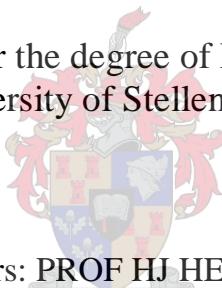


**“Being a hermeneutic of the gospel:
Hermeneutical and epistemological foundations
for a missional ecclesiology”**

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ABSTRACT

The church in the West is facing a crisis of identity. Who are we as the church and what is our purpose in the world today? The recovery of a missional ecclesiology in the West is an urgent task. The aim of this study is to contribute to this work on a missional ecclesiology by focusing on the need for the church to grow its capacity to discern missional vocation. This study's central question: "How can the church in the West discern its missional vocation?"

The first chapter considers how global realities are forcing the church to re-examine its missional identity and vocation. In addition, the local realities in which this study is situated are highlighted, with particular emphasis on the realities that demand discernment. The chapter concludes with consideration of historical developments in hermeneutics, in particular the development of a missional hermeneutic. The emergence of a missional hermeneutic is important in the church's discernment.

The second chapter "puts on" a missional hermeneutic to aid in this discernment of missional vocation. Dwelling in the biblical story with this lens, and so allowing the story to renew our understanding of the role and identity of God's people, will shape our missional discernment.

The third chapter focuses on the contemporary cultural context in its North American expression, in which the church must forge its missional identity. A retelling of the cultural story of the West demonstrates the challenges, both old and new, facing the church.

Two important movements are already seeking to answer the question of how the church discerns missional vocation. The fourth chapter engages the important conversations that are happening within both the Emergent and Missional Church movements. These conversations encompass a wide diversity of theological traditions and backgrounds, but are held together by a common desire to discern what a missional ecclesiology means for the West. Particular themes that are important for discernment are highlighted as these conversations are engaged.

Finally, the questions of the early chapters converge on the crux of this study: a framework for discernment, articulated in detail in the fifth chapter. Building on important examples, both Western and African, this affirmative-antithetical model of discernment is offered as a broad "lens" for reflective churches seeking to discern their missional vocation.

The final chapter then practices discernment in six key areas facing the church in the West today, at times using for illustration the local context in which this study is situated. These parting thoughts seek to both recognize the challenge facing missional churches, and point to encouraging dialogue already happening among those seeking to do the same.

OPSOMMING

Die kerk in die Weste beleef 'n identiteitskrisis. Wie of wat is die kerk en wat is haar doel vandag? 'n Misssionale ekklesiologie is in die lig hiervan 'n noodsaaklikheid. Die studie beoog om 'n bydrae te lewer tot die ontwikkeling van 'n missionale ekklesiologie. Dit wil fokus op die kerk se behoefté om geloofsonderskeidend missionale roeping beter te verstaan. Vandaar die sentrale vraag wat die studie stel: "Hoe kan die kerk in die Weste sy missionale roeping onderskei?"

Die eerste hoofstuk kyk hoe globale werklikhede die kerk tans forseer om sy missionale identiteit en roeping in heroorweging te neem. Die konteks waarin die studie plaasvind word beskryf met die oog op die vraag watter geloofsonderskeidende uitdagings hulle stel. Die hoofstuk hanteer ook hermeneutiese ontwikkelinge wat bygedra het tot die ontwikkeling van 'n missionale hermeneutiek. 'n Missionale hermeneutiek is belangrik vir geloofsonderskeiding.

Die tweede hoofstuk werk met 'n missionale hermeneutiek as dit geloofsonderskeidend die kerk se huidige roeping en uitdagings wil formuleer. As sodanig wandel dit in die Bybel se verhaal om die identiteit van die volk van God te verstaan. Laasgenoemde is 'n voorwaarde vir enige missionale onderskeidingsproses.

Die derde hoofstuk fokus op die huidige konteks van die Noord-Amerikaanse kultuur en die uitdaging wat dit vir missionale identiteit stel. 'n Oorsig oor die verhaal van die Westerse kultuur demonstreer die ou en nuwe uitdagings waarvoor die kerk gestel word.

Twee belangrike bewegings probeer antwoorde op dié uitdagings vind. Die vierde hoofstuk hanteer die gesprekke in die Ontluikende (*Emergent*) en Gestuurde Gemeente (*Missional Church*) bewegings. Die gesprekke vind plaas teen die agtergrond van 'n wye verskeidenheid theologiese tradisies maar het in gemeen dat hulle probeer onderskei wat 'n missionale ekklesiologie in die Weste behels. Belangrike temas in die proses van geloofsonderskeiding word belig in die bespreking van die twee bewegings.

Ten slotte vloeи die vrae van die vorige hoofstukke saam om die fokus van die studie aan die orde te stel: 'n raamwerk vir geloofsonderskeiding. Hoofstuk vyf. Belangrike voorbeelde uit die Weste en uit Afrika word gebruik as 'n lens om 'n bevestigende-antitetiese geloofsonderskeidings-model voor te stel wat kerke kan help om hulle missionale roeping te ontdek.

Die laaste hoofstuk pas geloofsonderskeidende beginsels toe op ses sleutelareas wat die kerk in die Weste moet aanspreek. Praktiese voorbeelde uit die konteks waar die studie gedoen is illustreer wat bedoel word. Met dié voorbeelde en gedagtes word die uitdagings waarvoor missionale gemeentes staan op die spits gedryf en word almal wat reeds deel is van die dialoog, uitgenooi om dit voort te sit.

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INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the 21st century, many different voices have been drawing our attention to two realities that are shaping the future of Christianity: the centre of gravity for the Christian faith has shifted to the global South and to the East; and the church in Western societies has been pushed to the margins and is facing serious decline (Guder 1998, 1). Many are asking themselves, “what are the implications of these facts for the future of the church in western culture?”

Western culture is in the midst of cultural shifts as the postmodern story is providing a significant challenge to the story of modernity that has shaped the West. At the same time, the story of modernity continues to be formative, particularly in its economic expression through the process of globalization and the ideology of consumerism. In times like this, we enter into a time of crisis – a time that provides both opportunity and challenge, as David Bosch reminds us (1991, 3).

Following in the footsteps of Lesslie Newbigin, the church in the West is beginning to be awakened to its new missional realities and there are many who are searching for a renewed missional identity as the church seeks to discern its missional vocation. One of the crucial things to do in times like this is to avoid the tendency to find some solution in a new methodology or practice for becoming an effective church. For some, becoming “missional” may become just that – another methodological or programmatic solution that promises to bring new success and vitality to the church. This must be avoided. Rather, in times of deep cultural challenges and change, there is the need to reflect more deeply at a basic and fundamental level about the very nature of what it means to be the church. The array of programmatic and methodological solutions that are on the market today will only mask this crisis and may also underline the nature of the crisis. Something at the foundational level needs to be asked, namely, “who we are and what we are for” (Guder 1998, 3). Recent work has been done here – grappling with the contours and shape of a missional ecclesiology for the church in the West that begins to ask some of these fundamental questions about the nature of the church (Bosch 1995, Frost and Hirsch 2003, Goheen 2000, Guder 1998, Hunsberger and Van Gelder 1996, Kimball 2003, Shenk 1995). This study will dive into this conversation and seek to make a valuable contribution, as outlined below.¹

Aims of this study

The aims of this study are threefold. The first is to contribute toward the development of a missional hermeneutic for reading the biblical story that opens up for the church in the West the missional thrust of the biblical story. While there has been work done in developing a theology of mission, establishing “biblical foundations” for mission, and compiling biblical texts that speak about mission, there is a need for a clear understanding of something that is more fundamental—a missional hermeneutic for understanding the biblical story as a whole and doing biblical theology (Bosch 1978, 1986, 1993; Wright 2004). My rationale is that such a hermeneutic will capture the biblical story in its entirety and deepen our understanding of the missionary thrust of the biblical story. Further, developing and employing such a hermeneutic will renew the church’s missional identity in the West and equip the church in the West to recover the Bible as the one true story for the whole world, as Lesslie Newbigin has put it (Newbigin 1989, 15).

The second goal is to articulate a framework of discernment for the church in the West that moves beyond the current crisis of knowledge rooted in the shift from modernity to postmodernity. This is important for the church, for it finds itself in the “epistemological predicament” of Christianity in “postmodern” western culture (Kirk 1999). My rationale is that such a framework will help to strengthen the development of a missional ecclesiology

¹ The following outline is adopted from Mouton 2001 (44-61) and Hendriks 2004 (211-234).

and help us move beyond the false dilemma between objectivism and relativism. Another rationale is that developing such a framework is vital for equipping the church in the West with a better self-understanding and of its missional calling in Western culture.

The third goal is to contribute toward the development of a missional ecclesiology that will equip the church in the West to move beyond Christendom and recapture its identity and missional vocation. Recent scholarship in this area, including the work of Newbigin, Bosch, Goheen, and Guder, argues that the development of a missional ecclesiology is an urgent theological need of the church in the West.

Research Problem

The central problem to be addressed in this study is the need for increased capacity in missional discernment for the church in Western culture. The church in the West faces an identity crisis in light of the collapse of Christendom and the dislocation of the church's dominant position in society. This problem has been well documented in recent years by the work of Lesslie Newbigin and those who have built on his important work. An ever-growing number of voices are calling for the church in the West to recover its missional identity and role – to become once again missional in its ecclesiology. Recent work has been done here, as noted above, that is beginning to grapple with the contours and shape of a missional ecclesiology. This study will contribute to the work on missional ecclesiology by focusing on the need for the church in the West today to grow in its capacity to discern its missional vocation. This study's central research question is "**how** can the church in the West discern its missional vocation as it seeks to recover its missional identity?"

Research hypotheses

The following are the research hypotheses that have guided this study at the beginning:

1. Recent work in biblical theology of mission suffers from a truncated understanding of mission and therefore fails to capture the unity and diversity of the biblical story in a convincing way.
2. The development of a missional hermeneutic is a critical tool for the church in the West to recover a missional ecclesiology and the missional thrust of the biblical story in which this ecclesiology is rooted.
3. The postmodern suspicion of metanarratives needs to be countered by recapturing the biblical story as metanarrative.
4. The crisis of knowledge in Western culture must be confronted and overcome by the church in the West for renewal of its missional identity and discernment of its missional vocation.
5. The church in the West faces the twin dangers of syncretism or irrelevance in its struggle to contextualize the gospel in Western culture.
6. A framework for discernment must be developed and employed that helps us contextualize the gospel for our culture without falling into these twin dangers.

Methodology

The methodology that will be employed in this study will be largely theoretical analysis and literature study that is multi-disciplinary in its scope. Theoretical analysis and literature study will be conducted in the fields of hermeneutics, biblical theology of mission, history of philosophy, worldview studies, contextualization, epistemology, and ecclesiology. My approach to this multi-disciplinary research is as a missiologist. Missiology is by its very nature a multi-disciplinary discipline that seeks to centre its academic work in serving the mission of the church.

A secondary methodology will be engagement in a "correlational hermeneutic" circle for reflection on the local congregation, a hermeneutic circle that seeks to bring together

missional church practices with ongoing critical reflection on these practices so that the missional challenges facing the local congregation in its context are critically correlated with the normative sources of Scripture and tradition (Fowler, 1999, 75-83). I approach this work not only as an academic missiologist, but as one who is deeply committed and involved in the mission of the church in Western culture and providing pastoral leadership in the local congregation.

Outline of chapters

The central research question of “**how** can the church in the West discern its missional vocation as it seeks to recover its missional identity?” gives shape to the structure of this study. Before this question can be answered, it is important to begin by establishing this central research problem and question. That will be done by demonstrating why developing capacity to discern its missional vocation is critical for the Church in the West. The first chapter will demonstrate this by considering global realities calling the church in the West to re-examine its missional identity and vocation. Further, the local contextual realities in which this study is situated will be highlighted, with particular emphasis on the realities that demand discernment for missional identity and vocation. Finally, historical developments in hermeneutics, in particular the development of a missional hermeneutic, are calling for the church in the West to renew its biblical understanding of its missional identity and vocation in the world.

Having demonstrated the need for developing capacity in missional discernment, the focal question becomes “**How** can the church discern its missional vocation?” Providing answers to this central research question will move the narrative of this study forward. Specifically, the next four chapters can be seen as adding elements which together form an answer to this central question. How can the church in the West discern its missional vocation as it seeks to recover its missional identity?

First, by dwelling in the Biblical story with a missional hermeneutic that will allow that story to renew our understanding of the role and identity of God’s people within it. A missional hermeneutic is a critical tool to equip the church to so dwell in the biblical story and be renewed in its missional identity and role. Such a hermeneutic leads us firmly to a missional ecclesiology. The second chapter will put on a missional hermeneutic, dwelling in the biblical story and paying particular attention to the way in which the biblical story gives shape to the identity and role of the church and a missional understanding of that identity and role as that flows out of the biblical story. This renewed identity and role is vital for missional discernment.

How can the church in the West discern its missional vocation as it seeks to recover its missional identity? Second, by knowing the broad cultural story of the West and our contemporary place in that story. In the third chapter, focus will be placed upon the contemporary cultural context of the West in its North American expression. Particular focus will be given to telling the cultural story of the West in a way that demonstrates the wider cultural and historical context of the church today and our place within the story of Western culture. A missiological analysis of the cultural story shaping the West is needed and demonstrated. Unfolding the story of the West leads us to appreciate the complexity of our contemporary moment – a moment in which modernity continues to have a powerful shaping influence through economic globalization and heightened consumerism. But a moment as well in which the postmodern story is challenging the modern story at several key places, creating a vacuum of meaning that consumerism has quickly begun to fill. Several themes emerging from our contemporary cultural context will be discussed and their relevancy for the task of discerning missional vocation will be highlighted.

How can the church in the West discern its missional vocation as it seeks to recover its missional identity? Third, by engaging with two ecclesiological movements in the West

today that are seeking to answer this question as well. Chapter four will engage the important conversations that are happening both within the emergent and missional church movements. These conversations encompass a wide diversity of theological and ecclesiological traditions and backgrounds but are held together by a common desire among those engaged of seeking to discern what a missional ecclesiology means in our contemporary cultural context in the West. Careful historical analysis and attention to the core practices and theological emphases, as well as the growing diversity, is needed. Important themes for discernment are surfacing between these two movements and find connections with the cultural story and the global/local context. These themes that are important for discernment will be highlighted and summarized as these movements are engaged and analyzed.

How can the church in the West discern its missional vocation as it seeks to recover its missional identity? Fourth, by developing a framework for discernment. Chapter five will articulate in more detail a framework for discernment that will aid in contextualizing the gospel for the church in the contemporary cultural context of the West, as it seeks to avoid the twin dangers of syncretism/irrelevance on the one hand and ethnocentrism/relativism on the other hand. Building on the important work of both Western and African contributions, an affirmative-antithetical model of discernment and contextualization will be articulated.

A final chapter concludes this study by practicing discernment in six key areas facing the church in the West. These six areas are highlighted as they embody the coalescence of themes that have emerged throughout the study, through reflection on the global and local context; the unfolding of the cultural story in the West; and the engagement with the missional and emergent church movements. In particular, this final chapter will seek to demonstrate the challenging task of discerning what it means to be a missional church in the contemporary cultural context of the West, in dialogue with others seeking to do the same. And so chapter six puts on the framework and seeks to practice discernment in the following six key areas: *missio Dei*; the gathered and scattered church distinction as a helpful way to move us beyond crippling polarities facing the church in the West; leadership practices that learn from the abuses of modernity and the postmodern critique of such abuses and move us forward in missional practices; preaching in a missional church that keeps the gospel central and nourishes the missional identity of God's people; the centrality of the gospel for the missional church; and tools for cultural analysis aided by the worldview tradition and the tools of a missiological analysis of culture.

CHAPTER ONE: THE NEED TO DEVELOP CAPACITY IN MISSIONAL DISCERNMENT

1.1 Introduction

Identity provides the source of meaning and experience for a people. In today's world, peoples and societies across the globe are searching for a renewed sense of identity. Likewise, the church in the West is facing the need to recover and renew its own missional identity as a people. To do that, it must develop the capacity to discern its missional vocation in the world for the particular place in which it finds itself. The need to develop such capacity will be demonstrated in this chapter, through consideration of global realities calling the church to examine afresh its identity and vocation; through identification of local realities out of which this study emerges that demand discernment; and through historical reflection on the development of a missional approach to Scripture, calling the church to discern afresh its biblical understanding of the missional identity and missional vocation of God's people in the world.

1.2 Global Realities Calling for Renewed Identity and Vocation

All theological and missional discernment by the church today must be rooted in the local context in which God's people find themselves, while at the same time keenly aware of the global realities that intersect with that local context (Schreiter 1997, 3-4). Because of the globalized world in which we live, we must learn to develop both intimacy with and distance from our local contexts. Put another way, we must learn to speak beyond our local context and to be open to outside voices speaking into our local realities (1997, 4). Globalization is changing the political, economic, and communications structures of the world today, and awareness of these globalizing trends is crucial for the church today (Castells 2000a, 2000b, 2004; Schreiter 1997, 5-8).

The local-global interface creates tension. It becomes increasingly difficult for churches to understand whether local realities have local or global causes. Living within this tension is crucial for the church in its practice of missional discernment. The tension is often described as the reality of "glocalization" – a term used by Roland Robertson to describe the encounter of the local and global (1995). As Schreiter argues, "Some of the most salient features in religion and theology today can best be described from the vantage point of the glocal. Neither the global, homogenizing forces nor the local forms of accommodation and resistance can of themselves provide an adequate explanation of these phenomena. It is precisely in their interaction that one comes to understand what is happening" (1997, 12).

First, consider six global realities which are forcing the church to renew its missional identity and vocation.

1.2.1 Competing metanarratives

One of the important challenges to the gospel today in our global context is the reality of competing metanarratives that seek to provide a unified story of the world, of human history, and of the meaning and purpose of human life. Robert Webber has issued a call to the evangelical community in the West in light of this growing challenge: "Today, as in the ancient era, the church is confronted by a host of master narratives that contradict and compete with the gospel. The pressing question is: who gets to narrate the world?" (Webber and Kenyon 2006; Webber 2008).

Our lives only find meaning in light of some story that is basic and foundational – a story that gives us an understanding of the whole world and our place within it. These basic and foundational stories are what are meant by metanarratives. Furthermore, these metanarratives make comprehensive and normative claims – defining what is true of reality and giving an

account of the whole of reality (Bartholomew and Goheen 2004b, 18-20). As N.T. Wright puts it, “a story . . . is . . . the best way of talking about the way the world actually is” (1992, 40).

More specifically, a metanarrative can be characterized by the following four aspects. First, metanarratives are large stories that seek to provide the meaning and destiny of human reality and life as a whole. They are all-embracing stories that make claims on every aspect of human life and reality. Second, they seek to encompass the immense diversity of human stories into a larger comprehensive story. Third, they also claim to be normative or true. They seek to tell the true story of the world. Fourth, as a result of these totalizing claims, they are often used to justify oppression and domination (Bauckham 2003, 4).

Bauckham suggests that today there are at least three metanarratives competing for global influence. First: growing economic globalization with its focus on unlimited economic progress and growth. This narrative is a heightened expression of Enlightenment modernity and its story of reason, technology, and progress. Second: the Islamic faith and its growing antagonism toward the economic globalization narrative that is rooted in the West. Like Christianity, Islam tells a story of the world and the meaning of the whole of reality that claims both to be normative and comprehensive. Third: Christianity and the gospel. As will be argued below, the gospel must be recovered by the church in the West as a credible alternative story that seeks to make the same normative and comprehensive claims as the other competing metanarratives.

Facing competing metanarratives, the Western church must recover the biblical story as the grand story of the world and history and seek to proclaim this grand story as public truth. This is a task that is central to the missionary challenge facing the church in Western culture – a church that has allowed the biblical story to be absorbed within the reigning humanist story of modernity and postmodernity (Bartholomew and Goheen 2004a, 150-2). Newbigin’s whole model for the missionary encounter of the church in its cultural context, what is often referred to under the rubric of “contextualization,” is driven by the understanding that this encounter is between two comprehensive stories of the world – the biblical story which the church is called to indwell and the cultural story or stories in which we find ourselves (Newbigin 1989, 34-38; cf. Goheen 2000, 365-366). As Newbigin saw it, basic to our missionary calling in Western culture is a recovery of the biblical story as public truth and a faithful indwelling of that story. For too long the church has been co-opted by the modern Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment stories that have shaped our society. Newbigin puts it well:

I do not believe that we can speak effectively of the Gospel as a word addressed to our culture unless we recover a sense of the Scriptures as a canonical whole, as the story which provides the true context for our understanding of the meaning of our lives – both personal and public (1991b).

To claim the Bible as a metanarrative is to argue that the Bible provides a unified story that is both comprehensive and normative. As Goheen suggests, “When we speak of the biblical story as a narrative we are making an *ontological* claim. It is a claim that this is the way God created the world; the story of the Bible tells us the way the world really is” (2005b).

The Bible needs to be offered as an alternative metanarrative because it alone has the power to expose the idolatry driving its “competitors.” Bob Goudzwaard makes a brilliant contribution in this regard, arguing in detail how reigning global ideologies today are contributing to three catastrophic crises we are faced with today: worldwide poverty, environmental degradation, and widespread terrorism. More broadly, Goudzwaard argues these ideologies have fuelled some of these competing metanarratives in their inordinate and idolatrous drive to pursue the following four goals: resisting all dehumanizing powers that

prevent a better society; the preservation of freedoms and cultural identity; the pursuit of material prosperity and growth that will usher in progress; and guaranteed security against any form of attack or aggression (Goudzwaard *et al* 2007, 38-9). The gospel alone, as it is understood within the context of the entire biblical story, has the power to expose the idolatrous drives undergirding the narratives profoundly shaping Western culture.

It will not be enough to simply expose the idolatrous faith assumptions undergirding the Western story. The church must offer the gospel as a credible alternative at every point where idolatry threatens to undermine creational life. The narrative of economic globalization is particularly threatening in this regard, with its consumerist individualism further legitimized by postmodern relativism, and with its inherent aversion to metanarratives (Goheen 2006c, 9-10). Bauckham asks, “What do we really need in order to recognize and to resist this new metanarrative of globalization? Surely a story that counters the global dominance of the profit-motive and the culture of consumption . . .” (2003, 97). The biblical story is the only such story that can be offered as a credible alternative by the church today.

1.2.2 Loss of Christendom

It is one of the great new facts of our time. While there are diverse interpretations of its significance and meaning, it is hard to deny that the church in the West finds itself increasingly on the margins of society, no longer having a central place of influence or power in the shaping of our culture (Guder 1998, 1-2).² This new reality has been described by many as the loss of Christendom. The acknowledgement of this loss has become a shared starting point for most, if not all, who participate in the missional conversation in the West today. The church has been “disestablished” and no longer finds itself having a formative influence on the public or private lives of most people. The result is an inevitable and profound identity crisis for the church in the West – such a major dislocation cannot help but bring disorientation, forcing the church to ask deep questions about its identity and role.

The missional conversation has in many ways been shaped by this shared recognition of loss and the resultant identity crisis. This reality of our global context has made the time ripe to once again ask the fundamental questions about the identity and role of the church.

1.2.3 Privatization of the gospel

A third global reality that calls the church in the West to examine afresh its missional identity and vocation is the privatization of the gospel. As the modern humanist story in the West came to fuller maturity during the time of the Enlightenment, the triumph of scientific reasoning gradually displaced the church and Christianity from the centre of European society. Following the scientific revolutions of the 16th and 17th centuries and the subsequent religious wars, Europe was searching for a new centre that would bring unity and peace. The answer would no longer be found in religion or the church. Religion divides. Science was the key.

Europe was converted to a new faith. The synthesis between humanism and Christianity that had shaped the past, particularly during the medieval period, was breaking down. Now a vibrant “Enlightenment faith” replaced faith in the gospel as the dominant religious belief that would shape European and Western culture. “Confessional humanism”³ was becoming the dominant religious vision and culturally formative worldview. The “light

² See Douglas John Hall, *The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity* for a positive, almost celebrative interpretation of the significance of this loss of Christendom. See Pat Keifert, *We are Here Now: A New Missional Era* for a more balanced voice. Keifert calls us to “grieve the loss of Christendom” (2006, 34-6).

³ Goheen and Bartholomew describe the spiritual centre of Western culture as “confessional humanism,” by which they mean: “a belief system in which human beings have replaced God as Creator, Ruler, and Savior” (2008, 68).

of the world” had come, and it was no longer the light of John’s gospel, but the light of reason, science, technology, and progress.

There were four critical pillars to this emerging Enlightenment faith. First, a profound faith in the inevitable movement of history toward greater and greater progress, largely or even exclusively defined by economic growth, material prosperity, and the leisure time and liberty in which to enjoy that prosperity. The second pillar of the Enlightenment was a particular view of reason, one we could describe by three characteristics: autonomous, which meant reason would be independent of divine revelation and liberated from the Christian faith; instrumental, which meant reason would be a key instrument to be employed by mankind in order to predict, control, and shape the world; and universal, which meant that reason transcended human cultures and could claim to be normative for all people. The third pillar of faith was the ability of scientific reason to be translated into technology. Progress would come as these tools of technology could be used to control nature for the benefit of humanity and the obtainment of progress and material prosperity. The fourth pillar was the ability of scientific reason to also be translated into the rational organization of society. The spheres of social life, political life, economic life, and education could all be investigated and a rational order discovered and applied (Goheen and Bartholomew 2008, 92-6).

As this Enlightenment faith took root and grew, its clash with the Christian faith and the gospel was inevitable. Yet as that conflict dawned, rather than challenge the Enlightenment faith with the comprehensive claims of the gospel and the biblical story, by and large the church in the West allowed the absorption of the gospel into Enlightenment thought, and in so doing surrendered the claims of the gospel to universal truth. The gospel and its practical claims became narrow and reduced in scope.

Newbigin unpacks the fact-value dichotomy of the Enlightenment faith that has led increasingly to the privatization of faith in the West. With the triumph of humanism, scientific reason was accepted as the only judge of truth. Any truth claim had to pass through that lens. If a truth claim could be proved scientifically, only then could it be a truth claim. Truth claims that did not pass through that lens were seen as values, beliefs, private opinions. As a result, the gospel in the West has been relegated to the private sphere of life. As “private opinion,” it is seen to no longer have any role in our public life, now shaped by an alternative faith in rationality and scientific reason. The consequences to the church in the West have been devastating to our witness. Newbigin’s work goes a long way to help the church in the West become more aware of this privatization of the gospel and its devastating effects, as well as bolster the confidence of the church to assert the gospel as public truth and universal history (Newbigin 1989, 1991).

1.2.4 Shift of Christianity to the global South

The Christian faith now sees its most vibrant growth in the global South and the East – one of the most dramatic developments we have witnessed in our generation. The implications of this shift are far-reaching, as many recent voices testify.⁴ The church in the West needs to discern the implications of this shift for its missional vocation.

Andrew Walls gives us two wonderful images that help us understand this shift. First, Walls talks about the “serial nature” of the Christian faith – its need to be continually translated into different cultures and places (2002, 27-48; Hendriks 2002). There is an inherent “vulnerability” in the Christian faith, Walls argues. “Christian faith must go on being translated, must continuously enter into vernacular culture and interact with it, or it withers and fades” (2002, 29). In fact, throughout history the Christian faith has found

⁴ See *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* by Philip Jenkins, one of the first attempts to look at the many implications of the changing Christian face. See also Jenkins’ more recent *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South*, and Lamin Sanneh’s important works *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West* and *The Changing Face of Christianity*.

strength in its translations into new cultures. Walls comments, “There is a significant feature in each of these demographic and cultural shifts in the Christian centre of gravity. In each case a threatened eclipse of Christianity was averted by its cross-cultural diffusion. Crossing cultural boundaries became the life-blood of historic Christianity” (2002, 32). The shift to the global South fits this historic pattern that Walls discerns. We are living through a significant transition in the cultural and demographic centre of our faith.

Second, Walls talks about what he describes as the present “Ephesians moment” in the development of global Christianity, alluding to imagery of the church as the body of Christ and the call to see the interdependent nature of that body in Ephesians 4. The “Ephesians moment” in which we live refers to the movement of the gospel from one culture to another, a movement through which the church is able to experience more of the fullness of being the diverse body of Christ. This has important implications for the church today, as we need to intentionally find ways to listen and dialogue with one another across our cultural differences so that we might renew our theological task.

Hendriks speaks of “cultural captivity” of the church in the West and how our theologizing has been shaped by the humanist faith of the West, rooted in Greek classical culture and growing to maturity in Enlightenment modernity (2007, 5). We are now in another critical “Ephesians moment,” in which we can engage in critical cultural dialogue with diverse theological traditions flourishing in non-Western cultural contexts. Walls reminds us that all of our theological agendas are culturally induced, and therefore in need of the mutual correction that can come through the cross-cultural diffusion of Christianity and the dialogue this opens up (2002, 79). We need to learn to listen to the church in the global South. As Joel Carpenter suggests, Christians in the global North and West need to reorient hearts and minds to the pressing issues facing the church in the South and East (2004, 2006).

For the Western church seeking to discern missional vocation, there are many implications of learning to listen to the church in the global South. First, it provides an opportunity to reunite biblical scholarship with mission. Under the direction of the International Association for Mission Studies, the Bible Studies and Mission study group (BISAM), launched in 1976 in response to the “increasing estrangement of biblical scholarship from mission studies,” has been doing important work in this area. A collection of essays, *To Cast Fire Upon the Earth: Bible and Mission Collaborating in Today’s Multicultural Global Context*, captures the work of a recent international consultation by this study group. The focus is on how the Bible is used today in mission and the many different questions this raises “among peoples of different race, sex, class, culture, creed, faith, and social location” (Okure 2000, 235). This study serves as a survey of the many diverse hermeneutical questions raised and issues identified by the growing multicultural expressions of the Christian faith, including historical issues of biblical interpretation in the past, and the issues being asked about the Bible itself. The scope of this project is immense, demonstrating the complexity of issues facing the church in different contexts.⁵

Second, this shift opens us to diverse horizons and intercultural understandings of the biblical story. A focused international effort by some members of BISAM has looked particularly at intercultural readings of the story of Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman in John 4 and the implications of these readings (de Wit, 2004). Reflecting on the implications of this project, Kessler suggests that the changing realities of the church today force us beyond the traditional hermeneutical model of a bipolar relationship between text and reader/interpreter (2004, 452-453). Today we face what he has termed a “multipolar” reality, with a multiplicity of poles represented by the plurality of readers in diverse cultural settings. Kessler summarizes:

⁵ In Appendix C, there are several hundred questions and issues identified as a result of this consultation and study project.

Reading the text thus becomes a double communication. It is communication with the text, as in the traditional bipolar model. And by means of the text, it is communication with the author. However, reading also includes communication with other readers. This communication forms a constitutive part of the process of understanding. Understanding the text is no longer possible without this communication with other readers (Kessler 2004, 456-457).

Philip Jenkins provides insights into how a multiplicity of “horizons” contributes toward learning from the church in the South. His recent work *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* is an in-depth investigation of the perspectives on the Bible that are emerging among believers in the South. He writes on the immediacy of the biblical text to the pressing social and cultural contexts of the church in the South; the communal nature of biblical interpretation; and the many prophetic voices emerging amidst global realities of injustice, poverty, and suffering. After surveying a host of issues unique to biblical interpretation in the South, Jenkins concludes: “We see the power of Christianity to overturn hierarchies and traditions. The chief beneficiaries are often the traditionally excluded groups, women and racial minorities, the poor, even those suffering under traditional stigmas or caste rules. Empowered by the Bible, they learn to speak out and claim their place in society” (2006, 193).

At the same time, the church in the West must allow the biblical story to provide its orienting centre. *Our* place in the biblical story must be shaped by the social, cultural, and historical characteristics of *our* communities. We must keep before us the common challenge facing the church in every place and in every time – the challenge of finding our place in the *biblical* story, the grand narrative of the true story of the world. This grand narrative reminds us that God’s people everywhere are called to committed participation in his creation-wide mission to restore the whole creation. The implications of that committed participation are different in each context and will carry different emphases, but the commonality of our missional task should lead us to international hermeneutical dialogue which seeks the mutual enrichment and correction that can only come as we dialogue not only with the text in light of our own contexts, but also open ourselves up to dialogue with other readers in other contexts.⁶ Andrew Walls’ important words in this regard point the way forward:

. . . each of the culture-specific segments [is] necessary to the body but . . . incomplete in itself. Only in Christ does completion, fullness, dwell. And Christ’s completion, as we have seen, comes from all humanity, from the translation of the life of Jesus into the lifeways of all the world’s cultures and subcultures through history. None of us can reach Christ’s completeness on our own. We need each other’s vision to correct, enlarge, and focus our own; only together are we complete in Christ (2002, 79).

1.2.5 Critical global crises facing us today

Another important facet of our global context today is the reality of several critical global crises we are facing. The first is escalating environmental degradation. The 2005 UN report “Millennium Ecosystem Assessment” suggests that several natural systems are near collapse. Increased production of greenhouse gases is accelerating rapid climate change, habitats and plant and animal species are being lost, and the planet’s citizens are rapidly consuming natural resources. All these circumstances threaten irreversible damage to the environment. The

⁶ Paul Hiebert makes a similar argument in developing a model of what he has called “critical contextualization.” Hiebert suggests, “Out of the exercise of the priesthood of believers within an international hermeneutical community should come a growing understanding, if not agreement, on key theological issues that can help us test the contextualization of cultural practices as well as theologies” (1987, 110-111).

crisis is great, and the paradox of solutions only exacerbates our situation. Goudzwaard argues that our tendency is to look for one-dimensional solutions that do not go deep enough. “They rely largely on either market forces – such as the trade in emission or pollution quotas, which in fact amounts to the East and the South ‘selling’ their environment for use by others – or developing and deploying new environmental technologies” (Goudzwaard *et al* 2007, 22). These proposed solutions work against us in part because they do not address the mass consumption that only accelerates the present crisis. Goudzwaard puts it this way:

Some experts have calculated that if each member of the rising world population now lived at the same level of prosperity presently enjoyed by those in the West, the current environment and stocks of raw materials and energy would be completely depleted in the relatively short period of one to two decades as a result of the accompanying pressure on the environment, energy, and the land (Goudzwaard *et al* 2007, 153).

The second crisis is the growing scale of global poverty. This can be seen on the one hand in the alarming growth in the gap between the poor and the rich. While in the late 1960s, the incomes of the wealthiest twenty percent of the world’s population were about 30 times higher than those of the poorest 20 percent, that gap has grown to the point that the wealthiest 20 percent are now 83 times wealthier than the lowest 20 percent (Goudzwaard *et al* 2007, 20). Other challenging statistics reveal a dim picture of the growing global poverty today.⁷

Third, while accurate statistics are hard to establish, approximately 28 million people are living with AIDS in the continent of Africa. The global total is over 35 million and growing. While there are signs that the historical inaction of the global community is starting to change, the crisis has become a pandemic that will reshape the future of Africa and have a devastating effect on the entire global community.

Fourth, the massive militarization of the world over the past century has led us into a global crisis of security and widespread terrorism. Worldwide government military expenditures exceeded US \$1 trillion in 2004, and as that number continues to rise, so have warfare, strife, and global threats to security. As Goudzwaard laments, “Clearly, preemptive war, curtailing civil liberties for the purpose of preventing further attacks, increasing armament levels through the application of more advanced technology and increased expenditures, and enhancing the destructive capacity of the military for strategic purposes – these have not solved terrorism” (Goudzwaard *et al* 2007, 21).

These global crises form part of the context in which the church in the West is faced with taking up its missional role. As Newbigin suggests, we need to continually be seeking to understand what God might be doing in the midst of the crises we face today.

The real question is: What is God doing in these tremendous events of our time? How are we to understand them and interpret them to others, so that we and they may play our part in them as co-workers with God? Nostalgia for the past and fear for the future are equally out of place for the Christian. He is required, in the situation in which God places him, to understand the signs of the times in the light of the reality of God’s present and coming kingdom, and to give witness faithfully about the purpose of God for all men. (1962).

An important task of the church today is to bear witness to this present and coming kingdom

⁷ Approximately 40,000 people die of famine-related causes every day; 1 billion go to bed hungry each night and over half a billion are starving; 88% of the world’s population has an inadequate water supply; approximately 1 billion people have about \$1 (USD) per day spent on housing, food, clothing, and education; and over 90 million children live on world’s streets (See Bryant Myers, *Exploring World Mission: Context and Challenges*).

of God, and allow the story of which that good news is a part to become the story that shapes our role in the world. This is a critical part of discerning the missional vocation of the church today.

1.2.6 New mission paradigm emerging

Finally, it is important to recognize the new paradigm of mission that is emerging today in light of these global realities, particularly two key elements.

The first is the emphasis of mission as *missio Dei*. Mission is to be understood primarily as God's mission of renewing the entire creation. The church's mission, or *missio Ecclesiae*, should be seen as our committed participation in God's creation-wide mission of redemption (cf. Bosch 1991, 389-93). It was Karl Barth who was one of the first, in his paper at the 1932 Brandenburg Missionary Conference, to articulate mission as an activity of God himself; placing our understanding of mission in the context of the trinity and not that of soteriology or ecclesiology. The starting point for our understanding of mission must be the Triune God, Barth argues. If God has revealed himself as a God who is on a mission, then the identity of God's people as a missional people necessarily results. If God is a missional God, then God's people are missional by their very nature.

The older paradigm of mission understood mission in a very ecclesio-centric fashion, seeing mission as just one activity along with the church's other ministries. But, as Hendriks argues, "... Instead of looking at mission as something done by the church, it should be seen as something that actually originates from God, from the way God revealed himself to us. God is missional in his very being and as such his body should be likewise" (2004, 25). The emergence of the *missio Dei* as a central category opens up the biblical story in a way that allows us to see the centrality of God's mission in that story.

The second key element of the new paradigm of mission is the emerging consensus on missional ecclesiology. Bosch traces the development of this in various traditions, noting a convergence that has moved beyond the dichotomy between church and mission and has recovered the understanding of the church as "missionary by its very nature" (1991, 368-389). The local church is God's main instrument of mission, that community gathered around the Cross of Christ that is sent into the world to be an eschatological sign and foretaste of the coming reign of God. As a sign of the Kingdom, the church ought to be concerned to work against injustice, poverty, and every type of brokenness that has invaded our world due to sin. But also as a foretaste, the church is called to demonstrate in its own communal life together what life renewed by the gospel looks like. With this recovery of a missional ecclesiology, there is now the recognition that the mission of the church is everywhere – "To, In, and From All Six Continents."

1.3 Local realities demanding discernment

In addition to these global realities, it is important to understand the local context out of which this study emerges and the issues demanding discernment that emerge out of that context. These themes can only be discerned when they are understood within the larger context of their cultural story, including its missional and emergent church conversations. The local context in question can be summarized as the challenge of providing leadership to the planting of a new church community in contemporary urban Canada. The particular urban context is Hamilton, Ontario, a city of about 500,000 residents and the particular church community is New Hope Church.

In this new church community, several themes have emerged that are representative of the ongoing struggle to engage in mission in the West.

First is the struggle for a contextual church. New Hope is committed to developing a style and method of ministry that is contextualized for its local community. The desire is to see the gospel become incarnate and embodied in the local context in which we live and do

ministry. The local context has demanded answers we have struggled to discern, to questions like: How much does the local context shape what the church is and what it does? Does our local context call us to have a dialogical or monological style of preaching? Does it call us to have a certain style of leadership or decision-making? Is there anything about our local context that calls us to an informal style?

Second is the struggle for consensus in understanding the *missio Dei*. The Reformed theological tradition in which New Hope Church lives emphasizes God's work of redemption in the world. The cosmic and restorative nature of redemption is crucial – God's desire is to restore all of creation and all of life. From that point of agreement, however, questions have arisen about the purpose and role of the church as an institution in this larger creation-wide mission of God. Throughout the last several years, there have been some who have used the *missio Dei* tradition to develop an instrumental view of the church, where the focus of the church has largely become the work of God outside its walls, in pursuit of social justice, humanization, and the overall betterment of society (see Hoekendijk 1964). On the other hand, others have reacted to this development and emphasized an ecclesio-centric understanding of mission, with particular attention on the institutional practices of the church (see DeYoung and Kluck, 2009). This raises the important issue of discerning the proper relationship between God, the church, and the world; or, perhaps more broadly the relationship between the kingdom of God and the church.

A third theme in New Hope's struggle for missional identity is the importance of worldview thinking. The Reformed tradition emphasizes the importance of articulating a comprehensive world and life view, grounded in the biblical story. It will become critical to reflect on how the resources of this tradition should be brought to bear on issues emerging from the local missional context. Some of those issues where worldview thinking might bear particular fruit include the following: the sacred-secular split in Western culture that many see in the disconnect between Sunday morning worship and the rest of the week; cultural understanding of the shift from modernity to postmodernity (i.e. the question of whether or not postmodernity is new or just a continuation of modernity); how the church might be equipped to engage the global crises of our day and the role of the institutional church in that process; and the vocations of God's people outside the ministry of the local church and their connections to the local church.

The fourth theme of New Hope's struggle is familiar and complex: leadership. Foundational to a church's missional identity will be how it clarifies the role and purpose of leaders; the place of communal discernment and the appropriation of models that might be used for communal discernment; the type of decision-making process most valuable to the community; the degree to which egalitarian values are allowed expression in a community vulnerable to battles over authority and hierarchy; and the healthy balance between authority and safeguards.

Fifth, New Hope faces – like many missional churches in the West – debate on evangelism and social concern, and the relative priority to be placed upon either. A related issue is to discern how to engage these issues given Canadian society's predilection against proselytizing other religions.

Finally, the theme of preaching is crucial and emerging as well. To fully form a missional vocation, churches will need to understand the place of preaching in a missional community; appreciate the authority of a preacher; and wrestle with how our understanding of preaching may be influenced by the postmodern suspicion of truth and authority.

As a community seeking to form a missional identity, New Hope encounters the contrast between what is being called “attributional church” and “incarnational church.” Advocates of “incarnational church” oppose a perceived over-emphasis on Sunday morning worship gatherings – through which, conversely, “attributional churches” persuade people to come and consume their religious goods and services. “Incarnational churches” emphasize

service work, community development, neighbourhood outreach, and the importance of empowering local communities to flourish. These are much-debated questions: does having a focus on Sunday morning worship necessarily mean an “attributional” model is being embraced? Should an “attributional model” be avoided altogether? In what ways can a church community pursue healthy “incarnational” ministry?

New Hope has struggled to have integrative thinking on these and other issues. As a result, the community has been prone to falling into an “either/or” mentality by which issues can become polarized. Exploring models for discernment and missional engagement which help move New Hope, and the countless churches represented by New Hope, beyond polarizations into coherent, healthy ways of thinking and acting.

In light of these themes and questions emerging from the local context, a renewed understanding of the role and identity of the church will be vital to bring clarity and aid in discernment.

1.4 Historical developments in missional discernment

Having looked at the global and local realities that call for the church in the West to develop greater capacity for discernment of its missional vocation, it is important to briefly consider four historical reflections on the development of a missional approach to Scripture. This missional approach to Scripture, captured under the rubric of “missional hermeneutic,” has much to offer God’s vocation- and identity-seeking people. As Bauckham argues:

a missionary⁸ hermeneutic of Scripture . . . (is) a way of reading the Bible for which mission is the hermeneutical key . . . A missionary hermeneutic of this kind would not be simply a study of the theme of mission in the biblical writings, but a way of reading the whole of Scripture with mission as its central interest and goal. . . . a missionary hermeneutic would be a way of reading which sought to understand what the church’s mission really is in the world as Scripture depicts it and thereby to inspire and to inform the church’s missionary praxis (n.d., 1).

1.4.1 Relationship between the Bible and mission

Evangelical Protestants have tended to pride themselves in their conviction that their missionary activities are done on the basis of what Scripture teaches (Bosch 1978, 34). William Carey in 1792 argued specifically for a biblical foundation for the missionary mandate of the church. Carey’s approach was to root this foundation solely in the command of Christ found in Matthew’s Great Commission. Yet, even without considering debate over the authenticity of this passage, Carey’s is a problematic hermeneutical approach because it rests the missionary mandate of the church on the basis of a single text understood to be an explicit command of Christ (Bosch 1978, 438). Even though, as Bosch argues, Carey’s legacy in fact continues to guide Evangelical Protestant missionary practices and agencies today, we need a more comprehensive hermeneutic.

In the Ecumenical tradition, even prior to Edinburgh in 1910, there was a concerted search for a broader hermeneutic that would better integrate the Bible and the missionary mandate of the church. Martin Kahler was one of those who argues for mission as “the mother of theology” found in the New Testament (NT) – the early Christians began to theologize out of their mission involvement and that mission involvement gave shape to their theological expression (Kahler 1908).

A broader understanding of mission would not begin to emerge until the middle of the 20th century, leading missiologists to return to the Bible. Numerous factors began to challenge the colonial “geographical expansionist” paradigm of mission that was dominant in

⁸ Bauckham uses the classic designation “missionary” instead of “missional.”

the 19th century.⁹ Tambaran (1938) and Willingen (1952) saw many key assumptions of this colonialist view of mission break down: the separation of mission and church; the division of the world between the Christian West and pagan non-West; and the notion of mission as geographical expansion (Goheen 2005a, 253-254; 2010, 2).

Slowly, the need for a deeper theological basis to mission was seen and acknowledged. The new paradigm of the *missio Dei* began to emerge – re-orienting “mission” as being primarily concerned with God’s redeeming work in the world and the church’s instrumental role in that work. “There is no participation in Christ without participation in his mission to the world. That by which the church receives its existence is that by which it is also given its world-mission. ‘As the Father has sent me, even so send I you’” (Goodall, 1953).

In the midst of this struggle to articulate biblical foundations for mission, and coinciding with the emerging Biblical Theology movement which had shaped the Ecumenical movement during the 1940s and 1950s, the 1959 joint committee of the World Council of Churches and the International Missionary Council commissioned Johannes Blauw to write a “survey and appraisal of recent work in Biblical Theology having any bearing upon the nature and necessity of the church’s mission to the world.” Blauw’s work *The Missionary Nature of the Church* would function as the primary work in this field until the mid-1970s. Alongside Blauw’s work was the work of Joachim Jeremias in 1956 which sought to uncover the “inner logic” of missionary activity and the biblical basis for it (Jeremias 1958); the important work of George Vicedom in 1957 which introduced a theology of mission rooted in the notion of the *Missio Dei* (Vicedom 1965); the collection of essays compiled by Gerald Anderson in 1961 which sought a “broader hermeneutic” for the theology of mission (Anderson 1961); Harry Boer’s published dissertation in 1961 on the significance of the events of Pentecost for the theological basis of the missionary work of the church (Boer 1961); the work of NT scholar Ferdinand Hahn in 1963 which focused on the historical development within the NT and early church in understanding the mission of the church (Hahn 1965); and the work of Bengt Sundkler in 1963, noted for its discussion of the distinction between “centripetal” and “centrifugal” mission (Sundkler 1963).

By the 1970s, the missionary situation in the world had changed significantly, and there were significant contributions made to Old Testament (OT) and NT studies by DuBose (1983), Winn (1981), Senior and Stuhlmueller (1983), Koster and Probst (1982), Rowdon (1982), and Gensichen (1980). Much of the work that has been done since the 1980s has been to develop what has become known as “biblical foundations” for mission or a biblical theology of missions, including by Burnett (1986), Filbeck (1994), Gilliland (1998), Glasser (1993), Gnanakan (1989), Hedlund (2000), Kostenberger and O’Brien (2001), Larkin and Williams (1998), Legrand (1992), Newbigin (revised edition, 1995), Nissen (1999), and Okoye (2006).

1.4.2 Analysis of previous work done on Bible and Mission

Chris Wright (2004) highlights some of the general trends in the canon of mission literature that have addressed the relationship of the Bible to mission. It will be helpful to look at these briefly and add to his analysis of these trends.

1.4.2.1 Biblical foundations

First, there has been a lot of work done under the rubric of “biblical foundations for mission.” There are some weaknesses in this paradigm that need to be explored. First, much

⁹ Among the factors that could be mentioned, the following are most prominent: the growth and vitality of the Third World church, the decline of the church in the West, the collapse of colonialism, the ideology of pluralism, the globalization and accompanying modernization, growing urbanization, rapid population growth, staggering social and economic need, and the growth of the Pentecostal church.

of the biblical foundations literature tends to function like an “apologetic” for mission – seeking either on the one hand to provide a biblical *justification* for contemporary missionary practices or on the other hand to provide a biblical *motivation* for doing missions. This apologetic posture taken in the literature has led many to mine biblical text for as many missionary nuggets as can be found to buttress this apologetic purpose (Bosch 1993, 175-6). Texts are located – commonly from Psalms, Isaiah, the narratives of Jonah and Ruth, or the Great Commissions in the NT gospels – that either directly provide a mandate or command for missionary activity, or indirectly support the missionary task of the church. No matter how long the list, laying out these different “missionary nuggets” on a string does not yield a missional hermeneutic, nor does it provide a solid foundation for the mission of the church. Bosch comments:

I am not saying that these procedures are illegitimate. They undoubtedly have their value. But their contribution towards establishing the validity of the missionary mandate is minimal. This validity should not be deduced from isolated texts and detached incidents but only from the thrust of the central message of both Old and New Testaments. What is decisive for the church today is not the formal agreement between what she is doing and what some isolated biblical texts seem to be saying but rather her relationship with the essence of the message of Scripture (1993, 439-440).

A second major weakness of the biblical foundations trend is seen when contemporary definitions of “mission” or examples of contemporary missionary practice are taken as the starting point and read back into the biblical text. This is often done in Protestant evangelical circles where the definition of “mission” is the crossing of geographical boundaries with the emphasis on a verbal proclamation of the gospel. Here, the effort to develop a biblical foundation is troubled from the start, for it is very difficult, if not impossible, to find either biblical precedents or mandates for modern missionary activity (Spindler 1995, 124). What is not sufficiently recognized is the historical distance between the text and the contemporary practices of the church (Bosch 1985, 532).¹⁰

A third weakness has to do with the way that missiologists developing “biblical foundations” tend to flatten the rich diversity in the Bible and reduce the biblical foundation for mission to one or a few “themes” or “motifs” that are found in different biblical texts. Bosch argues that even when authors are more sophisticated than employing the “golden nuggets” approach, missiologists still tend to “paint with a large brush,” flattening the rich diversity of the Scriptures by reducing the biblical motivation to one motif or theme (1986, 66).¹¹

A fourth area of weakness in this biblical foundations literature is the limitation of tracing “mission themes” throughout the narrative of Scripture. This is a helpful development beyond the older proof-texting model. In particular, recent work is being done as explicit “biblical theology” of mission, tracing important “mission themes” through biblical authors or

¹⁰ Further to this weakness, what is strikingly absent is an awareness of contemporary developments in both missiology and missional realities of the global church today. What is often assumed in this literature is an Enlightenment paradigm of missions noted by the following characteristics: a focus on the crossing of geographical boundaries and expansion, a separation of church and mission; and a narrow understanding of mission as verbal proclamation or evangelism (see Goheen 2010, 1-2). Assumed throughout much of this literature is a rather ecclesiocentric understanding of mission as primarily having to do with the church’s activity. This activist and ecclesiocentric understanding of mission does not allow us to see the broader horizon of God’s mission that is central to the biblical narrative and one of the key starting points for the development of a missional hermeneutic.

¹¹ Bosch laments the ongoing separation between the missiologist and the biblical scholar on issues of the Bible and mission. He points out that the biblical scholar tends to err in the opposite direction – emphasizing the diversity of the Bible and the historical distance from contemporary missionary practice (1986, 65-66; 1985).

texts, in recognition of the theological diversity within the biblical canon. What is often lacking, however, is both a recognition of the centrality of mission to the entire biblical narrative and the inability to see a larger unity to the thematic diversity that is noted. Kostenberger and O'Brien, for example, do a fine job of tracing "mission themes" throughout the biblical canon – particularly the various NT authors. However, both their narrow understanding of mission – understood anthropocentrically and narrowly as verbal witness – and their focus on the thematic diversity of the various authors, leads them to miss the missional heart of the narratives themselves.

Recent work continues to be done in this area, in large part out of a shared recognition of the weaknesses in the biblical foundations for mission approach. There is a growing recognition that foundational hermeneutical questions need to be resolved to move us forward in our understanding of the relationship between the Bible and the mission of the church.¹²

A missional hermeneutic seeks to renew our understanding of the relationship between the Bible and mission by approaching this issue in terms of seeing the Bible as the unified and comprehensive story of the world.¹³ It will approach this relationship not in terms of isolated biblical texts, but will seek to capture the relationship between the mission of the church today and the Bible in terms of "the essence of the message of Scripture," as Bosch argues. "Either mission – properly understood – lies at the heart of the biblical message or it is so peripheral to that message that we need not be overly concerned with it" (Bosch 1993, 177).

In the grand sweep of the biblical story, a missional hermeneutic sees the mission of God as the central story line. Following Chris Wright, a helpful starting point for such a hermeneutical approach comes from the words of the risen Christ on the road to Emmaus, recorded in the gospel of Luke:

Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning in Jerusalem." (Luke 24:45-47)

Evangelicals are keen to find here strong grounds for a Christological centre of the biblical story as Christ points to his life, death, and resurrection as the fulfilment of the OT Scriptures. What is missed and what Chris Wright demonstrates so well is that we find here not only a strong Christological centre but also a missional centre to the biblical story. Christ is pointing both to the events surrounding his life, death, and resurrection as well as the mission to all nations which flows out of those events as the focus and fulfilment of the whole of the Scriptures. Wright summarizes the implications of this text: "Luke tells us that with these words Jesus 'opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures,' or, as we might put it, he was setting their hermeneutical orientation and agenda. The proper way for disciples of the crucified and risen Jesus to read their Scriptures is from a perspective that is both *messianic* and *missional*" (2004, 107).

Claiming that the entire biblical story has a missional centre is also shifting the theological priority in understanding "mission" as the mission of God. That is, "mission" needs to be understood not primarily as an activity of the church but primarily as the mission of the triune God to redeem and renew his creation. The church is the community of God's people called to committed participation in this *missio Dei* through its proclamation and demonstration of God's reign.

Wright uses the helpful analogy of a map in describing how a missional hermeneutic helps keep the missional thrust central to the biblical story line and thus keeps before us the

¹² See Bauckham 2003; Beeby 2000; Bosch 1978, 1986, 1991, 1993; Brownson 1998; DeGroot 1995; Legrand 1992; Nissen 1999; Roxborogh 2001; Spindler 1995; Van Engen 1996; Wright 2004, and Okoye 2006.

¹³ This is what Charles Van Engen has called the emerging consensus for a "whole Bible approach" among those missiologists grappling with the relationship between biblical scholarship and missiology (1996, 36-7).

role and identity of God's people in that mission. The map analogy is helpful to articulate the potential fruitfulness of a missional hermeneutic. Any hermeneutical framework that seeks to capture the biblical story in its entirety will necessarily "distort" the text to some degree. However, such frameworks function similarly to a map in this regard – where of course not all features are highlighted, but only the most significant features needed to see clearly and get direction. A missional hermeneutic will provide this type of clarity and direction for the role and identity of the church today, as that identity and role are allowed to be shaped by the biblical story as a whole.

Such "distortions" are not inaccuracies, but are part of the function of maps and the purpose they serve. Like a map, a hermeneutical framework provided by a missional hermeneutic provides "a way of 'seeing' the whole terrain, a way of navigating one's way through it, a way of observing what is most significant . . ." (Wright 2004, 139). A missional hermeneutic map allows us to see the fundamental orientation of the biblical story to the mission of God, allowing the major features of that story to stand out clearly and allowing us to see fruitful and surprising connections between many other features and the main story line.

This renewed understanding of mission in the context of the biblical story is essential to shaping the missional role and identity of God's people today. To put it quite simply, if God is a missional God and the mission of God is the clue to the entire biblical story, it follows that God's people are missional in identity. Goheen comments, ". . . we will not recover our missional identity, unless, both in the church and in the academy, we recover Scripture as one story in which we are called to find our true identity" (2006c, 8).

1.4.2.2 Multi-cultural perspectives

A second major trend of earlier work on mission and the Bible is a focus on grappling with the hermeneutical questions that arise when we are engaged in cross-cultural missionary activity or attempts to validate multi-cultural hermeneutical perspectives on the biblical text (Brownson 1996, 1998; de Groot 1995). These concerns are of course valid and part of the changed reality of the church in our world today. Such an approach leaves us with a multiplicity of possible ways of reading the text from all the different cultural and missional contexts of the church around the world today. James Brownson argues that a missional hermeneutic must start by recognizing that the early Christian church which gave shape to the NT canon was a missionary movement at its heart. As a result, this movement was crossing cultural boundaries and began very early on, within the timeframe of the NT itself, to engage in the challenges of relating the Christian message to diverse cultures.¹⁴ Brownson summarizes,

It is fertile, especially for our purposes, because it places the question of the relationship between Christianity and diverse cultures at the very top of the interpretative agenda. This focus may be of great help to us in grappling with plurality in interpretation today . . . The missional hermeneutic I am advocating begins by affirming the reality and inevitability of plurality in interpretation (1996, 232-233).

However, a missional hermeneutic must move beyond compiling a plurality of multicultural perspectives on the biblical text. We must find something that will provide coherence and unity to the biblical texts and the biblical story. Brownson's attempt to bridge this plurality of readings with a "hermeneutic of coherence" which seeks to speak the truth in love is a bridge built on a very selective foundation of the core NT presentations of the

¹⁴ Brownson's emphasis at this point resonates with the observations by Walls about the serial nature of Christianity and the Ephesians moment in which we currently find ourselves. Flemming has also made a wonderful contribution to this issue with his work on the realities and challenges of contextualization within the NT canon (2005).

gospel, as Wright argues. The gospel begins with the story of creation in Genesis, and a missional hermeneutic grounded in the entirety of the biblical story provides the “coherence” Brownson is looking for. What we need is a broader understanding of contextualization, within which the issues of culture, mission, and gospel can be situated.

It is common today to not just assume the reality of this contextual plurality and diversity of readings of the text, but to also accept the postmodern assertion that this diversity is all that we have. Radical postmodern hermeneutics revel in the many different readings and local contextual stories and argue that we can no longer speak of the Bible, or any other story for that matter, as providing a coherent whole that goes beyond the particularity of the local and contextual. Some even argue that seeing the Bible as a grand narrative is inherently imperialistic and highly inappropriate in our post-colonial world, where cultural diversity and flourishing cannot be hampered by such universalist claims.

Yet, a grand narrative understanding of the biblical story is not necessarily oppressive or imperialistic. The Bible, unlike every other grand narrative, does not look for an intrahistorical victory. Rather, the biblical story finds its decisive victory in the cross of Jesus Christ, a victory validated by the resurrection that will one day be manifest completely when Christ returns to bring history to an end. The cross is not simply the central content of the Christian message, but the very form of our witness. The witness of the church must take the same cruciform posture of weakness and suffering in the midst of persecution and rejection, as the church refuses to conform to the idolatrous powers of the cultural stories within which we live (Goheen 2006c, 12). Bauckham captures it well:

Indeed, it may be the power of the cross that can most effectively break through the corrosive cynicism of much contemporary Western culture, the suspicion that the will to power is the hidden agenda in all human relationships however apparently altruistic (2003, 102).

The biblical story is not a story of ethnocentric domination or imperialistic aspirations. Rather, the very climax of the biblical story itself must always remind us that the growing cultural diversity and particularity is part of the story itself. This is part of what Walls has in mind when he describes the “serial nature” of the Christian faith (2002, 27-48). The biblical story reminds us that the gospel is advancing throughout the world as the Holy Spirit thrusts the church into its worldwide mission to the very ends of the earth. Wright offers keen insight on this issue:

[The Bible] is the grand narrative that constitutes truth for all. And within this story, as narrated and anticipated by the Bible, there is at work the God whose mission is evident from creation to new creation. This is the story of God’s mission. It is a coherent story with a universal claim. But it is also a story that affirms humanity in all its particular cultural variety. This is the universal story that gives a place in the sun to all the little stories (2006, 47).

1.4.2.3 Liberationist hermeneutics

A third trend is the concern for a “liberationist hermeneutic” – different advocacy readings that take as their starting point a commitment to approach the text on the side of the victims of injustice and seek to explore how a reading of the text might liberate people from oppression, exploitation, or violence. This trend has been rooted in the helpful insight that all theologies and all readings of the Bible are situated and contextual. The Enlightenment claim of objectivity through the employment of methodological reason has been exposed as a myth. For this we can be grateful.

This hermeneutical posture has been developed through many of the different liberationist theological movements of the later 20th century: Liberation Theology in Latin America, Dalit Theology in India, Minjung Theology in Korea, Black Theology in Africa and among

African-Americans, and various Feminist theologies – each in their own way seeking to read the text from the side of the poor and oppressed.

A missional hermeneutic will move beyond a liberationist hermeneutic yet at the same time embrace some of the liberationist concerns. A missional hermeneutic will move beyond the postcolonial missionary-bashing that has found its way into biblical scholarship.¹⁵ Wright reminds us that much of this fails to take into account that the majority of people who are committed to the biblical story of God's missionary purposes for the nations are not white males from the West (2006, 44-45).

This does not mean that a missional hermeneutic will run roughshod over the particularity and diversity of contexts within which the text is read today, many of which are contexts shaped by intense poverty and the sinful distortions of unjust structures and practices. Rather, these particularities are all part of the unfolding biblical story. This story of God's mission affirms humanity in all of its particularity and diversity and calls us to find the ultimate hope for liberation and renewal in the God whose mission is at the heart of this story. Thus a missional hermeneutic recovers a more holistic biblical perspective on what it means to espouse an advocacy reading of the text. Carl Braaten captures this well:

[A] Trinitarian grounding of mission should make clear that God and not the church is the primary subject and source of mission. Advocacy is what the church is about, being God's advocate in the world. The church must therefore begin its mission with doxology, otherwise everything peters out into social activism and aimless programs (Braaten 1991).

1.4.2.4 Bosch's critical hermeneutics

A fourth trend is found with the contribution by David Bosch and what has been called his “critical hermeneutics.”¹⁶ His critical hermeneutics make a significant contribution toward the development of a missional hermeneutic.

Bosch notes the different approaches to the biblical text found between biblical scholars and missiologists. On one hand, the historical nature of the text is often highlighted by biblical scholars in a way that distances the text from today's contemporary missional realities; conversely, missiologists do not tend to appreciate the historical conditioning and therefore tend to make simplistic moves from the biblical text to contemporary mission practice. On the other hand, biblical scholarship often emphasizes diversity within the biblical text, while missiologists tend to downplay diversity in search for a unifying framework for interpreting the biblical text.

Bosch takes hope in recent developments within hermeneutics, particularly the work of Gadamer, to move beyond these problems. Gadamer argues that the application of the text, or the post-history, is integral to our understanding of what the text means. This is the case because the process of interpretation is one in which we seek to find a fusion between the horizon of the biblical text, shaped by its historical context, and the horizon of the

¹⁵ It was striking in this regard to participate in the Matthew section of the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) at the 2005 annual meeting, which was committed to “Matthew and Mission: Hermeneutical Issues.” One of the assumptions made by more than one of the presenters was that the Matthean Great Commission text must be deconstructed as inherently oppressive and imperialistic in light of its history of providing biblical foundations for the colonialist paradigm of mission. See Daniel Patte, “Reading Matthew 28:16-20 with Others: How It Deconstructs Our Western Concept of Mission,” and Nienke Pruijsma, “Liberating Interdependence and a People-Centred Mission: Musa W. Dube’s Postcolonial Feminist Reading of Mission Texts and the Evolution of Her Concept of Mission in the HIV/AIDS Reading.”

¹⁶ Focus will be given here to the specific contribution of Bosch in this regard. It should be noted, however, that more recent work has been done by both OT and NT scholars addressing the whole issue of the Bible and mission that is very much in the tradition of Bosch's methodology. See, for example, the recent work by Okoye, *Israel and the Nations: A Mission Theology of the Old Testament*, and Nissen, *New Testament and Mission: Historical and Hermeneutical Perspectives*.

contemporary reader (Bosch 1986, 74). Developing this insight and drawing out its implications for the development of a missional hermeneutic, Bosch argues that our goal in developing a biblical understanding of mission is to remain consonant with the original intention of the text. This consonance comes as we seek to creatively understand how the text speaks into our contemporary missional situation. Bosch sees this model at work in the NT itself as the gospel writers develop the traditions of Jesus in a way that allows them to speak into their own contemporary situations and yet remain consonant with the logic or thrust of Jesus' mission.

The key concept for Bosch that opens up this possibility of consonance is that of "self-definition," an important concept for the church as it seeks to discern its missional vocation today.¹⁷ Goheen summarizes this important concept in Bosch well:

Critical hermeneutics seeks a view from within the community by inquiring into the self-definition of that community. The approach 'requires an interaction between the self-definition of early Christian authors and actors and the self-definition of today's believers who wish to be inspired and guided by those early witnesses.' How did the early church understand itself? How do we understand ourselves? How does the interaction between those self-definitions affect our view of mission? (2005a, 236)

Another key aspect of critical hermeneutics is the central role given to our missional context. Bosch is convinced that the missionary situation of the church can both open up new possibilities in the text as well as allow the text to open up our missionary horizons (Bosch 1986, 77). It is Bosch's conviction that the early church's self-definition was thoroughly missional. While there was diversity within the NT, rooted in the different self-definitions that emerged among different authors writing to diverse communities, all found ways to develop the self-understanding of Jesus' mission in ways that were consonant with his mission. As we seek to do that today, we will find that our own contemporary missional horizon can function as an anticipatory fore-structure¹⁸ which opens up new dimensions of the biblical text while at the same time challenges and opens up new dimensions of our contemporary understanding and practice of mission as we seek to find consonance between the two horizons (Bosch 1986, 76-7; Goheen 2005a, 237). Bosch argues that critical hermeneutics are enhanced and safeguarded by the enrichment and perspective that can only come from an ecumenical, inter-cultural fellowship of believers who learn to listen to each other and read biblical text as opened up by the diverse contexts of the world church in diverse missional contexts (1986, 77-8).

What is some of the fruit of Bosch's critical hermeneutics for the development of a missional hermeneutic today? Bosch provides a valuable missional reading of Matthew,

¹⁷ Bosch's magnum opus, *Transforming Mission*, builds on this approach as he seeks to develop different historical paradigms of mission that are developed as the church's self-definition, particularly as it relates to mission, has shifted throughout history. This is grounded in Bosch's work in developing Jesus' paradigm of mission and the sub-paradigms of some of the NT authors: Matthew, Luke, and Paul. The challenge throughout his work is to wrestle with how the church's self-definition developed historically and compared and/or contrasted with the self-definition of Jesus' mission and that of the early church developed within the NT by these different NT authors (see Bosch 1991).

¹⁸ Goheen has developed another important insight of Gadamer's in this regard. "Our reading of texts is shaped by what Gadamer refers to as anticipatory fore-structures of 'prejudices' that orient our interpretation. These interpretive categories allow us to enter into dialogue and interpret the text, which is likewise engaged with the self-same matter at hand" (2005a, 232). Goheen goes on to ask whether or not the increased awareness of a missional situation facing the church in the West can help us recover "missional anticipatory structures." Goheen asks: "Can the work of contemporary missiology pose questions to the biblical text that will help recover our understanding of the essential missionary thrust of Scripture? Specifically, what would a missional reading . . . look like?" (2005a, 233).

Luke, and Paul, and has given us a rich understanding of their unique paradigms of mission. As well, Goheen cites the following emphases by which Bosch has advanced missional hermeneutics: “mission as a central thrust of Scripture’s message; the centrality of the *missio Dei*; various mission theologies rooted in the mission of Jesus; the missionary identity of the church; the broad scope of mission centred in the comprehensive salvation of the kingdom of God; the communal dimension of mission; and a hermeneutic of ‘consonance’ or historical logic that enables the ancient missionary paradigms to speak authentically to the present” (2005a, 254).

There are two critical points at which Bosch has not gone far enough, and where recent work done in developing a missional hermeneutic provides good insight. The first weakness we see in Bosch is the dilemma he faces in trying to hold onto the over-arching missional purposes of God as the key to the biblical story as a whole, and in connecting that larger metanarrative with the biblical paradigms he develops for Matthew, Luke, and Paul. He fails to connect and root these NT paradigms adequately within the larger narrative of God’s missional purposes. It is very likely Bosch’s own ambiguity in employing the word “mission” that may have contributed to this weakness.¹⁹ It is a shame that some of Bosch’s other work done on the OT could not be incorporated into the more sophisticated NT work found in *Transforming Mission*.²⁰

The second weakness concerns the way in which Bosch can easily be read as providing “mission themes” found in Matthew or Luke, without providing a perspective on the whole of these texts as being missional. Goheen cites the following in connection to Bosch’s work on Luke: striking Lukan themes related to mission are missing from Bosch’s paradigm, important sections in Luke are not developed, and the connection between Luke’s paradigm and the broader NT paradigm developed by Bosch is not clear (2005a, 258-9). A more holistic, narrative reading of the text would allow these mission themes highlighted by Bosch to find their place within the larger narrative developed by Luke, a narrative that is profoundly missional throughout (Goheen 2005a, 260).

1.4.3 Clues to a new approach

To situate the importance of a missional hermeneutic for the church in the West to discern its missional vocation today, consider some clues toward a new approach from N.T. Wright and Hans Gadamer.

1.4.3.1 Contributions of N.T. Wright

The recent work being done by N.T. Wright, particularly in articulating and defending his hermeneutical approach to the NT, will prove to be exceedingly important in contributing to the development of a missional hermeneutic. There are four insights by N.T. Wright that are particularly relevant. The first insight is his call to read the Scriptures as a unified grand story of the cosmos. Contrary to the postmodern aversion to such things, N.T. Wright calls us to read the Scriptures as a metanarrative (1992, 142; 2005, 4-5). This insight will be central to a missional hermeneutic as it seeks to equip the church in Western culture to once again proclaim and embody the biblical story as public truth. The second important insight from N.T. Wright is in how Scripture functions as an authoritative tool for forming, shaping, and equipping God’s people for mission.²¹ He argues that God’s self-revelation in Scripture is

¹⁹ Goheen cites Bosch’s fear to avoid the charge of “panmissionism” articulated by Walter Freytag and Stephen Neill. This is the charge that argues, “if everything is mission, nothing is mission” (see Bosch 1991, 511; Goheen 2005a, 255).

²⁰ In this regard, Kevin Livingston’s dissertation on David Bosch is helpful, particularly chapter 5 on Biblical Foundations of Mission in Bosch (Livingston 1989).

²¹ Using the helpful distinction suggested by Goheen, a missional hermeneutic needs to attend to the way in which Scripture comes to us both as authoritative *record* of God’s redemptive mission and the way the

given to energize and equip the people of God for the task of mission as they participate in God's redemptive mission.

N.T. Wright opens up a fresh perspective on the issue of biblical authority as it flows out of seeing the Scriptures as one story. This authority is fundamentally the *authority of God himself* seen in his reign and his sovereign power accomplishing the renewal of the entire creation. Scripture's "authority" had nothing to do with "proving the Bible to be true" but rather was about the community living under the authority of the biblical story and wrestling with how that story shaped and equipped them for their missional task in their context and situation (2005, 21-44). This community, living under the authority of the Scriptures, is a community called to wrestle anew with its mission in the context of its place within that story. Thus Scripture's authority functions to equip the church for its missional task.

This insight into Scripture functioning as an authoritative tool for mission can be further summarized along the following lines. N.T. Wright argues that the OT Scriptures were written in order to equip the people of God for their mission in God's purposes for the world. God's calling and equipping of Israel was for the sake of the world – they were to be the people through whom God would carry out his worldwide mission. In order for Israel to carry out that mission, she would need to be a light to the nations around her. Scripture functioned in that context in all of its various OT genres, as Goheen summarizes:

[The law was given to order Israel's] national, liturgical and moral life; wisdom helped to shape daily conduct in conformity to God's creative order; the prophets threatened and warned Israel in her disobedience and promised blessing in obedience; the psalms brought all of Israel's life into God's presence; the historical books continued to tell the story of Israel at different points reminding Israel of and calling Israel to her missional place in the story (Goheen 2008a).

Further, as N.T. Wright argues, the New Testament brought the biblical story to its climax in Jesus Christ and sought to bring that story to bear on the early Christian communities in order to form and equip them for their mission. The gospel proclamation, the word of God, was brought to bear on the church's life in many ways as a life-changing power that "called into existence a missional community, shaped that community as a faithful people, and worked through them to draw others to faith" (Wright 2005, 36-7; cf. Goheen 2008a). New Testament authors wrote down the word of God to form, equip, and renew the church for its mission.²² These books "carried the same power, the same *authority in action*, that had characterized the initial preaching of the word" (Wright 2005, 38).²³

The third insight is N.T. Wright's model of a "five-act hermeneutic" (2005, 90). He has offered up the model of seeing the biblical story unfolding as a play with five acts as a helpful way for us to understand the authority of Scripture and its connection to the contemporary church.²⁴ Using the analogy of a Shakespearean play, he suggests that the biblical story can

Scripture functions authoritatively as a *tool* for shaping God's people in mission (see Goheen 2008a). Goheen follows the confession of the Christian Reformed Church, *Our World Belongs to God: A Contemporary Testimony*, where it says, "The Bible is the Word of God, record and tool of his redeeming work" (par. 35).

²² Goheen captures Wright's insight well – "The New Testament authors believed themselves to be authorized teachers, who, by the guidance and power of the Spirit, wrote books and letters to sustain, energize, shape, judge, and renew the church" (2008a).

²³ Michael Barram has made a wonderful contribution to this insight in Pauline studies, by demonstrating how for Paul, his letters can all be understood as missional documents, with "missional context, thrust, and import" given his apostolic mission of evangelism, church planting, and nurturing and caring for the new churches he had planted (Barram 2005, 2007).

²⁴ In this model, the acts are: creation, fall, Israel, Jesus, and the church – each constituting a different stage in the drama offered in Scripture (2005, 89). Bartholomew and Goheen have picked up this model and adapted it in their recent work *The Drama of Scripture*. Bartholomew and Goheen add a sixth act – the completion of redemption in the new earth (2004, 26).

be seen as an unfolding drama where the first four acts have been completed and the first scene of the final act narrates for us the beginning of the church's mission and offers the clues for how the play will end. This first scene begins to draw out the implications and significance of the first four acts but requires us today, who continue the church's mission in our context, to improvise the remaining scenes of this final act. This "improvisation" can only happen as we live under the authority of the first four acts and the first scene of the final act – totally immersed in the biblical story and allowing that story to shape and inform our missional task within this unfolding story. (Bartholomew and Goheen 2004a, 154-56). This model forces us to take seriously the historical, contextual shaping of the text – the first four acts plus – and also allows the text to shape and inform our mission today, on our stage.

The fourth insight is N.T. Wright's sensitivity to the "storied" nature of knowledge and the universe. In developing his "critical realist" epistemology and the hermeneutical implications, he reminds us of the foundational role played by worldview in all scholarship. This foundational insight is not new with N.T. Wright, but he argues that worldviews are at root a story, a grand story of the universe.²⁵ Biblical interpretation must be sensitive to the worldview story at work in all aspects of the interpretive process: the author, the original audience, the text (including its history), and the interpreter (Moritz, 184; N.T. Wright 1992, 62-4). This insight is foundational not only for the development of a missional hermeneutic, but for the epistemological crisis facing the church in Western culture and the epistemological task of the church's mission in the West (Goheen 2002, 364; Kirk and Vanhoozer 1999).

A missional hermeneutic will build on this insight by providing a missional shape and perspective on the formation of a Christian worldview. Like all human endeavours, hermeneutics in particular and epistemology in general are shaped by some worldview story. A worldview expresses the most basic beliefs through which we perceive and understand reality. They operate at the presuppositional and pre-theoretical level and have to do with the ultimate beliefs that shape our lives.

What N.T. Wright helps us see is that for hermeneutics to be renewed, we must start by embracing the worldview story of the Bible and allow this worldview story to function as the "philosophical scaffolding"²⁶ or "controlling story" that shapes our hermeneutical work. In the past, the church has assumed the Enlightenment, Western worldview-story to be the lens through which biblical scholars approached the biblical text, allowing the biblical story to be absorbed within the Western story and reduced to only a literary or historical phenomenon (Bartholomew and Goheen 2004a, 156). A missional hermeneutic calls us to recover the *missio Dei* as the central thrust to this "controlling story" that we find in the Scriptures. Only then can we allow this biblical story to function as authoritative in our lives.

Along similar lines, David Hesselgrave argues for a "missionary hermeneutic" which allows the missionary purpose of God to function as a "pre-understanding" for hermeneutics (1993, 17). For Hesselgrave, "a pre-understanding of the missionary hermeneutic is this: it is God's expressed purpose to bring glory to himself through the creative, redemptive and punitive work of his Son, and especially in this age by bringing men and women of all peoples to repentance and faith in Christ." He gives five reasons why such a pre-understanding should shape our hermeneutical approach to the text: it acknowledges God's purposeful plan in the Bible as an essentially missionary plan; it places world mission at the centre of a biblical worldview; it allows mission to function as the "mega-context" for many biblical texts; it opens us up to the missionary acts of God that are central to the historical context of particular texts; and it allows us to see mission as intrinsic to the "big picture" of the biblical story as a whole (1993, 17-18).

²⁵ Wolters' *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview* remains the best exposition of the foundational role played by worldviews in scholarship and all types of knowing.

²⁶ Craig Bartholomew's term to describe the way in which worldviews operate in relationship to philosophical and indeed all theoretical reflection (1996, 213).

While there is much to appreciate in Hesselgrave's argument, his starting point for a "missionary hermeneutic" is flawed by his individualistic understanding of salvation, with its focal point on "bringing men and women of all peoples to repentance and faith in Christ." A missional hermeneutic should expand this "pre-understanding" by seeing the *missio Dei* – understood in the broadest sense as God's mission to restore the entire cosmos, and his formation of a people that is called to embody, proclaim and demonstrate his redemptive purposes for the world – as the central purpose of God that is revealed throughout the biblical story.

In a similar vein, Chris Wright argues that a missional hermeneutic will enhance our understanding of Scripture's authority for our missionary activity and all of our lives by rooting that authority not in isolated commands or biblical imperatives for the church's missionary activity, but in the indicatives of the biblical story and the realities it reveals to us. He identifies three "worldview realities" that will shape this mission: the reality of the *God of Scripture* who calls us to commit our lives to his purposes for creation; the reality of *this story* unfolded in Scripture; and the reality of the *people of God* revealed in this story – Israel, a people with a mission to be a light to the nations, and that community gathered around Jesus and sent into the world – the people revealed in Scripture whom I am called to join.

Furthermore, in providing us with a "worldview story" for hermeneutics, a missional hermeneutic provides a way out of the epistemological crisis facing the church in Western culture: the encounter between the biblical story and the Western story. The church must reclaim its confidence in the biblical story as the true story of the world and not continue to allow that story to be absorbed within the modern or postmodern stories shaping Western culture. A missional hermeneutic reminds us not only of this storied nature of all knowledge and not only helps sketch the basic contours to that worldview story we find in the Scriptures, but provides us with the missional thrust to that worldview and therefore provides a missional foundation for our epistemology and indeed all of Christian scholarship and life.

1.4.3.2 Gadamer's insights

It is important to appreciate the significance of Gadamer's work for biblical hermeneutics. Thiselton refers to the "watershed" nature of Gadamer's work for hermeneutical theory and biblical hermeneutics in particular (1980, 16). Bosch also picks up on the significance of Gadamer particularly for the development of a biblical theology of mission (Bosch 1986, 74ff.). Gadamer's insights into the "fusion of horizons" and the role of "application" in interpretation are particularly important for the development of a missional hermeneutic.

Gadamer helps us see that the process of interpretation, *contra* the historical critical paradigm, is one in which there is a "fusion of horizons" between the horizon of the text and the horizon of the contemporary reader. Applying this insight of Gadamer to the hermeneutical task, the biblical scholar and the missiologist need one another – the biblical scholar to help the missiologist stay connected to the "pastness" of the biblical text and its horizon, and the missiologist to keep ever before the biblical scholar the importance of the contemporary missional context for a true understanding of the text today (Bosch 1986, 74-5).

Building on Gadamer, Bosch argues that not only do we need to deal seriously with the "pre-history" of the biblical text, but for us to understand the text we must also attend to its "post-history" or its application (*Anwendung* in Gadamer's terminology). The reality of two horizons does not threaten our ability to understand the biblical text today, but rather it is precisely in resolving the tense distance between the horizons that we open up the meaning of the text for today. The text remains our point of orientation, but understanding it is a creative process. Bosch sees this process at work in the New Testament:

Jesus inspired his disciples to prolong the logic of his own ministry in an imaginative and creative way amid historical circumstances that were in many respects new and different. The traditions were retained carefully but they

were modified to meet new circumstances. Good exegesis is produced where the exegete's own horizon has been opened in the way the biblical author's horizon was opened. The text remains the firm point of orientation Studying the Bible from our missionary context we discover that it provokes meaning for us. It opens our horizons. It produces what Schreiter calls 'envisioning possibilities' (1986, 76-78).²⁷

1.4.4 Proposals for a Missional Hermeneutic

There are a number of proposals for a missional hermeneutic that have been advanced. George Hunsberger provides a very helpful map of the various proposals (2009). He identifies four main streams, each with a certain emphasis on what is believed to be the most essential aspect of what makes interpretation of the biblical story missional.

The first stream – best represented by Chris Wright, Michael Goheen, and Dan Beeby – emphasizes the importance of reading the biblical story as a whole and seeing the mission of God as the framework or hermeneutical key for interpretation of that story. All the parts within the biblical story are then to be read in light of that overarching narrative of God's mission. Mission becomes the defining centre.

The second stream – best represented by Darrell Guder – emphasizes the importance of the missional purpose of the Bible and sees the aim of biblical interpretation to be primarily that of fulfilling the equipping purpose of the biblical writings. The biblical story and all of the writings that comprise that story are seen as critical tools for the equipping and forming of God's people for mission.

The third stream – best represented by Michael Barram – emphasizes the importance of the missional location of the reader. The emphasis is placed upon reading the biblical story from a community that is engaged in mission and allowing the located questions of that communities' missional engagement to guide the encounter with the biblical text. Barram writes, "A missional hermeneutic should be understood as an approach to Scripture that self-consciously, intentionally, and persistently bring[s] to the biblical text a range of focused, critical, and located questions regarding [the] church's purpose in order to discern the faith community's calling and task within the *Missio Dei*" (2006, 5).

The fourth stream – best represented by James Brownson – emphasizes the way in which the biblical story provides an interpretative matrix through which the biblical traditions are brought into conversation with the particular cultural contexts in which biblical authors were situated.

Within this broader context, the approach taken in this study will be one firmly situated within the first stream, emphasizing the biblical story as a whole. However, in seeking to sketch the role the church plays in the mission of God as narrated in the biblical story that provides the missional identity and role of the church, insights from the other three streams will be drawn into the conversation. The biblical story has a powerful shaping and forming purpose on God's people, and it does indeed give us fruitful insight into the ongoing challenge facing the church in every place to engage its cultural context with the gospel and discern afresh its missional vocation.

Having situated the present work on missional hermeneutic within the emerging streams and emphases in the field, the next chapter will put on a missional hermeneutic and so provide a sketch of the biblical story as a record of God's mission through his people for the sake of the world. Particular emphasis will be given to how this story shapes the role and identity of

²⁷ Bosch goes on to say this, resonating with the insights of Walls and Sanneh, "Of course this is an enterprise fraught with danger at every turn. Our contexts develop a life of their own, divorced from the biblical text and its critical challenge. . . . The only safeguard we have against this is the ecumenical, inter-cultural fellowship of brothers and sisters in the faith, where we learn to listen to each other and begin to see the relativity of our own contexts" (1986, 78).

God's people and thus provides the shape and direction for the development of a missional ecclesiology today and discernment of missional vocation.

1.5 Conclusion

The central research problem and question has been established. In light of the global realities facing the church today, in light of the local realities out of which this study emerges, and in light of the historical developments in understanding mission in the Bible, the need for missional discernment has been demonstrated. The church in the West needs to develop greater capacity to discern its missional vocation. The central question concerns how the church can discern this vocation as it seeks to renew its missional identity. The task of missional discernment is a fundamental one, and it is urgent.

CHAPTER TWO: DWELLING IN THE BIBLICAL STORY

2.1 Introduction

If the church in the West is going to develop greater capacity to discern its missional vocation, it must be renewed in its identity and role by dwelling in the biblical story. This dwelling in the story of Scripture will be most fruitful when done with the aid of a missional hermeneutic that will allow the biblical story to shape our understanding of the role and identity of God's people. A missional hermeneutic leads us to a missional ecclesiology and provides a very fruitful biblical-theological framework for how we begin to discern the missional vocation of the church today in the West. This will be demonstrated below by sketching the biblical story as a record of God's mission through God's people for the sake of God's world with a particular focus on how the identity and role of God's people flow out of that story and begin to shape the missional vocation of the church today.

2.2 Biblical story as a record of God's mission

Every telling of the biblical story is shaped by the questions we ask and the material we select and highlight in the telling. The telling below will be guided by the questions and issues of the missional engagement of the Western church, and the global and local and historical contexts of this engagement, already highlighted above. In particular, the focus will be on seeking to discern the role and identity of the church within the biblical story as a whole: this is, after all, the most basic question of ecclesiology (Stackhouse 2003, 9).²⁸ Wilbert Shenk keenly observes, "The Bible does not offer a definition of the church or provide us with a doctrinal basis for understanding it. Instead, the Bible relies on images and narrative to disclose the meaning of the church" (1997, 9). Taking this as an important interpretative clue, we can sketch the role the church plays in the mission of God as that mission is narrated in the biblical story.²⁹

2.2.1 Starting with the gospel

Paradoxically, the starting point of the narrative of God's mission is actually the climax of the narrative of Jesus Christ. When Jesus began his public ministry, he announced the good news, "The Kingdom of God has arrived." This announcement was nothing less than the declaration that God was breaking into history and was now acting in Jesus by the power of the Spirit to restore all of creation and all of human life under the rule of God.

This gospel announcement can only be understood within the narrative of God's redemptive mission in the Old Testament. God chose one people out of all the nations of the world to be a channel of his redemptive blessing to the world. That people ultimately failed in carrying out God's mission, absorbing the cultural idolatry of the nations around them. Rather than abandoning his people or his mission, God promised to act again, this time through a king who would gather and renew his people's faithful witness.

In Jesus, that day arrived and that promise was fulfilled. God's power was now at work and present, through Jesus' life, words, and deeds. His mission led him to the cross, where he took upon himself the sin of the whole world, battled the powers of evil, and gained a triumphant victory over sin and death. The new creation began, as Jesus rose as the firstborn

²⁸ This is not to say that the issues which ecclesiology has been concerned with historically, such as sacraments, church order, discipline, ministry, and structures, are not important. Nonetheless, before we can adequately deal with those issues, we must concern ourselves with the more basic questions about the identity, purpose, and self-understanding of the church. Hunsberger puts it well: "Ecclesiology, at the heart of it, is the self-understanding of the Christian community, which then orders its life in a particular way because of that self-understanding" (2003, 107).

²⁹ The narrative that follows is indebted at points to *A Light to the Nations* (Goheen 2011).

from the dead and the Lord of all creation.

Before Jesus ascended to the place of authority at the right hand of God the Father, he commissioned the renewed people of God to continue his mission of bearing witness to the gospel to the very ends of the earth, until he returns again at the end of history. Until that day, the church is taken up into this redemptive mission of God and is called to bear witness to the coming kingdom of God in every cultural context (Goheen 2011, 17-18).

Summarizing the gospel this way, we can highlight six themes that are instructive in discerning the church's missional role:

1. The gospel is the true story of the world, disclosing the purpose and meaning of human and cosmic history.
2. The central theme of this story is God's mission to redeem creation, and the people by which God pursues this mission.
3. The long-awaited end to God's mission, what we call the kingdom of God, will finally conclude the comprehensive and restorative salvation accomplished by Christ.
4. In the meantime, the church is the community that bears witness to this coming kingdom, set apart to play a central role in God's mission.
5. The church is "both the beginning of something new and the continuation of something much older" (Goheen 2011, 20) – a proper understanding of its identity must attend to both the Old and New Testaments.
6. And finally, as Newbigin never tired of saying, the gospel is about events in history, particularly the events surrounding the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ (1989, 66). If the cross and the empty tomb are the climactic events of history and the climax of the biblical story, then they must always be at the centre of the church's mission and must continually shape and define its role and identity.

This is the fruit of a missional reading of Scripture. There is much ferment in both missional and emergent conversations about the nature of the gospel, with some emphasizing individual doctrines such as atonement and justification by faith, and others emphasizing the gospel's eschatological-kingdom aspects. In order to avoid polarization over these issues and to maintain the clarity so critical for the church's mission, it is crucial to read the gospel as *stories of events in history* and to see the kingdom of God, justification, atonement, and redemption (to name only a few) as images and themes used by the NT authors to unfold the significance and meaning of those events. To polarize one NT image and theme against another is dangerous and unhealthy for ecclesiology, as is the tendency to inflate (equate) one of these images *with* the gospel. Newbigin is emphatic on this point, and provides keen insight for the church today:

We are speaking about a happening, an event that can never be fully grasped by our intellectual powers and translated into a theory or doctrine. We are in the presence of a reality full of mystery, which challenges but exceeds our grasp. . . . Down the centuries, from the first witness until today, the church has sought and used innumerable symbols to express the inexpressible mystery of the event that is the center, the crisis of all cosmic history, the hinge upon which all happenings turn. Christ the sacrifice offered for our sin, Christ the substitute standing in our place, Christ the ransom paid for our redemption, Christ the conqueror casting out the prince of the world – these and other symbols have been used to point to the heart of the mystery. None can fully express it. It is that happening in which the reign of God is present (1995, 49-50).

2.2.2 Missio Dei

Mission in the biblical story is foundational for how we discern the role and identity of God's people. A missional hermeneutic builds on recent shifts in missiology paradigms that stress the theological priority of God's mission – an important theological shift away from an ecclesiocentric understanding of mission that puts emphasis and priority on the activity of the church to a theocentric understanding of mission that starts with God's mission as the primary activity in which the church is called to participate. As Bosch highlights, there have been those who have taken this concept and reached the conclusion that God's mission has to do primarily with his involvement in the historical process, for example working toward humanization or peacemaking, and thus have diminished the church's involvement as peripheral and optional (1991, 389-393). Despite this abuse and the potential weaknesses of this terminology that have been highlighted, this theocentric *missio Dei* understanding remains a critical starting point for a missional hermeneutic of the Bible.³⁰

A missional hermeneutic brings together three pillars of the *missio Dei* unfolded throughout the biblical story: the *core* of God's mission, the *scope* of God's mission, and the *means* of God's mission.

The *core* of God's *missio Dei* is made obvious in the telling of the gospel story above: mission flows out of the very being of who God is. There are two important aspects to this.

First, to make the claim that mission flows out of the very being of God is to build on the work of Barth, who was one of the first to locate mission within the doctrine of the Trinity (Bosch 1991, 390).³¹ Mission is an attribute of the Triune God; God is a missionary God. Jürgen Moltmann writes, "It is not the church that has a mission of salvation to fulfil in the world; it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father that includes the church" (1993, 64). Mission is a movement of God to the world, and the church is a community caught up and called into participation in that movement. The Triune God exists in a community of intra-Trinitarian love. All of humanity is invited into the dance of that community of love. Bosch again captures it well: "To participate in mission is to participate in the movement of God's love toward people, since God is a fountain of sending love" (1991, 390).

The biblical canon is itself a product of God's mission (Taber 1983; Beeby 1999). As Taber argues, the very existence of the Bible is a witness to the mission of God in his movement of self-revelation toward humanity:

The very existence of the Bible is incontrovertible evidence of the God who refused to forsake his rebellious creation, who refused to give up, who was and is determined to redeem and restore fallen creation to his original design for it . . . The very existence of such a collection of writings testifies to a God who breaks through to human beings, who disclosed himself to them, who will not leave them unilluminated in their darkness . . . who takes the initiative in re-establishing broken relationships with us (1983, 232).

The God of Scripture is a God who has come to us and revealed himself to us through his word. That act of self-revelation is a missional act.

Further, God's will throughout the biblical story is to be known as the God of the whole creation. The world and the nations must know their creator, leader, and judge. This is one of the emphases of the Exodus narrative that is echoed throughout the Old Testament – YHWH

³⁰ See Hoedemaker 1995 for a nuanced and yet critical analysis of the *missio Dei* concept for missiology.

³¹ As Bosch puts it, "Indeed, Barth may be called the first clear exponent of a new theological paradigm which broke radically with an Enlightenment approach to theology. His influence on missionary thinking reached a peak at the Willingen Conference of the IMC (1952). It was here that the idea (not the exact term) *missio Dei* first surfaced clearly" (1991, 390).

has acted in Israel and through Israel so that the nations around her, indeed the whole world, might know that Israel's God is the one and only true God (Exodus 9:16; Chris Wright 2006, 127). Bauckham writes, "The exodus, then, establishes a paradigmatic link between God's particular identity as the God of Israel and God's purpose of universal self-revelation to the nations" (2003, 37). God's identity was to be made known to the world through his people bearing witness to that identity.

If mission flows out of the very being of God and is in fact an extension and amplification of that being, and if mission is caught up in the very act of God's self-revelation to the world through his word, then mission belongs to the very identity of God as he has revealed himself. Our God is a God who is on mission to redeem his creation. If God is missional, then both our personal identities as people made in God's image and our corporate identities as people gathered in communities of Christ's body are also missional (Hendriks 2004, 24-25).

The *scope* of God's *missio Dei*, which a missional hermeneutic will keep before us as the biblical story unfolds, is broad indeed: God's purpose is to redeem all of creation. This reminds us not only of where the biblical story has begun, emphasizing the goodness of creation, but also where the story will end – creation renewed and restored. The movement of the biblical story is towards redemption – redemption that is restorative in nature and cosmic in scope (Wolters 2005). This eschatological vision is consistent throughout the biblical story. Expressed in climactic fashion in the Old Testament in Isaiah 65-66, this vision shapes the New Testament hope as well. A missional hermeneutic will keep this creation-wide mission of God front and centre as the context in which we understand the identity and role of the church.

Finally, a missional hermeneutic will consistently emphasize God's people as the *means* by which he carries out his mission. God calls a people to embody his intentions for the world; he will accomplish his mission through a chosen community. Newbigin helps us see the importance of this for the biblical story and our understanding of mission. For Newbigin, the election of a people by whom God purposes to save the world is the Bible's central theme. The following are key aspects that shape this biblical theme and inform his understanding of election: the choosing of one community as a channel of grace to others; the scandal of particularity that God has chosen one community to be the bearer of salvation for the world; and the insight that because salvation is corporate and cosmic, and not the salvation of isolated individuals, the election of a community is the only principle that is consistent with God's redemptive purposes (Hunsberger 1998, 48-55).

The key insight here that Newbigin helps us discover and which is so critical for the role and identify of the church is the recovery of the missional purpose of election. The purpose of election is service to God in his mission, to be the vehicle through which his purposes for creation will be fulfilled. Those who are chosen or elected will be the bearers of the blessings of salvation to others – both in terms of the ends and the means. In other words, God's choice of a community through which he will work to accomplish his purposes for creation brings into view not only the ultimate purpose for which God chooses the community (the restoration of creation) but also includes within it the means through which that restoration will take place.

Hunsberger contrasts this missional perspective with the classical Calvinist perspective on election which has put the focus on the soteriological aspect of election and, as a result, missed the missional task that is at the heart of election (1998, 88). Hunsberger also contrasts this with the "instrumental mechanistic" view of election that is common among those who employ a salvation-historical hermeneutic with the biblical story.³²

Newbigin's insights into a missional understanding of election can be contrasted with

³² The Dutch redemptive-historical tradition would be a prime example of those who employ the salvation-historical hermeneutic and miss the missional thrust of the biblical story. J.H. Bavinck is a notable exception. See his *Introduction to the Science of Missions*.

those of both Harry Boer and Oscar Cullmann. Boer employs a redemptive-historical hermeneutic that sees the purpose of election as preserving the messianic line – a historical process that culminates with Christ’s coming in that line and the universal diffusion of salvation that comes after the risen Christ pours out his spirit at Pentecost. The main focus for Israel’s election is her role in being a bearer of the redemptive-historical process; part of the “machinery of history” through which God would carry out his redemptive purposes in the messiah. Lost is the missional vocation of Israel’s election. N.T. Wright argues that the election of Israel for the sake of the nations and for the sake of God’s purpose of restoring the creation is central to both the OT story and the apostle Paul’s own theology:

This is at the heart of the redefinition of election around the messiah: that through his death . . . God’s purpose, to rescue the world from the entail of sin and death has at last been accomplished. The messiah has done that for which Israel was chosen in the first place. His death . . . has made the atonement through which all nations will be redeemed. . . . He has done *in Israel’s place* what Israel was called to do but could not, namely to act on behalf of the whole world (2005c, 120).

Cullmann’s redemptive-historical hermeneutic similarly puts the emphasis on the “historical instrumentality” of election and eclipses missional purpose. This allows him to see the continuous, historical process of God’s redemptive activity through Israel – the “historical line of events” which are then fulfilled in the death and resurrection of Christ and after which God’s salvation is opened up for all. What Cullmann misses is the “people-ness” of election – why God chose this particular people and how they were involved in the unfolding of God’s plan and in fact how their mission is an integral part of that redemptive plan (Hunsberger 1998, 99).

For Newbigin, there is a “must-ness” to election in the biblical story, a “must-ness” that is rooted in the scandal of particularity: God choosing one people for the sake of the world. The particularity of election, both the election of Israel in the OT and the church in the NT, serves God’s universal missional purposes. This particularity does not simply preserve the historical line through which the messiah will come to bring redemption, nor does it replace the exclusivism of Israel’s election with a universalist message of world mission.³³ Rather, this election has an inner logic that brings together the particularism of election and the universalism of God’s intentions for the world. Newbigin’s insights into the missional purpose of election as a central theme of the biblical story moves us beyond looking for a “missionary commission” in the OT, and past arguments for whether or not there is a centrifugal mission for Israel in the OT, and allows us to recapture the flow of the biblical story as a whole. Within the biblical story, God’s mission is carried out as he calls, forms, and sends a community to embody his intentions for the world.

2.2.3 Israel’s missional role and identity

Within this context of the gospel and the mission of God, the missional role and identity of Israel in the OT and the intertestamental period can now be explored in more detail. This large portion of the biblical narrative will be summarized along six lines that will help give shape to identity of God’s people.

³³ Hunsberger cites Boer and Cullman as examples of the former and Senior and Stuhlmueller as an example of the latter (1998, 108-109). Okoye’s more recent *Israel and the Nations* seeks to trace the historical development within the canon, specifically focusing on the internal transformation within the OT tradition that indicates a missional intention for Israel’s election. For Okoye, this is a later historical and redactional development and is reflected particularly in Isaiah (see Okoye 2006, 3-4, 118-143).

2.2.3.1 Calling of Abraham

While it is primarily in the book of Exodus that God forms the people of Israel and gives them their role and identity in his mission, this formation fulfils God's promise to and calling of Abraham in Genesis. The calling of Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3 is a crucial text for how we understand the entire biblical story. The purpose and role of God's choice of a people is found here; they are a people who are chosen for the sake of the world (Goheen 2011, 30). There are three facets of this calling worth highlighting.

First, understand the *shape* of God's promise to Abraham. It embodies a two-fold plan: God will form through Abraham a great and powerful people, and then God will bless all the nations of the earth through that people. Summarizing the promise in this way is consistent with the grammatical structure of the text:

¹ The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you." ² I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

The final clause is the purpose clause, and indicates the aim of the promises that God makes leading up to the final clause. God promises to bless Abraham *so that* all peoples on earth will be blessed through him. As Dumbrell puts it, "the personal promises to Abraham have final world blessing as their aim" (1984, 65).

Second, the very notion of Abraham's *blessing* is much discussed. Many scholars seeking to trace a biblical theology of mission have recognized the significance of Abraham's election, particularly the importance of the final clause where God promises to bless the nations of the world through Abraham. Often, however, it is not entirely clear what is meant by this "blessing" that God promises to bring to the nations through Abraham and his seed, a theme that dominates so much of the OT narrative. A missional hermeneutic should open up for us the full-orbed dimensions of this blessing and its significance for the biblical story as a whole.

Borrowing from Chris Wright (2006, 208-220), consider several dimensions of this "blessing" traced in Genesis and later in inter-textual echoes throughout the OT:

Abraham's blessing is *creational* (he is mandated to enjoy the good gifts of God's creation) and *relational* (encountered in relationship with God's people who are bearers of that blessing). Creational blessing will come as God's people embody his intention for human life, conformed to God's creational order.

Abraham's blessing is both *missional* and *historical*. God gives Abraham the imperative "Be a blessing," which entails a redemptive mission and purpose. Creation has been broken by sin, and as God now elects Abraham and establishes covenant with him, he is launching his redemptive mission to renew creation that will drive the remainder of the biblical story. This history of redemption is fundamentally a history of mission.

Abraham's blessing is *covenantal*. There is a particularity to the blessing of God as it is experienced by those in covenant relationship with him. Blessing within the covenant includes the knowledge of YHWH as the one and only true God and a commitment to obey him in the context of the covenant relationship so that the blessing may continue to be enjoyed. As the story in Genesis 15 demonstrates, it is God's initiative that forms the covenant and God who takes upon himself the punishment of both parties for any breach in the covenant. God's people are called to covenantal obedience, but the initiative is God's and the mission in which God's people are caught up is God's mission.

Finally, Abraham's blessing is *universal* and *Christological*. God extends his blessing through Abraham to the whole world. This blessing will come as the nations find the source – Abraham's God – and come to put their faith where Abraham puts his.

The third notable facet of Abraham's calling is the dynamic of *particularity and universality* that is embedded in this promise and that will shape the rest of the OT story and the role and identity of God's people. Genesis 12 comes on the heels of Genesis 1-11, wherein God is dealing universally with all nations and the entire creation as the creator and ruler of all. Goheen argues, "The universal scope of the first eleven chapters of Genesis reminds us that God's particular attention to Abraham and Israel in the Old Testament was for the sake of *all* nations, for *all* creation. God employs particular means to reach a universal goal" (Goheen 2011, 28).

Genesis 1-11 is a crescendoing narrative of creation, fall, and restoration. God has set out to restore the entirety of his good creation that is broken by sin, and chooses in Genesis 12 a specific and particular instrument – Abraham – through which he will accomplish the universal scope of his plan. Goheen writes of Genesis 12, "We stand at one of the most important places in the Bible for ecclesiology, where we can begin to understand the nature and purpose of the community God chooses" (2011, 29).

Indeed, understanding this dynamic between God's universal purpose in bringing salvation to the whole world and the historical particularity of the means through which God achieves that purpose is crucial to the missional thrust of the biblical story. It pushes the whole story forward and gives shape to it.

When we think of the Abrahamic covenant and the OT narrative, it is easy to see the focus on God's fulfilment of the promises to Abraham to become a great nation; the promised covenant relationship between YHWH and Israel; and the promise of the land. But it is also easy to be left wondering, "What about the climactic universal blessing for the nations?" (Chris Wright 2006, 223).

Rather than seeing this universal blessing fade into the background, Wright traces in detail the several OT echoes of this universal blessing and argues that through these echoes this universal horizon is kept before God's people. The following is a brief list of those texts where God's purposes for the whole world beyond the nation of Israel are brought into view.

- Exodus 19:13-16, where we see God's universal purposes in the Exodus;
- Exodus 19:5-6, where the Abrahamic pattern of God blessing the nations through the particularity of the nation of Israel (Abraham's seed) is clear;
- Deuteronomy 28:9-10, where the nations are promised YHWH's blessing on Israel;
- Joshua 4:23-24, which holds out missional hope that the nations may come to know the God of Abraham, as Israel crosses the Jordan;
- 1 Samuel 17, in the context of David's slaying of Goliath;
- Samuel 7:25-26,29, as God promises to make David's name great so that through him and his house the nations might come to know God;
- 1 Kings 8:41-43,60-61, where the dedication of the temple assumes that the nations will hear of YHWH and be attracted to come and worship Israel's God and that YHWH will respond to the prayers of the nations;
- many Psalms (22:27-28; 47:9; 67:1-2; 72:17-19; 86:9; 45:8-13) that clearly open up this universalist perspective of God's blessing on the nations through Abraham and his seed;
- and finally, many mentions by the prophets (Isaiah 19:24-25, 25:6-8, 45:22-23, 48:18-19, 60:12; Jeremiah 4:1-2; Zechariah 8:13) of how God's purposes for the nations take us back to his promises to Abraham to bless the nations and also forward to the fulfilment of the universal mission that opens up in more dramatic fashion when the messiah comes.

Wright summarizes this universal strand of Abraham's calling:

The legacy of God's words to him lived on – not only in Israel's prime worldview certainties (their own election, the gift of the land, the covenantal

bond between them and YHWH), but also in that haunting bottom line – ‘through you all nations will find blessing’. Somehow, sometime, there would be universal effects from these very particular realities. For YHWH the God of Israel is also the God of all creation, to whom belong the whole earth and all its nations. Nothing less could adequately define the scope of God’s mission of blessing. No smaller framework can adequately encompass a biblical theology of mission either (Chris Wright 2006, 242).

The Hebrew preposition *בְּ* in Genesis 12:2-3 is critical – it carries the *instrumental* nuance and specifies that God’s blessing to the nations of the world will come “through” Abraham and his offspring; this is the means through which God will carry forward his mission to the world. This particularity of God’s instrument is just as important as the universality of his purpose; these two poles must be held together in order to open up the missional thrust to Israel’s story.

2.2.3.2 Israel’s missional vocation in Exodus 19:3-6

After the mighty act of redemption in the exodus from Egypt, God brings the people of Israel to Mt. Sinai, where he will form this people by binding them to himself in covenant relationship and giving them their unique identity in his redemptive mission. This disclosure of their identity helps us understand Israel’s mission as she is constituted as a nation and given her God-ordained vocation. Exodus 19:3-6 is a pivotal text which shapes Israel’s identity and role in God’s mission:

“This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: ‘You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession because the whole earth is mine. You will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites.”

Arguing for the importance of this text, William Dumbrell suggests:

A correct understanding of these verses which summon Israel, as a result of Sinai, to its vocation is vital. The history of Israel from this point on is in reality merely a commentary upon the degree of fidelity with which Israel adhered to this Sinai-given vocation (1984, 80).

Let’s look briefly at the three labels given to Israel and how they help us to understand the missional vocation given to her by YHWH.

The first label given to Israel is that of “special personal possession.” This word, *נַחֲזָקָה*, is used to describe something that is set aside for personal use; often in the context of a king who would have a personal treasure within the context of his wider possessions (Dumbrell 1984, 85; Chris Wright 2006, 256). With reference to Israel, the label indicates God’s choice of Israel for a special function; among all the nations of the world, YHWH has chosen Israel for a special function.

The nature of that special function is further clarified by the other two terms: “priestly kingdom” and “holy nation.” These two labels are taken as parallel statements whose purpose is to elucidate Israel’s function as the personal possession of YHWH. Israel is to have a priestly role among the nations, not in the strict cultic sense, but in the wider significance of being a mediator of the Abrahamic blessing.

This image of Israel being a “priestly kingdom” suggests three things. First, as a priest served the nation by remaining separate and devoted to God, so also Israel would serve other nations by being unique and devoted wholly to God while living in their midst. Second, as a

priest mediated God's presence to the people by their lives of dedication and consecration to the Lord which was demonstrated through a holy lifestyle, so Israel was to mediate God's presence by her consecrated way of life that embodied God's presence. Third, as a priest carried out these functions for the sake of the people, so too Israel was to live and embody God's presence for the sake of the nations around her (Goheen 2011, 37-40).

Further, as a "holy nation," Israel was to function as a distinct community among all the nations of the world and be the vehicle through which God's will is displayed in the world. It is striking to note the conditional clause of verse 5 which drives home this point – "if you really obey my voice and keep my covenant." As Chris Wright argues, "Only through covenant obedience and community holiness could they claim to fulfil the identity and role here offered to them. The mission of priesthood among the nations is covenantal, and like the covenant itself, its fulfilment and enjoyment is inseparable from ethical obedience" (2006, 333).

What is clearly in view in all three of these labels is the way in which Israel is to have a missional purpose in God's creation; in other words, the whole world is in view here just as it was in view with Abraham's election. There is, as Chris Wright argues, a "missional pulse beating in texts that affirm Israel's election and uniqueness." Wright affirms:

The election of Israel is set in the context of God's universality; the election of Israel does not imply the rejection of other nations; the election of Israel is not warranted by any special feature of Israel itself; the election of Israel is founded only on the inexplicable love of God; the election of Israel is instrumental, not an end in itself; the election of Israel is part of the logic of God's commitment to history; [and] the election of Israel is fundamentally missional, not just soteriological (2006, 263).

2.2.3.3 Law and life in the land

Israel was to be distinct; her holiness was part of her very existence, redeemed and called out from among the nations. Israel would have to be different from the other nations and live as the holy people of God in order for her to fulfil her mission as God's priestly people. Yet even Israel's response of obedience was rooted in God's gracious work of redemption.

In order for Israel to carry out her mission as a priestly kingdom and holy nation, the LORD provided the *Torah*, or Law. On the one hand, the Law disclosed for God's people the creational purposes of God for human flourishing. Israel was to point the nations to the way of life that God intended for all of his creation. On the other hand, the Law also instructed Israel how to counter the idolatry of the pagan nations around her and resist that idolatry.

A missional hermeneutic helps open up the missional dimension of Israel's obedience to the law, and helps to frame our perspective on it. The missional perspective on Israel's election is not isolated to the book of Exodus, but is also a dominant theme within Deuteronomy as well. Consider four sides to Israel's missional obedience, laid out in Deuteronomy 4:

The visibility of Israel in the land (v. 6-8). It is assumed that the nations would see Israel and be impressed with both the wisdom of Israel's law and the nearness of YHWH to Israel as a people (v. 7-8). Comparison of Israel's laws with the laws of other nations is implicitly invited. Further, the missional goal and motivation for Israel's obedience is highlighted – she is called to obey God's laws so that the nations would see the difference it makes in her life as a nation (Chris Wright 2006, 380). The Promised Land where God would place Israel was like a crossroads in the Ancient Near East, what some Jewish rabbinic texts refer to as "the navel of the world." Israel was to live its life before the eyes of the nations so that the nations might see her attractive life and the glory of God in her midst (Bavinck 1960, 14).

The exclusive nature of Israel's worship (v. 9-31) is encouraged by way of strong warnings. There were two keys for Israel's witness to the nations: her covenant obedience

(not forgetting the laws of God) and her covenant fidelity (not running after the gods of the nations around her). Idolatry would be the greatest threat to Israel's mission, and would compromise the missional goal of her obedience that was laid out in verses 6-8. Israel was to demonstrate to the nations a life lived in obedience to God's law that would be a witness to YHWH as the only true God and would therefore always be a confrontation to the idolatry of the other nations.

Israel is reminded of the uniqueness of her experience (v. 32-38). Unlike any other people, Israel has a unique experience of God – YHWH has both spoken to her and redeemed her in a way that no other people had experienced or known. This had happened so that Israel would know for sure that YHWH was the one and only God in the world.

Finally, this frame is rounded out by the *missional responsibility of Israel's obedience* (v. 39-40). Israel is urged in her obedience to God's law, not simply to experience well-being and longevity in the land, though it certainly would bring that, but motivated by YHWH's unique act of redemption and Israel's call to respond in gratitude as a result. The goal of this obedience was to function as a witness to the nations around her that would be watching (Chris Wright 2006, 385-6). Israel's missional vocation given at Sinai was to guide and direct her obedience in the land.³⁴

As the biblical story unfolds with Israel's entrance into the land, we see particularly through the book of Judges the way in which Israel is unfaithful in carrying out her role and living out this missional identity. She fails to cleanse the land of pagan idolatry, and the nations with their idols become a constant temptation ensnaring Israel. Through the cycle of judges, we learn that Israel failed miserably to carry out her role of being a priestly kingdom and holy nation and instead became just like the nations around her and was absorbed into the Canaanite idolatry. Yet God will not abandon his mission nor the instrumental people he has chosen for it. For Israel to carry out this mission more faithfully, she will need stronger leadership that will help her live in obedience to God's purposes for her and deliver her from the idolatry of the nations.

2.2.3.4 King, temple, and prophets

The next major portion of the biblical story brings an important shift in the form and shape of Israel's community and life as a people. Israel becomes a kingdom, and God gives her a king. During the time of the monarchy, three important institutions emerge as central to the story: the *king*, the *temple*, and the *prophets*. Each of these institutions shape and direct the missional role and identity of Israel by nourishing a life of faithfulness and by keeping the universal horizon of the nations before Israel (Goheen 2011, 55).

First, the role of the *king* was critical in shaping Israel's missional identity, particularly as disclosed in the Davidic covenant. David was to embody YHWH's reign on earth among Israel; his rule over Israel as king implied not a rejection but a representation of YHWH's kingship. As David was a man after God's heart, he was to be a model of the type of king that Israel would need in order for her to faithfully live out her identity as a holy nation and priestly kingdom before the nations. In particular, through defeating Israel's enemies and thereby helping to overcome the constant threat of idolatry, through the establishment and promotion of temple life with its worship and sacrifices, and through the enforcement of the

³⁴ Chris Wright in this regard opens up an insightful connection between the themes of this text in Deuteronomy and what he sees as the “missional logic” of this passage which is echoed again as Solomon prays to dedicate the temple and remind Israel of God’s redemptive purposes for the world through her, “And may these words of mine, which I have prayed before the LORD, be near to the LORD our God day and night, that he may uphold the cause of his servant and the cause of his people Israel according to each day's need, so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the LORD is God and that there is no other. But your hearts must be fully committed to the LORD our God, to live by his decrees and obey his commands, as at this time” (1 Kings 8:59-61).

law among God's people, the king would help Israel carry out her missional vocation in the land.

Furthermore, God's covenant with David promised that his throne and kingdom would endure forever. The close link between David's kingship and YHWH's kingship helps us to make sense of the texts that picture the reign of David's throne over all the nations. Psalm 2 and Psalm 72 are striking in how they picture the universal reign of a son of David over all the nations. This perspective is developed further by Isaiah 11, where the Spirit of YHWH will come to empower a descendent of David whose rule of justice will be throughout the whole earth, whose banner will call all peoples and nations, and whose good news will be proclaimed to the whole world (Chris Wright 2006, 346). These promises are more than merely political in nature, for they also anticipate the goal of God's redemptive work through Israel, namely, the incorporation of the nations into God's covenant people. YHWH, as king over Israel, will establish his kingdom over all the earth and draw the nations into his loving reign. By keeping this universal horizon of God's redemptive mission through Israel, the King would help to shape and guide Israel in her missional identity and role among the nations.

The *temple* also played a significant role in shaping Israel's missional identity. It was, of course, for Israel: a symbol of God's presence in their midst. Yet it was also to be a motivation for Israel's mission. While God's presence was focused in the temple, his purpose was to one day make his presence known by all the nations. The temple, argues Gregory Beale, was there "to serve as a motivation to Israel to be faithful witnesses to the world of God's glorious presence and truth, which was to expand outwards from the temple. . . . [The temple] was a symbol of their task to expand God's presence to all nations" (2005, 19).

The temple built during David's reign becomes not only a house of worship for Israel, but even as early as its dedication by Solomon, is pictured as a place of blessing for all the nations. This blessing that will come to the nations through the temple is pictured vividly in Isaiah 56:1-7, where we see God bringing foreigners to his holy mountain, giving them joy in his house, and accepting their sacrifices – "for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations" (56:7).

Two additional features of the temple would also shape and equip Israel for this missional role: sacrifice and worship (Goheen 2011, 56-58). The sacrificial system was graciously provided by God to deal with the sin and covenant rebellion of Israel. Through the sacrifices, God provided a way to forgive the people of their sin and to restore fellowship with them – their sin was atoned for and their commitment to serving YHWH was renewed. Further, the temple was where Israel worshipped, celebrating before the nations and in the midst of the land the mighty acts of God, and bearing witness to the world that YHWH was the LORD of all creation and of all nations. God's presence in the temple called Israel to find her identity as a worshipping community, which would be crucial to their mission as a people.³⁵ Temple worship, much of which is breathed through the Psalms, very often held out before Israel the universal horizon of God's redemptive purposes. Mark Boda (2010) argues:

The theme of *the nations* is ubiquitous in the Psalter and through it we catch a glimpse of an inclusive vision for all nations on earth. We also catch a glimpse of the mission of Israel as those who proclaim YHWH's rule among the nations *through their praise* (18-19, emphasis mine).

Finally, the *prophets* also played an important role in shaping Israel's missional identity.

³⁵ John Piper has put it this way, "Mission is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Mission exists because worship doesn't. Worship . . . is the fuel and goal of missions. It's the goal of missions because in missions we simply aim to bring the nations into the white-hot enjoyment of God's glory. . . . But worship is also the fuel of missions. . . . You can't commend what you don't cherish. . . . Missions begins and ends in worship" (1993, 11).

They spoke the word of God to Israel and called her to covenant fidelity, and spoke out against all the ways in which Israel would live in unfaithfulness and thus forget her missional identity and role before the nations. “The central concern of the prophets,” argues Brueggemann, “was to communicate to Israel what it meant to be Israel” (1968, 25). Consider words from Jeremiah:

“If you will return, O Israel, return to me,” declares the LORD. “If you put your detestable idols out of my sight and no longer go astray, and if in a truthful, just and righteous way you swear, ‘As surely as the LORD lives,’ then the nations will be blessed by him and in him they will glory” (4:1-2).

As Chris Wright argues, the logic of the whole sentence is remarkable. “God’s mission to the nations is being hindered because of Israel’s continuing spiral and ethical failure. Let Israel return to *their* mission (to be the people of YHWH, worshipping him exclusively and living according to his moral demands), and God can return to *his* mission – blessing the nations” (2006, 241).

All three of these institutions – king, temple, and prophets - played important roles in nourishing the missional role and identity of God’s people, and holding before her God’s universal redemptive purposes for the nations and all of creation.

2.2.3.5 Exile and identity

As the OT historical narrative unfolds, Israel increasingly fails to carry out her God-given mission. The community God has called to embody his redemptive purposes for the world, to be a channel of blessing and a light to the nations, fails in her mission. So God brings judgment to Israel, and both the northern and southern tribes are carried off into exile.

This exile raises questions about the continuation of God’s redemptive mission through Israel, and poses two unique threats to her missional identity and role: the dangers of assimilation and withdrawal. If she assimilated into the nations, nothing would distinguish her and her missional witness would be compromised. If she withdrew into isolation, she would fail to be the blessing that God called her to be (Burnett 1986, 75).

For Israel to face these twin dangers, she needed to renew her missional identity in this exilic situation. Israel had to maintain an alternative identity, vision of the world, and vocation in the midst of a context that would continually tempt her into cultural assimilation (Brueggemann 1997, 41). One of the means by which this happened was through the reading of Scripture by local elders, who sought to resist assimilation by nurturing Israel’s unique identity as a displaced people. The elders’ leadership structures and practices were vital to Israel’s missional vocation (Smith 1989, 69-126). We see here an example of the vital importance of leadership for the missional community of God’s people. The leadership of the elders was crucial, but note as well that the leaders were primarily able to sustain and nurture Israel’s missional identity through the reading and teaching of the word of God. This interaction of leadership with the word of God will find different expressions again in the NT.

Another means by which Israel battled assimilation and withdrawal was the exilic literature that helped to contextualize their history and theological traditions into their new exilic situation. 1 and 2 Chronicles, for instance, retold Israel’s history and helped to situate Israel within the wider context of God’s movement of history from Adam to the present. Then, too, the exilic prophets were significant voices calling Israel back to her missional identity. John Bright argues, “In light of . . . triumphant theology which filled history with meaning, [Isaiah] summoned Israel to its destiny as the people of God” (1951, 22). Jeremiah, as well, called Israel to fully participate in the life of the Babylonian Empire and so seek to be a blessing to the Babylonians while they lived in their midst.

The prophets pointed to Israel’s missional role and identity in both their condemnations for her covenant unfaithfulness, and in their hope for YHWH’s intervention both for Israel and, through her, for the sake of his redemptive purposes for the creation and all nations.

2.2.3.6 OT eschatology

The final element to consider in the OT story that had a profound shaping influence on the missional role and identity of God's people in the story is the place of OT eschatology. In order to unpack the significance of the OT's vision for the future, it will be important to consider three aspects of this: the centripetal mission of Israel throughout the OT, the place of the nations in Israel's mission throughout the prophets, and the prophetic hope for the future.

We could summarize the main thrust of Israel's missional role and identity by saying that Israel's mission to the nations is centripetal. Her primary task is to live as a community in covenant obedience to YHWH. This communal life in covenant obedience will itself be a powerful witness to the nations around her. This is why there is a missional thrust to Israel's law and the call for her to live in covenant obedience to God's law; the law was to shape Israel's corporate life, which was itself a witness to the nations. The law was not a means for Israel to achieve salvation but the thing that shaped her unique identity as YHWH's people. If she failed to keep the law, her uniqueness and witness to the nations would be jeopardized.

The main movement in Israel's relationship with the nations is *centripetal* movement – that is, the nations are pictured as being drawn to Israel as they witness Israel's God and the wisdom of Israel's law embodied in her life as a community. Israel is not sent to the nations in a *centrifugal* sense of having an active mission of outreach.³⁶ ³⁷ In this regard, a missional hermeneutic needs an eschatological perspective on both Old and New Testaments; indeed eschatology is a key element of a missional hermeneutic, as we will develop below. The centrifugal mission of God's people to the nations is a post-Pentecost reality. Charles Scobie, speaking of the eschatological ingathering of the nations, writes,

. . . the fact remains that there is no real indication of any active missionary outreach on the part of Israel in the Old Testament period. This is so for three important, interlocking reasons: Firstly, the ingathering of the nations *is an eschatological event*. It is something that will happen 'in the latter days.' . . . Secondly, the ingathering of the nations *is not the work of Israel*. Frequently it is the nations themselves who will take the initiative. In a number of significant passages it is God who gathers the nations . . . Thirdly, these prophetic passages all envisage *the nations coming to Israel, not Israel going to the nations* . . . This movement from the periphery to the centre has been appropriately labeled 'centripetal' (1992, 291-292).

The prophets provide vital perspective on Israel's missional role and identity in relationship to the nations. Indeed, this is of central importance for a missional reading of the entire biblical story. From one vantage point, this is a central theme of the entire biblical story. Chris Wright writes,

God's mission is what fills the gap between the scattering of the nations in Genesis 11 and the healing of the nations in Revelation 22. It is God's mission in relation to the nations, arguably more than any other single theme, that provides the key that unlocks the biblical grand narrative (2006, 455).

Borrowing from Wright, consider three perspectives on Israel's mission in relationship to "the nations." First, we see throughout the OT the way in

³⁶ Contra Walter Kaiser, who attempts to argue for a centrifugal missionary task of Israel in the OT (Kaiser 2000). His argument tends to flatten the movement in redemptive history; does not do justice to the biblical priority of God's mission in the OT; and operates with a very narrow understanding of mission as "missions," understood almost exclusively as the crossing of geographical boundaries to verbally proclaim the gospel.

³⁷ As Chris Wright demonstrates, if there were a clear centrifugal mission for Israel in the OT, it is striking that we neither find instructions given to Israel for this type of mission nor do we find anything in the prophets that condemn Israel for failing to take the message of salvation to the nations by physically going to them. Israel had a mission – but it was not a mission "of going somewhere, but of *being* something" (2006, 504).

which *the nations are witnesses of what YHWH does* in and to Israel. They are said to be witnesses of God's acts of redemption, particularly the great act of redemption in the Exodus;³⁸ the nations are witnesses of Israel's covenant obedience, as we noted above, and also called in as witnesses for covenant lawsuits when Israel does not keep covenant;³⁹ the nations witness God's judgment on Israel, which potentially jeopardizes YHWH's own reputation among the nations;⁴⁰ and the nations witness God's restoration of Israel, in part so that God's reputation among the nations is persevered.⁴¹ This perspective of the nations functioning as witnesses is consistent with and helps shed light on two critical aspects of God's mission that are so central to the biblical story, as we have been arguing. On the one hand, what YHWH would do among the nations would ultimately be for the benefit of Israel; and, on the other hand, whatever YHWH did for Israel would ultimately be for the benefit of the nations (Wright 2001, 260).

Second, we see predominantly in both the Psalter and the prophets the eschatological vision that *the nations will one day come to worship Israel's God*, for four main reasons: they will praise him in response to his mighty acts;⁴² in response to the justice of his rule;⁴³ in response to his redemption of Zion;⁴⁴ and as part of the universal praise of the entire creation.⁴⁵

Turning to the prophets, we see this theme emerge particularly in the book of Isaiah, and in such a way that cannot be captured in either the “nationalist” or “universalist” perspectives that have dominated scholarly discussions of second Isaiah (Chris Wright 2006, 484-489). Gisanti’s evaluation of this scholarly debate is most helpful and consistent with the missional reading of these texts:

The prophet Isaiah neither depicts Israel as a nation of world-traversing missionaries, nor does he exclude the nations from participation in divine redemption. . . . the prophet argues that God's special dealings with his chosen people not only benefit Israel, but also carry significance for all nations. Isaiah underscores Israel's role in providing a witness to the nations . . . in the sense of being a people of God whose life shall draw nations to inquire after YHWH (cf. Isa. 2:1-4; 43:10-11). It is as God's chosen people that Israel can exercise a mediatorial role with regard to the nations (Gisanti 1998).

Third and finally, and perhaps most climactic of all the perspectives, we see the eschatological expectation that *the nations are included in Israel's own identity as God's people*. The nations are registered in God's city;⁴⁶ the nations are blessed with God's salvation, experiencing an “exodus-like” redemption;⁴⁷ the nations are accepted in God's house;⁴⁸ the nations are called by God's name;⁴⁹ and the nations are joined together with God's people as a renewed people of God⁵⁰ (Chris Wright 2006, 489-497).

³⁸ Exodus 7:20, Exodus 15:14-16, Leviticus 26:45, Numbers 33:3.

³⁹ Micah 1:2, Jeremiah 6:18-19 and Amos 3:9

⁴⁰ See for example, Deuteronomy 29:24-25 and Ezekiel 36:17-19 for the latter

⁴¹ See for example, Ezekiel 36:22-23

⁴² See Psalm 66, 68, 86, 96, 98, 97, 99, and 138

⁴³ See Psalm 2 and 22

⁴⁴ See Psalm 102

⁴⁵ See Psalm 100, 117, 145, 148

⁴⁶ See Psalm 47:9 and 87

⁴⁷ See Isaiah 19:16-25

⁴⁸ See Isaiah 56:3-8

⁴⁹ See Amos 9:11-12 and Isaiah 44:1-5

⁵⁰ See Zechariah 2:10-11 and 9:7

Summarizing these perspectives on Israel's mission in relationship with the nations, Wright helps us see their significance for a missional hermeneutic of the entire biblical story:

The distinction between Israel and the nations will eventually be dissolved in a multi-national community belonging to YHWH and living in a relationship of blessing with him, in fulfilment of the great covenantal initiative established through the promise to Abraham. The distinctiveness of Israel from the nations within their Old Testament history was essential to the mission of God. But the mission of God was that the distinction would ultimately be dissolved as the nations flowed into unity and identity with Israel. Only the New Testament gospel would show how that *could* happen. And only New Testament mission would show how it *did*, and will continue to, happen until their ingathering is complete (2006, 500).

Finally, the prophetic hope for the future pointed to the way in which YHWH would both gather and renew Israel so that she might faithfully carry out her mission and so that through her God's blessing might reach the nations. These twin themes of "gathering" and "renewing" Israel are focal points for the prophetic vision for the future in the OT, as that vision is particularly disclosed in Ezekiel and Jeremiah. A gathered and renewed Israel will be central to God's redemptive mission for the nations. Goheen summarizes, "This assembling and reconstituting of God's people will take place in the last days, when Israel is restored to its original calling. Then the nations will know the LORD. Then the restored, gathered, and purified Israel will fulfil its vocation to be a light to the nations" (Goheen 2011, 67).

Israel's failure in mission was a breaking of covenant with YHWH, so YHWH speaks through his prophets words of promise that he will act in a new way to renew his covenant and carry out his redemptive purposes for the world. Through Jeremiah, YHWH promises that if Israel repents of her covenant unfaithfulness, she will be restored and God's blessing to her would flow out to the nations as God promised to Abraham (Jeremiah 12:14-17, 4:1-2). And through Ezekiel Israel is reminded of the opposite – that if Israel does not repent and is not restored, there is no hope for the nations, for both Israel and the nations would come to know YHWH primarily through their experience of his judgment (Chris Wright 2006, 351-2).

How will God intervene to both restore Israel and to carry out his redemptive mission for the world? J.H. Bavinck gives us a wonderful summary of the hope that emerges through the prophetic message: God would usher in a new age where Israel would be restored and once again be the means through which the nations would be drawn to God; this restoration of Israel was conditional on the genuine conversion of Israel; God would send a messiah who would bring about this conversion of Israel; the messiah would usher in both judgment and salvation for the nations; the salvation that will come to the nations would be such that they are drawn to Israel's God through a spontaneous coming; this spontaneous coming of the nations would be an eschatological event; and the salvation that will come to Israel and the whole world will be comprehensive in scope and involve the renewal of all creation (Bavinck 1960, 19-24).

2.2.2.7 Intertestamental Period

As the Old Testament story comes to a close, Israel is again living in the land after the return from exile. The remnant is living in relative peace under the Persians, waiting for all that the prophets have spoken of to come true and be fulfilled. But as the NT story begins, the context is radically different. The Persian Empire is long gone, and Israel now suffers under the tyranny of the Roman Empire. Only a fraction of the people live in the land, while most have been scattered throughout the vast and expanding Roman Empire.

We need to briefly highlight what develops over these 400 years of silence, between

the prophecy of Malachi and the opening pages of the NT in Matthew, particularly the way in which these 400 years would shape Israel's identity and role in God's mission.

Though the people had in part returned to the land, those that lived in Palestine remained under the domination of one foreign power after another – almost as if their exile never ended. This was not just a political threat, but a threat to their entire life as a nation. The pressure was great to conform to the pagan culture around them – far from fulfilling their mission to be a light to that culture. To be faithful to that mission, Israel would have to be a distinct and holy people, but her experience did not match up with what the prophets had spoken: not all of Israel had returned to the land; the temple was rebuilt, but was only a dim reflection of the glorious temple under Solomon; and Israel lived under the rule of pagan rulers.

A movement arose within Israel to return to the Torah, and seek to be faithful to God's way for them. If they would just fully devote themselves to God and to Torah, then perhaps God would renew them and restore them fully. A tradition of oral teaching sprang up, applying the Torah to their new situations. Synagogues sprang up in the land and became centres in which God's law could be taught to the people.

Threats continued to haunt Israel even after the Persian Empire fell to Alexander the Great. His Hellenization was a strategic move to overcome the cultural threat of the Israelites in this part of Alexander's Empire. Things got worse under the Seleucid King Antiochus, as he looted the territories occupied by the Israelites in order to pay tribute to Rome which was growing in its Empire and reach. He tried ruthlessly to Hellenize the Jewish people and passed strict laws even against their religious practices (laws against circumcision, Sabbath keeping, and temple sacrifices). Copies of the Torah were burned. Then in 167 BC he desecrated the temple in Jerusalem by setting up an altar to Zeus and offering a pig. The Jews decided to act.

The son of an elderly priest named Judah became known as "Maccabee," and led Israelite rebels in a revolt against Antiochus. In 164 BC, he rode into Jerusalem (to shouts of *hosanna* and waving of palm branches), cleansed the temple of images to Greek gods, rededicated the temple to the LORD, established the new feast of Hanukkah and began the work of overthrowing the Seleucid rule. There was a brief time of independence for God's people under the rule of one of Judah Maccabee's descendants.

The events of this time period are critical for understanding how Israel's role began to shift. God had acted to deliver his people: to restore the temple yet again and to vindicate his law. Surely God would visit his people in another dramatic act of redemption from the pagan rulers who threatened Israel and her mission!

However, the Roman Empire grew and expanded. In 63 BC, Pompey the Great marched into Jerusalem and seized it, bringing Israel under the rule of the Roman Empire. Rome ruled over Israel via governors who occupied the land. Frustration for God's people grew, as under the Roman Empire oppression of God's people was its greatest yet.

Despite oppression, during this time Israel's faith grew and deepened. The people were eager to maintain their unique religious observances, and so protect their own identity. They focused on building synagogues: places for Sabbath worship, prayer, and the study of Scriptures and Torah, which became religious and cultural centres for God's people, shaping and nourishing Israel's faith.

However, there were growing tensions. The oppressions under these foreign rulers created a burning sense of frustration among God's people. This was held in tension with their profound sense of hope in God's future act of redemption. The growing pagan influences, first Hellenistic and then Roman, were a fundamental threat to God's people. This created a profound tension as they sought in the midst of those threats to remain faithful to the Torah.

In addition to growing tension, there was growing hatred. Some among the Jews

believed that as God intervened in the future to cleanse and renew the creation and establish his rule and kingdom on the earth, then the Gentile nations would finally acknowledge Israel's God as their own king and live under his gracious rule. However, for most, there was a growing sense of hatred that started to breed during these years of oppression. They longed for Israel to be restored, to rule, and to conquer and subjugate the Gentile nations. *Then* would not the nations either serve Israel, or be destroyed by God? The strong desire for the Lord's vengeance – not for the nations to flock to Zion and learn God's ways – began to ring in the ears of God's people. God would destroy their oppressors and liberate Israel. This hatred grew not just toward the Gentiles but increasingly toward even the compromising Jews.

Hope grew for the kingdom of God to come. God would be king. The holy land would be restored to Israel so that she could live again with God in the land. God would return to the temple and once again dwell in the midst of his people. The nation would be liberated. The rule of God would set all things right. The people would be transformed to once again live under God's gracious and loving rule.

As these tensions and frustrations continued to grow and build, Israel lost sight almost completely of her missional role and identity in God's mission. As Goheen summarizes, "Israel had lost this connection and looks instead to an apocalyptic future of salvation and blessing for gathered Israel alone – and of vengeance and wrath for the Gentiles. *Israel had forgotten its missional identity and role in salvation history: to be a channel of blessing to the nations*" (Goheen 2011, 72).

2.2.4 Jesus' mission

Continuing to unfold the biblical story through the lens of a missional hermeneutic, and against the backdrop of the intertestamental frustrations, Jesus' mission is of course climactic. There exists for this moment a whole realm of biblical and theological scholarship, vast and complex. Since the Enlightenment, particular attention has been paid to the question of the historical Jesus, the historicity of the gospels, and the theological nuances of each gospel. Moreover, in the whole history of scholarship on mission and the Bible, much has been written on the *mission* of Jesus that is developed in the four gospels.⁵¹ For this literature, we are grateful. There have been many solid contributions shaping our understanding of the diversity of mission practice and understanding in the NT, given the contextual diversity of different communities.

However, the focus being given to this reading of the story will keep before us the larger biblical narrative as a whole, and help us in understanding the main features of Jesus' mission in the context of that grand narrative of God's mission, with particular focus on how that narrative shapes the role and identity of God's people. The following five features of Jesus' mission will be considered in this light: the announcement of the arrival of the kingdom of God, the demonstration of the power of the kingdom of God, the teaching about the nature of the kingdom, the gathering of a kingdom community and the restoration and renewal of Israel, and the climactic events of Jesus' death and resurrection.

At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus clearly *announces* the arrival of the kingdom of God – "The time has come," he said, "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:15) This "good news" that the kingdom of God has arrived is a public announcement that brings great joy. As Bartholomew and Goheen summarize, "Jesus announces the good news that God's power to save his creation has arrived. God has entered human history in love and power to liberate, to heal, and to renew the whole world" (2004,

⁵¹ More recent examples that focus on the unique contribution of each gospel to our understanding of mission in the NT include the following: Senior and Stuhlmueller (1983); Bosch (1991); Larkin and Williams (1998); Nissen (1999); and Kostenberger and O'Brien (2001).

134-135). The gospels describe the kingdom of God as both a dynamic power at work to defeat the enemies of God's rule and restore God's creation, as well as newly arrived eschatological salvation, a salvation that is a realm into which people can enter and a gift that is able to be received. This power of God that has come through Jesus is at work to both vanquish all of the enemies of God's rule and bring the restoration of God's loving rule to all dimensions of human life. Those who respond to Jesus' announcement of the arrival of the kingdom in faith are given the opportunity to enter into the kingdom and receive the eschatological salvation that God's kingdom offers (see Mark 10:15).

Second, Jesus *demonstrates* the kingdom of God through his deeds. These deeds both validate that the kingdom of God has arrived and they also illustrate the restorative and redemptive nature of that Kingdom, giving us windows on the new creation (Bartholomew and Goheen 2004b, 137-138). Jesus tells John's disciples to look at his deeds as proof that he is the messiah and that God's kingdom has arrived: "Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor" (Luke 7:22).⁵² David Bosch summarizes Jesus' demonstrations well:

God's reign arrives wherever Jesus overcomes the power of evil . . . evil took many forms: pain, sickness, death, demon-possession, personal sin and immorality, the loveless self-righteousness of those who claim to know God, the maintaining of special class-privileges, the brokenness of human relationships. Jesus is, however, saying: If human distress takes many forms, the power of God does likewise (1991, 32-33).

Jesus' deeds show us the redemptive power of God's kingdom and give us a preview of the kingdom's purpose and goal – all of creation and all of life renewed under God's reign and the power of sin ended. Thus we see how both his announcement of the Kingdom's arrival and the demonstration of that kingdom through his deeds bear witness to the power of God to redeem.

Third, Jesus *teaches* through parables and other means about the nature of the kingdom of God. It was difficult for the disciples to understand how the kingdom of God was in fact a fulfilment of God's promises through the prophets. Through the parables, Jesus instructs his disciples about the nature of the kingdom of God and its coming in a way that both reveals and veils to them its meaning. One of the central features of the nature of the kingdom of God that emerges is the reality of what is often referred to as the already-not yet tension of the kingdom. That is, the reality that the kingdom of God has already arrived in a provisional state but has not yet come in its consummated fullness. The tension is far from a fruitless frustration; as Bosch argues, "Most scholars agree that the tension between the 'already' and the 'not yet' of God's reign in Jesus' ministry belongs to the essence of his person and consciousness and should not be resolved; it is precisely in this creative tension that the reality of God's reign has significance for our contemporary mission" (1991, 32).

In addition to his parables, it is also important to situate Jesus' "ethics" or ethical teaching within this framework of his mission.

Jesus' ethical teaching is situated within the *eschatological* context of his announcement and demonstration of the arrival of the kingdom of God. As part of that context, Jesus' ethical teaching makes a claim on all of human life as part of the dynamic power of God now at work to restore all of human life to God's creational purposes and intent.

Jesus' teaching is *communal*: he is not addressing isolated individuals, but rather is seeking to form and shape a visible community who together will live under God's gracious

⁵² Bartholomew and Goheen cite other texts giving the same perspective on the deeds of Jesus: casting out of demons (Luke 11:20); healing miracles (Luke 17:11-19, 18:35-43; Mark 2:1-12, 7:31-36); calming the sea (Mark 4:35-41); feeding hungry (Mark 8:1-10); and raising the dead (John 11; Luke 7:11-17; Mark 5:21-43).

and loving rule.

Further, his teaching is *missional*: his community is being shaped to be a visible light to the nations, a city on a hill.

Jesus' ethical teaching comes as *fulfilment* of the OT Torah and the intent of the Torah. That is, when Jesus summarizes the OT law as loving the Lord your God with all of your heart, soul, and mind and loving your neighbour as yourself, he was driving to love of God and neighbour as both the summary and intent of the Torah. This creational norm of love for human life is abiding, and universally valid, yet it takes different contextual forms in various cultural settings. The OT law is one form, while the Sermon on the Mount, for instance, recontextualizes God's law of love for a new time. Jesus' ethical teaching *features the "way of life"* that Jesus calls the community gathering around him to live. Throughout the gospels, the following features of that community's way of life stand out: a community defined by reconciliation and forgiveness (Matthew 18); a community of peace and joy (John 14-15); a community of justice and mercy (Matthew 6, Luke 4); a community that is concerned for the marginalized and poor (Luke 7, 14, 15); and a community that holds onto material possessions loosely (Luke 6:24-26, 12:13-21, 18, 19) (Goheen 2011, 90-94).

All of these features highlight the way in which Jesus' teaching was forming a visible community that would be an attractive contrast to the rampant idolatry of the Roman Empire in which this community found itself. In each of these ways, this community was to embody God's creational intentions. In each of these ways this community was to be a visible sign of God's gracious and loving purposes for life in their cultural context. And in each of these ways, this community would stand against the dominant idols of the Roman Empire.

The fourth feature of Jesus' mission to consider is how Jesus *gathers* a kingdom community and *restores* Israel to once again take up her missional role and identity as a light to the nations. This raises an important issue for the missional role and identity of God's people: the issue of the relationship between Jesus' earthly ministry to Israel and the universal mission to the Gentiles of which the prophets spoke. This is a complicated question, and scholarship around it has tended to four strands: Jesus was a missionary to the Gentiles; Jesus did not have a Gentile mission during his lifetime but did have this in mind and instructed his disciples to carry it out after his resurrection; the Gentile mission was a product of the early church's reflection on the universal dimensions of Jesus' teaching; or, Jesus' resurrection was proof that the final age of salvation had dawned and that the missionary activity of the church was the reason for this period of redemptive history (Senior and Stuhlmueller 1983, 143).

A missional hermeneutic provides a way through this scholarly debate. We must hold together both the *aims* of Jesus' kingdom mission and the *result* and impact of his mission. The aims of Jesus' mission were two-fold: to accomplish the restoration of Israel and to launch a movement aimed at the gathering of the nations. The *result* of that kingdom mission was the formation of a new community that called the nations of the world to faith in the God of Israel (Chris Wright 2006, 506-7). The messiah must come to first renew Israel, and after Israel is renewed the nations would be incorporated into God's people (Jeremias 1958, 71). We must hold this two-fold fulfilment together, for "the reason why Jesus came to Israel was precisely because his mission concerned the whole world" (Munck, 266). And, holding these two together is consistent with the gospel narratives, where we see on one hand that Jesus clearly limits his ministry to Israel and yet on the other hand had meaningful engagement with Gentiles in a way that anticipates the universal mission of this new community that was to follow his death and resurrection.

This hermeneutic is also consistent with the opposition from religious leaders that Jesus' mission aroused. Jesus' mission confronted the way in which Israel's identity as a community had become distorted, while the religious leaders' expectation for the messiah began to centre around understanding Israel's call to maintain separation from the nations, hatred for the nations who were seen as enemies of God, and hope for God's vengeance

against these enemies. As Bartholomew and Goheen argue, “Against the Pharisees’ deeply held misunderstanding of Israel’s identity and vocation, Jesus holds up Israel’s missionary calling. His refusal to abide by their rules and see things their way incenses the religious leaders because *his story of what Israel was always meant to be* shows their story to be a lie” (2004, 139-140).

So we see Jesus forming and gathering a new kingdom community that will carry out his mission of announcing the kingdom of God through their words, demonstrating that kingdom by their deeds, and embodying that kingdom in their life together. This gathering begins as Jesus announces the good news of the kingdom’s arrival and calls people to follow him. As the twelve respond to the call to follow Jesus and be with him, we see the gathering and formation of the nucleus of both this restored Israel and this future kingdom community who would carry out Jesus’ mission following his death and resurrection (Legrand 1990, 91-97). That the nucleus of this new kingdom community is twelve is no accident. As N.T. Wright claims, “For Jesus to give twelve followers a place of prominence, let alone to make comments about them sitting on thrones judging the twelve tribes, indicates pretty clearly that he was thinking in terms of the eschatological restoration of Israel” (1996, 300).

It is essential to understand what Jesus is doing in gathering the nucleus of this eschatological community. Israel is not being replaced, nor is Jesus forming a completely new and distinct people of God through which He will now somehow carry out his parenthetical purposes in history.⁵³ Rather, what is happening here is that Israel itself is being renewed and reconstituted as the eschatological community and people of God. N.T. Wright has put it so well, “Jesus did not intend to found a church *because there already was one*, namely the people of Israel itself. Jesus’ intention was therefore to *reform* Israel, not to found a different community altogether” (1996, 275).

The fifth aspect of Jesus’ mission is the climax of that mission in Jesus’ *death and resurrection*. Approaching his moment of victory, Jesus enters Jerusalem and performs three symbolic acts that demonstrate the nature of the coming kingdom of God: his entry on a donkey symbolized his claim to Davidic kingship, yet in a way that evoked *humility* and service, not political conquest; the judgment on the temple was a symbolic act that demonstrated judgment on the way Israel had turned her election into a privilege that made her separate, rather than a *calling* to be the light of the world; and the last supper was the final symbolic act prior to his crucifixion where Jesus demonstrated that his death would be the way God brings the new covenant, the end of exile, and the kingdom of God.

It is the cross and resurrection of Jesus that are the climax of his mission and also a decisive turning point in the history of God’s redemptive mission. These two events can never be separated – the cross is the victory of the kingdom of God where sin is defeated and the salvation of the world is accomplished, and the resurrection is the vindication of Jesus as messiah and Lord and validation of his victory at the cross. Taken together, the cross and resurrection bring the victory and inauguration of the kingdom of God, the triumph of Jesus’ kingdom mission, and the destruction of all that is opposed to the kingdom of God.

While we must always hold these two events together, it is helpful to briefly summarize the significance of each event for the biblical story and the role and identity of God’s people in that story.

How we understand the significance of the cross is vitally important for how we will understand the biblical story as a whole and the role and identity of God’s people in

⁵³ This is intentionally being stated in such a way to contrast with the dispensational perspective on this that seems to continually grow in popularity among various Evangelical movements in North America. See Williams 1989 for a critique of this Israel/church dichotomy which gets at one of the fundamental flaws of dispensational theology.

that story. Some have emphasized the cosmic significance of the cross; others have emphasized the personal significance of the cross. Polarizing these two emphases must be avoided. As Goheen argues, the cosmic, communal, and individual significance of the cross must be held up. The cross is the climax of God's battle against evil and sin for the sake of his good creation, and at the cross the kingdom of God has won a decisive victory over all of the powers of evil and sin that have sought to destroy God's good creation (Goheen 2011, 105-106). As Paul puts it in Colossians 2:15, at the cross Jesus "disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross." The cross is also the climax of Israel's story in that Jesus on the cross has taken the punishment and judgment that Israel deserved for her failure to live out her mission, so that Israel might be forgiven and restored (Goheen 2011, 106-107). The cross is a cosmic victory through which God has accomplished the end of history. The cross creates a community that experiences God's grace, and is transformed into a missional people. Through the cross, individual members of that community can share in this victory and mission through repentance and faith.

How we understand the significance of the resurrection is just as important for our understanding of the biblical story and the role and identity of God's people in that story. A missional hermeneutic will keep before us two essential perspectives on the resurrection for our understanding of God's mission in the biblical story. First, the resurrection, like the cross, has cosmic, communal, and individual significance that we must hold together. As N.T. Wright demonstrates, the resurrection was an important image in Jewish thought that referred both to the resurrection of human bodies and the renewal of all creation:

. . . "resurrection" was not simply a pious hope about new life for dead people. It carried with it all that was associated with the return from exile itself: forgiveness of sins, the re-establishment of Israel as the true humanity of the covenant god, and the renewal of all creation (1992, 332).

The perspective of the New Testament is consistent with this Jewish understanding of resurrection. In his resurrection, Jesus acts *on behalf of all humanity* and indeed the whole creation – a perspective that keeps in front of us the cosmic scope of God's mission, an important insight with profound implications for the mission of the church today.

Resurrection "generates mission" (Legrand 1990, 66). It represents a decisive shift in the history of redemption, as the new age breaks in through the resurrection of Christ as the first fruits of the eschatological future. Jesus' kingdom mission is the fulfilment of Israel's OT mission and through the resurrection, ushers in the powers of the new age where a renewed and restored Israel will be sent to gather the nations. In all four gospels, we see Jesus' commission to this renewed community of disciples to continue his kingdom mission to all the nations – a commission that can only be a post-resurrection reality.

Why was this missional commission only possible *after* the resurrection? Legrand offers six reasons:

1. the resurrection established the lordship of Jesus Christ and the universal scope of his mission to renew all of creation;
2. the eschatological gathering of the nations could now, after the resurrection, be a present reality, and indeed central to this new community's purpose;
3. the Christian community's mission is fully opened up post-resurrection, where the kingdom is both present and yet to come;
4. through the Holy Spirit poured out after the resurrection, the mission of the church is to continue the kingdom mission of Jesus;
5. the resurrection authenticates the good news Jesus proclaimed and embodied; and

6. the resurrection develops the particularism of the OT mission away from Israel as a community to Jesus and the gathered and restored community commissioned after his resurrection (1990, 80-83).

We can summarize several common themes among the gospels in these post-resurrection commissions that are significant for the mission of God's people (Goheen 2011, 114-118; cf. Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-18; Luke 24:46-49 and Acts 1:7-8; John 20:21-23):

- God sends his people to all the nations. This represents a significant shift in the biblical story – the movement is no longer from the nations to the centre of Jerusalem but is now from the centre of Jerusalem outward to the ends of the earth.
- The realization of God's purposes for the world is dependent on the resurrection and gift of the Holy Spirit.
- Third, Jesus sends out a community, not a bunch of isolated individuals
- This community is the eschatological Israel.
- This renewed Israel will take on a new form as a people as they find their expression and life in a variety of places around the world. They will be a “multi-ethnic” and “non-geographically-based people” from this point on.
- The direction given to this community in all of the gospel commissions is to continue the mission of Jesus in the world. Jesus' mission is a pattern that the early communities were being called to follow.

We have now seen how a missional hermeneutic helps to frame the centrality of Jesus' kingdom mission in the biblical story, and how the role and identity of God's people in that story are shaped through Jesus' mission. Jesus' announcement of the good news of the arrival of God's kingdom; the demonstration of the kingdom of God through Jesus' works; the teaching about the nature of the kingdom of God in Jesus' mission; the gathering of a kingdom community and renewal and restoration of Israel; and the climax of that mission in Jerusalem and the events leading up to and surrounding his death and resurrection have opened up the missional significance of Jesus' ministry and life for the role and identity of God's people as they are caught up into God's redemptive mission for the world.

2.2.5 NT eschatology and mission

Important for our understanding of the role and identity of the people of God as they participate in the mission of God throughout the biblical story is NT eschatology. Central to the eschatology that is developed in the NT is the coming of the kingdom of God (Ridderbos, 1962). The New Testament develops the eschatological perspective of the Old Testament with the reality that the kingdom of God comes in two stages: the present stage and the future stage, when the kingdom of God's salvation will come in its fullness and the present age will end. The present period is often referred to as the “overlap of the ages,” or the interim period where the kingdom of God is already present and not yet consummated. The already-ness of the kingdom of God is so clearly demonstrated through the resurrection of Jesus and the outpouring of the end-time gift of the Spirit at Pentecost, and the not-yet-ness of the kingdom of God is a reminder that nobody knows the end of the present age besides the Father (Cullmann 1961, 45).

The critical question that must be asked is, “What is the purpose for this interim period?” Why has the final and complete coming of the kingdom of God been delayed? Why is there now an overlap between the present age and the age to come? Grappling with these issues will shed more light on the missional role and identity of God's people in the biblical story.

As Cullmann argues, the overwhelming evidence of the NT points us in one direction – the purpose of this present interim period in the history of redemption is *for the mission of the*

church (1961, 46).⁵⁴

In his important book *An Introduction to the Science of Missions*, J.H. Bavinck argues similarly, building on his exegesis of several parables in the gospels which explicate the meaning of this interim period between the arrival and consummation of the kingdom of God. Bavinck puts it quite simply: “One may say thus that the interim is preoccupied with the command of missions, and it is the command of missions that gives the interim meaning” (1960, 32). Not only is mission the purpose of this interim period and the whole reason for the delay of the final coming of the kingdom of God, but as Cullmann argues, the mission of the church is itself an eschatological sign that we are living in this final period before the end of the ages and therefore gives this time period its distinctive meaning in the history of redemption (1961, 46-53). As an eschatological sign that the end of the ages has dawned, mission is central to the church’s identity and purpose in every age and in every place.

A missional hermeneutic must keep continually before us this important insight into the centrality of mission in eschatology. It is striking that while there has been much work done to develop our understanding of the *eschatology* of the NT, an emphasis on *mission* is rarely heard. The redemptive-historical hermeneutic, so formative in the Reformed tradition of biblical theology, has largely missed the missional significance of NT eschatology. This absence is informative and needs to be explored.

In addition to the importance of NT eschatology, a missional hermeneutic shares with the redemptive-historical tradition a concern to emphasize the Bible as one story, and indeed the true story of history and the world. And yet the redemptive-historical tradition has for the most part not recognized the centrality of mission in that story. Why? Two striking reasons, drawing on a missional hermeneutic. First, as argued above, the redemptive-historical tradition has not appreciated the missional significance of *election* in the biblical story of God’s mission. And second, the redemptive-historical tradition has failed at this critical point to ask the missional questions about God’s *purpose* in the history of redemption.⁵⁵ As Van Engen has argued, a critical factor that has not allowed biblical scholars to reckon with the centrality of mission in the biblical story as a whole is the way in which that scholarship has focused attention on questions of history and origin without asking the questions about purpose, design, and intention (1996, 35-36). Newbigin’s words here are very appropriate and also challenging to any eschatology of the NT that does not give a central place to the missional implications of the present time period:

The meaning of this “overlap of the ages” in which we live, the time between the coming of Christ and his coming again, is that it is the time given for the witness of the apostolic church to the ends of the earth. The end of all things, which has been revealed in Christ, is – so to say – held back until witness has been borne to the whole world concerning the judgement and salvation revealed in Christ. The implication of a true eschatological perspective will be missionary obedience, and the eschatology which does not issue in such obedience is a false eschatology (1954, 153).

A missional hermeneutic keeps before us the missional purpose of the history of redemption, centred in the mission of God to renew all of creation and also helps us see that central to that mission of God is the election of a community that is called to bear his

⁵⁴ David Bosch argues similarly that the mission of the church is the whole purpose for the church’s existence in between the already and not yet arrival of the kingdom of God (1991, 40-41). See also Rene Padilla’s important work, *Mission Between the Times*, particularly the final chapter, “The Mission of the Church in Light of the Kingdom of God.”

⁵⁵ In addition to these two reasons, one could also point to other factors that have shaped not only the redemptive-historical tradition but indeed much of the church in the West and have led to much of the church in the West to be non-missional – the reality of Christendom, the separation of mission from the church, and the syncretism of the gospel in Western culture, to name a few (Goheen 2006c).

redemptive purposes for the sake of the world – Israel in the Old Testament story and the church in the New Testament.

2.2.6 The mission of the church in the New Testament

The mission of the church in the New Testament can only be seen as both continuation and development of the entire biblical narrative. And so, the mission of the church in the NT will be summarized along the following four lines: the church is called to participate in *God's* mission; the church takes up the mission of *Israel*; the church is sent to continue the kingdom mission of *Jesus* in the world; and the church as the *presence of the kingdom of God* in every cultural setting.

2.2.6.1 The church participates in the *missio Dei*

As we have been arguing throughout, the mission of God to restore the creation is the central plotline in the grand narrative of the biblical story. The God we encounter in the biblical story is a God on a mission. The mission of the church, like the mission of Israel, is caught up in this larger mission of God. God's mission is nothing less than the restoration and renewal of the entire cosmos. The mission of the church is to participate in this creation-wide mission of God as it finds its place in God's mission in between the coming and consummation of God's future reign of salvation. The creation-wide mission of God marks our witness and defines our purpose as the people of God.

One of the key insights of a missional hermeneutic is to situate the mission of the church in the NT within the context of this larger biblical story. The modern missionary movement's "geographical expansionist" model for mission has for too long functioned as a hermeneutical assumption when reading the NT, leading many to not speak of "missions" in the NT until Acts 13 and the sending of Paul to cross geographical boundaries and establish witnessing communities in new places. Such a reading of the NT is short-sighted at best, for "mission begins not in Acts, but way back at the beginning of the biblical story. The gospels narrate the beginnings of the eschatological fulfilment of God's mission in Jesus' ministry, and the book of Acts carries forward that story. In Acts the story of God's mission through his people continues, with the restoration of Israel and the incorporation of the Gentiles into the people of God" (Goheen 2011, 122).

Central to God's mission throughout the biblical story is the calling of a community that is sent to embody his redemptive purposes for the world. A missional hermeneutic builds on the shift in missiology to a theo-centric understanding of mission from an ecclesio-centric understanding. As Guder puts it, "The church became redefined as the community spawned by the mission of God and gathered up into that mission. . . . the church's essence is missional, for the calling and sending action of God forms its identity. Mission is founded on the mission of God in the world, rather than the church's effort to extend itself" (1998, 81-82).

2.2.6.2 The church takes up the mission of Israel

Second, the church of the New Testament takes up the mission of Israel. On the one hand, the mission of the church and its role and identity can be seen as a fulfilment of God's purposes through Abraham. As we noted above, this election of Abraham by God brought into view both the universality of God's purposes for the nations and the world as well as the particularity of the means God will use. The reverberation of this Abrahamic promise throughout the NT canon is a widely recognized and fairly obvious observation; this promise to Abraham is central to so many places in the NT that demonstrate God's universal blessing of salvation that has come to all people. However, as N.T. Wright argues, it is important that we see many of these threads in not simply soteriological terms, but as primarily developing the great story from Abraham to Christ of God's purposes to restore the entire creation and make good on his promise to do that through the election of a particular community – the

New Testament community which, redefined by the messiah as both Jew and Gentile in fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise, becomes central to God's project of a new creation (2005a, 108-129).

Throughout much of the NT – the synoptic gospels, Paul, and also Revelation – we find many echoes of the Abrahamic promise of God's universal blessing that would come through the particularity of the election of Abraham and his family.⁵⁶ This OT narrative of universal blessing rooted in the election of Abraham was central to the self-understanding and mission of the early church:

Still less is this universal perspective merely a New Testament imposition on the Old Testament so as to give *ex post facto* justification for the innovating early church's missionary outreach. Rather, it is exactly the other way round. It was their awakening to the powerful universalizing thrust of their own Scriptures, in the light of Jesus the messiah, and under the effect of his own teaching, that propelled his first followers (and generations since) in that direction. It was Old Testament universality that drove the New Testament's concept and practice of mission. (Chris Wright 2006, 251-2)

On the other hand, the missional role and identity of the church in the NT is not only a fulfilment of God's mission through Abraham, but is also a role and identity that takes up the mission of Israel. As we argued above, Exodus 19 was central in defining Israel's mission – to be a holy nation, priestly kingdom, and special possession. That mission of Israel was centripetal – Israel was to embody God's redemptive purposes for the world in her community in such a way that the nations would be drawn to her and her God. The church is the new or reconstituted Israel – built on the nucleus and foundation of the 12 apostles who formed the core of this renewed Israel, as we noted above. Peter makes explicit the link between the church's mission and this centripetal mission of Israel – “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belong to God . . .” (1 Peter 2:9). The task given to Israel is now taken up also by the church – a task that starts already in the book of Acts as first an attempt to gather the lost within Israel itself and then extends outward to all the nations. This aspect of the church's role and identity in the NT is opened up in more detail by the story in the book of Acts.

Acts begins with the restoration of Israel through a community that is to bear witness to the coming kingdom of God. The question asked by the disciples and then answered by Jesus in Acts 1:6-8 is significant for how we understand the mission of the early church:

So when they met together, they asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” He said to them, “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

The disciples' question was a natural response to the eschatological expectations surrounding the resurrection, the kingdom of God, and the coming of the Holy Spirit. Jesus' reply to the disciples' question about *when* the kingdom would be restored to Israel shifts the focus to *how* that kingdom will be restored. He is urging the disciples to focus on their mission in the restoration of the kingdom that God had promised through the prophets. Goheen summarizes, “The outpouring of the Spirit signals that the blessings of the kingdom are about to be given, that the restoration has begun – and their role in this restoration is to be Jesus' witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and on to the ends of the earth. This is precisely how the kingdom is to be restored to Israel for the sake of the nations” (2011, 126).

⁵⁶ Chris Wright offers the following texts as examples: Matthew 1:1; 8:11; Luke 1:55, 73; 4:5-7; 13:10-16; 16:19-31; 19:1-10; Acts 3:21-26; Romans 1:5; 3:29-4:25; 10:12-13; Galatians 3:26-29; and Revelation 4-7.

Acts also opens up the centrality of Jerusalem to the church's mission. The movement throughout the book of Luke is *toward* Jerusalem and the events that will take place there, while the mission of the church in Acts *begins* in Jerusalem and then spreads out to the nations. The significance of this structure flows out of Luke's understanding of redemptive history and the way in which Jerusalem was central to Israel's expected renewal. The nations are pictured as coming to Jerusalem to join the renewed people of God.

In light of this literary and thematic feature of Acts, we see a two-fold dynamic at work significant for the mission of the church. On the one hand, the church is the gathering of the restored Israel into a community that was established in Jerusalem. Israel must be restored and then the nations can be gathered into God's community, as a restored Israel will become the "pole of universal attraction" for the nations to be drawn to God (Legrand 1990, 105). In this way, Luke is building on the centripetal thrust of Israel's mission and suggesting that the church takes up this "centripetal universalism" whereby a restored and renewed Israel would be an attractive community to which the nations are drawn. On the other hand, there is clearly discontinuity with this centripetal thrust of Israel's mission, as this renewed community is *sent out from Jerusalem* to the ends of the earth as the story in Acts progresses. Acts 1:8, as many have observed, functions in some ways as a sort of geographical outline for the story in Acts, highlighting the centrifugal movement of the church from Jerusalem outward to the nations. This discontinuity is significant for the role and identity of the church as well, sent out to embody and bear witness to the gospel in diverse places and among diverse peoples, no longer bound by geography or ethnicity.

While the shift from centripetal to centrifugal mission is a significant development in the NT, we must keep before us at the same time the continuity and continuation of the centripetal mission of the church today. The significance of this duel dynamic is great. The church, as restored Israel, has *both* a centripetal and centrifugal dimension to her mission. She is the end-time community that has been restored so that the nations might be drawn to her *and* she is the end-time community that is sent out to bear witness to the kingdom in the midst of the nations. We cannot polarize these two perspectives on the church's mission, as some are prone to do when contrasting "attractional mission" versus "incarnational mission."⁵⁷

One final theme to be drawn from Acts: the pattern of growth and opposition that highlights Israel's need to be purified and purged in order to be restored. Throughout the early chapters of Acts we see the focus remain fairly consistently on the restoration of Israel through both remarkable growth and multiplication of the early church communities *and* opposition and resistance from many Jews. Peter's sermon in Acts also highlights this theme of God's plan to purify and restore Israel in order for the mission to the nations to be extended to the Gentiles. Argues Goheen, "This is why the story of Acts tarries in Jerusalem. The twelve did not remain there as long as they did because of unbelief or narrow exclusivism or from failure to grasp God's universal mission. Their mission was to the Jews so that a faithful people might be formed; their mission to the Gentiles was to be founded on a community that already embodied the good news, making it credible" (2011, 138).

2.2.6.3 The church continues the kingdom mission of Jesus in the world

The connection between the mission of Jesus and the mission of the church is made immediately in Acts 1:1. Luke writes that his gospel was about what Jesus had *begun* to do and to teach. The implication, as many have noted, is that now in the book of Acts, Luke will continue the story about what Jesus will *continue* to do and to teach. The picture that emerges in Acts is that of the exalted Christ, through his Spirit, gathering the lost within Israel to his new community and then sending this community out beyond Jerusalem to the nations of the

⁵⁷ See Bauckham 2003 for a balanced perspective on the centripetal and centrifugal mission of the church.

world.

This continuation motif shows that continuing the mission of Jesus is not just one activity that the church is to be busy with; rather, this is the very identity of the church. The work of the church is to be done in “Christ’s way,” so that the elements of the church’s mission flow out of the elements of Jesus’ kingdom mission.

Like Jesus’ mission, the mission of the church has a kingdom focus. The church is called to *announce* the good news of the arrival of God’s kingdom in words; to *demonstrate* the kingdom of God through deeds of mercy and justice; to *teach* about the nature of the kingdom of God and *form* kingdom disciples; to *gather* and *embody* as a kingdom community a foretaste of the whole of life renewed; and to *suffer* for the sake of the kingdom as witnesses to an alternative story which is at odds with the idols of our cultural stories (Bartholomew and Goheen 2004b, 1999; Guder 97-109).

It is critical for the church today to recover the primacy of its relationship with the kingdom of God; the church is called to be both *sign* and *foretaste* of the kingdom. This is an imperative for the church to point away from itself, toward what God is doing. This also involves the church as *agent* and *instrument* of the kingdom to actively represent the kingdom of God both as a gathered community in times of corporate witness and as a scattered community in times of individual vocation in the world (Newbigin 1991a, 81-85; Guder 101-102).

Reading of Jesus’ kingdom work from a missional hermeneutic yields two important insights. First, the church’s task today is not one of duplicating at every point some model of ministry we find in Jesus’ mission, but rather continuing the kingdom mission of Jesus with contextual diversity and creativity. Echegaray writes, “Jesus did not set up a rigid model for action but, rather, inspired his disciples to prolong the logic of his own action in a creative way amid the new and different historical circumstances in which the community would have to proclaim the gospel of the kingdom in word and deed” (Echegaray 1984, 94). Second, it keeps before us the cosmic scope of the church’s mission. As Bartholomew and Goheen put it, “When we grasp that the salvation of the kingdom restores the creation, and all of it, we see that witness to God’s kingdom is as wide as creation. Witness will mean embodying God’s renewing power in politics and citizenship, economics and business, education and scholarship, family and neighbourhood, media and art, leisure and play” (Bartholomew and Goheen 2004b, 201).

2.2.6.4 The church as the presence of the kingdom in its cultural setting

Luke gives us a picture in Acts 2 of the early church community gathered in Jerusalem embodying God’s kingdom, while God begins to add to this community those who are from outside. Luke describes the devotion of this community to four vital practices, which became the means through which God’s presence in their midst was made manifest.

1. The early community was devoted to the *teaching of the apostles*, representing their commitment to immerse themselves in the biblical story and to understand their place in that story. The power of God’s word was at work to transform the early Christian community and was the means by which the kingdom would come, first in the eschatological community, and then beyond.
2. The early community in Jerusalem was devoted to *fellowship*. They were committed to a way of life together, through which they were both nourished in the life of Christ and also empowered by the Spirit to embody the transformed life of the kingdom of God in opposition to the idolatrous culture which surrounded them (Goheen 2011, 140-141). This way of life is what others have highlighted as an “alternative community” – a communal life noted for devotion and commitment to one another.
3. The early community was devoted to the regular practice of *participating in the*

Lord's Supper, a meal that was given to the church to nourish the new body of Christ until his return.

4. And the early community was devoted to *a life of prayer* through which the Spirit would advance the kingdom of God in response to their prayers.

Luke connects the centrality of the word of God to the core tasks of *church leadership*, too. The choosing of the seven in Acts 6 is significant in this regard, as it comes about so that the growing group of leaders might be able to devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the word of God. The early church appointed leaders who would keep the word of God central to the life of their communities, and thus allow the life and power of the kingdom to flow into and through them.

As the story of the church in Acts moves forward, we learn that this community was called to embody the presence of the kingdom of God in the midst of diverse cultural settings. The church in Antioch is significant here: they are the first to be called “Christians” or “Christ-followers,” as they had transcended the ethnic identification with Judaism and embodied a multi-cultural life together as Jew and Gentile (De Ymaz 13-26);⁵⁸ and they are the first community to take intentional steps across cultural boundaries and establish new communities in cities outside of Jerusalem. The church in Antioch sends out Paul and Barnabas to take the gospel and establish communities in new places. As Shenk suggests, the church moves from the “organic mode” of the Jerusalem community into the “sending mode” of the Antioch community (1995). The church begins to look beyond its own place and cultural setting and begins the centrifugal movement outward to other cultures and places where the gospel was to be embodied.

This sending mode will continue throughout the book of Acts, with Paul’s intentional strategy of establishing new communities to embody God’s kingdom throughout the Roman Empire.⁵⁹ Goheen captures the heart of this Pauline pattern in Acts well, “He wants to plant new missional communities, new manifestations of God’s eschatological people, in all the major centres of the Roman Empire, which would then function as missional congregations in those places” (2011, 150).

This sending mode raises the question of the early church community’s relationship with its cultural context. As the Jerusalem Council gathered together, they had to face head-on the tension created by the establishment of these communities in diverse cultures and how these Gentile cultures should relate to the Jewish culture of the church in Jerusalem. They had to figure out the extent to which Gentile converts would need to adopt Jewish cultural practices, particularly around circumcision and food laws. The decision of the Council was significant in redefining the identity of God’s people: the church became multicultural, transformed into a community which must embody the gospel in numerous cultural situations. This is a dramatic shift, as God’s people became non-geographical, living in the midst of the various cultures of the world.

2.3 Insights gained for missional discernment

The following is a summary of three important ways in which a missional hermeneutic is able to give shape to the missional identity and help form the discernment of the church’s missional vocation. The missional identity and role of the church has been developed throughout this chapter as each part of the biblical story has been opened up by a missional hermeneutic. The biblical story has indeed opened up additional themes and insights beyond

⁵⁸ See also Flemming who calls the church in Antioch the “first multicultural church” and argues that at least two Africans were part of this early community (2005, 43).

⁵⁹ See Allen (1962), Gilliland (1998) and Barram (2005) and Schnabel (2008) for more detailed studies of Paul’s missional methodology and strategy.

these three that are important for a missional ecclesiology today in the West.⁶⁰ What follows is a summary then of three ways in which a missional hermeneutic will be fruitful in shaping the identity and forming the missional discernment of the church in the West today.

A missional hermeneutic forces us to recover the centrality of mission. By keeping the metanarrative of the mission of God before us, a missional hermeneutic forces us at the personal and corporate levels to recover the centrality of mission for our identity and role. At the personal level, all followers of Christ are forced to see themselves in light of this sweeping narrative of God's mission. This is at the heart of who we are – caught up in the mission of God and called to committed participation in his missional purposes for the world. At the corporate level, a missional hermeneutic helps the church in the West move beyond seeing mission as one aspect of our life, or one ministry among others, to seeing mission as central to all that we do. Being a witness to God's kingdom in life, word, and deed is the whole reason for the existence of the church in this time between the times where the kingdom of God is a present reality already and also a future hope that has not yet been consummated.

A missional hermeneutic re-establishes the theocentric orientation of mission. Getting past the church-world dichotomy, which has created wide divergence in ecclesiologies between those in the evangelical and ecumenical traditions, a missional hermeneutic moves us toward what Bosch calls a “creative tension.” As we noted above, the church is that community sent into the world to be an eschatological sign and foretaste of the coming kingdom of God – concerned to work against injustice, poverty, and every type of brokenness, but also demonstrating in its own communal life together what life renewed by the gospel looks like. This creative tension must continue to abide – the church called to be separate from the world, and to serve God's kingdom purposes in the world outside the four walls of the church. This theocentric re-orientation of mission will also foster what Darrell Guder terms the “continual conversion” of the church in the West (2000): lives continually extricated from other Western narratives and converted to God's true missional purposes in the world. Chris Wright calls this “disturbingly subversive . . . certainly a very healthy corrective to the egocentric obsession of much Western culture – including, sadly, even Western Christian culture. It constantly forces us to open our eyes to the big picture, rather than shelter in the cosy narcissism of our own small worlds” (2006, 533).

Finally, a missional hermeneutic develops a creation-wide scope to our missional work. Here we can overcome another dichotomy, between word and deed, which has plagued the church particularly since the early 20th century when polarized evangelical and ecumenical traditions sought to understand the relationship between the verbal proclamation of the gospel and social concerns and involvement. As Bosch notes, this bifurcation of mandates has not only crippled the church's ability to be involved in issues of justice as well as the church's witness in evangelism – but what is ultimately at stake is a denial of the comprehensive nature of salvation (1991, 393-408). A missional hermeneutic recovers a comprehensive perspective on salvation that moves us beyond this dichotomy, and keeps the hope for this salvation rooted in God and his mission to redeem all of creation – delivering us from hopeless despair, activist attempts at self-redemption that would look to the realization of the fullness of God's reign within history, and the quietism that resigns itself to the current *status quo*. This, argues Bosch, must lead the church to action in the present:

From the tension between the “already” and the “not yet” of the reign of God, from the tension between the salvation *indicative* (salvation is already a reality!) and the salvation *subjunctive* (comprehensive salvation is yet to come!) there emerges the salvation *imperative* – Get involved in the ministry

⁶⁰ In chapter six, these additional themes and insights, along with the following summary remarks, will be brought to bear on the questions and challenges of discerning missional vocation in the West today.

of salvation! Those who know that God will one day wipe away all tears will not accept with resignation the tears of those who suffer and are oppressed *now*. Anyone who knows that one day there will be no more disease can and must actively anticipate the conquest of disease in individuals and society *now*. And anyone who believes that the enemy of God and humans will be vanquished will already oppose him *now* in his machinations in family and society (Bosch 1991, 400).

As a brief case study, consider what a missional hermeneutic would do for the church in the global South and East, where Christians are realizing how a holistic and evangelical perspective on the work of Christian higher education is integral to the mission of the church. Joel Carpenter suggests that the recent explosion of growth in evangelical universities, seminaries, and other movements of Christian higher education is a necessary and vitally important next step in the dramatic growth of Christianity in the global South and East (2003a). These new developing institutions must be careful to avoid Western models which have tended to create either vocationally trained Christian citizens on the one hand, or biblically trained Christian workers on the other hand – neither of which are fully equipped as kingdom citizens to develop Christian thinking and strategies that bring the gospel to bear on the burning contextual issues facing their local societies. The development of a creation-wide scope to the church’s missional identity is beginning to emerge and is critically important to equip the church in this task. One of the trends emerging in these developing institutions is a total shift in agenda for Christian theology away from traditionally Western concerns and emphases “to matters of poverty and social injustice, political corruption and the meltdown of law and order, and Christianity’s witness in a situation of religious pluralism” (Carpenter 2003a, 60). A missional hermeneutic can be fruitful as this new agenda for Christian theology and thinking is being written, fostering a missional identity and role as the church advances the gospel through the mission of Christian higher education. In this, and every other area of life, the church could be well-nurtured and best-equipped by a sense of mission that eyes all of creation, following God as he restores humanity and renews the world.

2.4 Conclusion

For the church in the West to be renewed in its missional identity and to develop greater capacity to discern its missional vocation, it will need to dwell deeply in the biblical story and allow that story to shape and form its identity. A missional hermeneutic is a particularly vital tool in helping the church in the West to allow the biblical story to shape its identity and form its missional discernment. The missional identity and role of the church has been developed throughout this chapter, with the aid of a missional hermeneutic that has opened up the missional thrust of the biblical story and the role and identity of God’s people within that story. This renewed missional identity and role must play a vital role in forming the discernment of missional vocation.

CHAPTER THREE: KNOWING OUR PLACE IN THE WESTERN STORY

2

3.1 Introduction

A missional church is called to be a witness and sign of the good news of the kingdom of God in its particular cultural context. Discernment of its missional vocation is done within that particular context. A crucial task facing the church today as it discerns its missional vocation is to understand our contemporary cultural context in the West. We must know our place in the Western story and engage in discernment with the themes confronting us, given our place in that story. Lesslie Newbigin's words are important, "It would seem . . . that there is no higher priority for the research work of missiologists than to ask the question of what would be involved in a genuinely missionary encounter between the gospel and this modern Western culture" (1986, 3). Responding to Newbigin's challenge, we need to develop insight and understanding into our contemporary situation in the West today.

The contemporary situation in the West is increasingly referred to as "postmodern."⁶¹ It is important for the church in the West to develop keen insight into and understanding of the postmodern context. In particular, there are eight important themes arising out of the postmodern context in the West that have important implications for the church in its missional encounter with Western culture:⁶²

1. the sensitivity and priority that is given to the local;
2. the challenges to modern forms of leadership and authority structures;
3. the growing suspicion of truth, certainty, and confidence;
4. the fear and suspicion of institutions;
5. the emphasis placed on the non-rational aspects of being human;
6. reactions to the individualism of modernity;
7. the importance of addressing the critical global crises facing the world today; and
8. the divergent interpretations of the significance and meaning of the postmodern shift.

Yet postmodernism is not alone in the Western context. The modern story, with its economic globalization, continues to spread around the world, and continues to influence the West. At the same time, the vacuum created in part by the postmodern challenge to the modern story is being filled voraciously by the ideology of consumerism. Themes emerging from these facets of the Western story must be understood as well. Indeed, our place in the Western story is increasingly a complex one.

All of these cultural themes do not arise out of a vacuum. Rather, they arise out of a larger cultural story that has shaped the West. In this chapter we will begin to understand this larger cultural story through a missiological analysis of culture, first by describing in more detail a missiological analysis of the Western story, and finally considering eight cultural

⁶¹ There is much debate regarding the nature of the postmodern and whether or not "postmodernism" is a helpful way to understand the West today. To engage in this debate is beyond the scope of our concern here. However, a particular way of describing our "postmodern" context will be employed in this chapter and, where appropriate, distinguished from other interpretations of postmodernity. See Bartholomew 1997 for an insightful summary of postmodernism and different theories of the postmodern, particularly as it relates to the task of Christian scholarship.

⁶² In chapter one, several themes emerging from the local ministry context in which this study is situated were highlighted. Many of those themes will resonate with what I am here calling themes arising in our postmodern cultural context. In chapter four, focus will be given to important themes arising in the missional and emergent church conversations. Many of those themes will also resonate with these themes arising in our postmodern cultural context.

themes arising out of this story that are relevant and important for the church as it seeks to discern its missional vocation. Knowing our place in the Western story is vital for the church to discern its missional vocation.

3.2 Missiological Analysis of Culture

In the missionary encounter between the church and culture, a missiological analysis of culture is essential. A missiological analysis is an important tool that can equip the church in its particular cultural context to develop insight into and understanding of its culture. This type of analysis will provide a larger context within which we can understand the contemporary culture of the West and its important implications for the church as it seeks to discern its missional vocation within Western culture.

3.2.1 Elements of a missiological analysis of culture

As noted above, Lesslie Newbigin believes that a missionary encounter with modern Western culture is the most urgent item on the agenda of missiology today. The church in the West today is in an “advanced state of syncretism” because the church in the West has uncritically accommodated itself to the idolatry of the Western cultural story. If the gospel is to be liberated from this syncretism, the church will have to engage in the cultural and historical task of understanding Western culture with the tools of a missiologist (Goheen 2002b). The following are six key elements involved in a missiological analysis of culture.

3.2.1.1 Definition of culture

Any attempt at cultural analysis will, of course, be first shaped by the scholar’s understanding of *culture*. Building on the integrated way of viewing culture that has been developed in the functionalist school of anthropology, Paul Hiebert defines culture as “the integrated system of learned patterns of behavior, ideas, and products characteristic of a society” (1976, 45). Charles Kraft expands on this understanding: “We may see a culture as a society’s complex, integrated coping mechanism, consisting of learned, patterned concepts and behavior, plus their underlying perspectives (worldview) and resulting artifacts (material culture)” (1996, 38). Broadening this even more and still capturing the integrated and unified wholeness of culture, Newbigin understands culture as a unified network of institutions, systems, symbols, and customs that order human life in community (1986, 3).

Common to all of these definitions and crucial for a missiological analysis of culture is the integrated and holistic understanding of culture. Harvie Conn uses the language of “integrating force” and “dynamic organism” to highlight this integrated and holistic understanding (1980, 148). While we can differentiate between cultural structures, forms, functions, meaning, and usage, each of these are interrelated and integrated in a culture. Every cultural form serves particular functions, conveys meaning to the participants of the culture, and is dependent for its meaning and function on how humans use it within a larger cultural framework (Conn 1980, 148). This integrated and holistic understanding of culture is vital to a missiological analysis.

3.2.1.2 Culture as religion made visible

Building on this definition of culture as an integrated whole, it is important to see the crucial role that religious belief plays in providing that integration and shape to a culture. Because of the integrated and holistic nature of culture, culture is never religiously neutral. Rather, as Bavinck argues, culture is “that complex of spiritual, moral, technical, and agricultural forces wherein a tribe or a people tries to express its basic feelings towards God, towards nature, and towards itself. The culture of a people is . . . rooted in its apprehension of reality. . . . Culture is religion made visible” (1949, 57). In other words, foundational beliefs

that are religious in nature are the core integrating and shaping force of each culture. Religious beliefs are the heart of a culture's integrity and provide its central dynamic as an organism (Conn 1980, 150).

Various terms can be used to describe these central religious beliefs that give shape to a culture. Newbigin speaks of committed beliefs, basic assumptions and commitments, dogma, ideology, myth, worldview, idols, and even gods to get at this core integrating force in culture (Goheen 2000, 342). Newbigin argues, “Fundamental to any culture [is] a set of beliefs, experiences, and practices that seek to grasp and express the ultimate nature of things, that which gives shape and meaning to life, that which claims final loyalty. I am speaking, obviously, about religion” (1986, 3). Culture is religion made visible.

3.2.1.3 Nature of religious beliefs shaping culture

To argue that culture is religion made visible is to speak of “religious belief” in a way that is not common in Western culture. In the West, it is common to relegate “religious beliefs” to the so-called “private realm” of life, which is held in sharp distinction to the “public realm.” Rather than see religious beliefs as one narrow aspect of life, it is wiser to see religious beliefs as the foundational beliefs that give shape and direction to the entire life of a particular culture. Newbigin is aware that to speak of religion in this way is to stand in opposition to the common use of this term in Western culture which, which, since at least the time of the Enlightenment, has relegated religious beliefs to the so-called “private” sphere of life. Newbigin argues:

Neither in practice nor in thought is religion separate from the rest of life. In practice all the life of society is permeated by beliefs which western Europeans would call religious, and in thought what we call religion is a whole worldview, a way of understanding the whole of human experience. The sharp line which modern Western culture has drawn between religious affairs and secular affairs is itself one of the most significant peculiarities of our culture and would be incomprehensible to the vast majority of people who have not been brought into contact with this culture (1989, 172).

The religious beliefs that shape culture are the fundamental and comprehensive beliefs held in common that provide direction and meaning for the entire culture. “Religion is ‘not an area of life, one among many, but primarily a direction of life . . . Religion, then becomes the heart of a culture’s integrity, its central dynamic as an organism, the totalistic radical response of man-in-covenant to the revelation of God” (Conn 1980, 149-150). These religious beliefs are comprehensive and direction-setting for a culture.

3.2.1.4 Characteristics and function of a worldview

In addition to the critical role played by religious beliefs in shaping the direction of a culture, it is vital to understand the characteristics and function of a worldview. Goheen and Bartholomew provide us with the following definition of *worldview*: “. . . an articulation of the basic beliefs embedded in a shared grand story that are rooted in a faith commitment and that give shape and direction to the whole of our individual and corporate lives” (2008, 23).

Several characteristics and functions of a worldview flow out of this definition. First, a worldview originates in a grand story about the world, or what in our postmodern culture has become known as a *metanarrative*. This grand story is what gives purpose and direction to our lives and explains the world and our place in it. Second, these grand stories are communally shared and embodied in a communal way of life. The communal nature of these stories means that we have all been shaped implicitly by some story, which has shaped the community into which we have been born and in which we live. Third, these grand stories are an expression of the ultimate religious faith commitments of our hearts, and are therefore

ultimately directed either toward the creator God or toward some created thing. Fourth, these grand stories have within them the answers to the most ultimate questions facing humans, including “What is life all about?,” “Who are we?, “What kind of world do we live in?,” “What’s wrong with the world?,” and “How can it be fixed?” The answers to these questions often form our most basic beliefs about life and the world. Worldviews explain at a basic level how and why things are as they are (Conn 1980, 155). Fifth, these grand stories, with these basic beliefs, give shape and normative direction to the entirety of our lives. They not only describe the world for us, but they provide us with a vision of how the world ought to be as well. This vision is not simply of our personal lives, but because of the communal nature of worldviews, is a shaping and direction given to the totality of the different aspects of our lives as a society. These include, but are not limited to, our political life, economic life, institutional life, and our aesthetic life. Worldviews validate and provide reinforcement to the basic institutions, values, and goals of a society as they are expressed in the variety of cultural systems and structures (Conn 1980, 155). Finally, these grand stories and basic beliefs are very often unarticulated and assumed by the people in a society which is shaped by them (Goheen and Bartholomew 2008, 23-25). This makes worldview articulation and reflection critical to cultural analysis and missional engagement.

3.2.1.5 Relationship between religious beliefs, worldview, and culture

Building on this definition of culture, the nature of religious beliefs, and the characteristics and function of a worldview in culture, it is important to briefly clarify the relationship between religious beliefs, worldview, and culture. This can be done along three lines.

First, a worldview is rooted at its deepest level in religious faith. A worldview story gives expression to the religious direction and faith of our hearts, what Conn describes as the “allegiance dimension” of the human heart (1980, 149).

Second, a worldview becomes a comprehensive framework of a culture’s basic beliefs, which functions to mediate the religious faith of the culture. This mediating function means that a worldview becomes the articulated story giving fuller expression to the basic beliefs about the world and life that flow out of the religious faith commitments that lie at this deeper level. If culture is *religion made visible*, then worldview plays an important mediating function in articulating *how* those religious faith commitments become visible in the cultural life of a society.

Third, a worldview defines and describes the comprehensive framework of a culture’s basic beliefs about things embedded in the cultural story, and that shapes and gives direction to that culture. A worldview sets out the main elements of that cultural story and how they fit together in an integrated way, and gives expression to the religious faith commitments that are at its root.

3.2.1.6 Underlying anthropology

A sixth and final element of a missiological analysis of culture is the study of philosophical anthropology, or the study of human nature and what it means to be human. Our understanding of human nature is intimately tied to how we perform cultural analysis. A missiological analysis needs to be shaped by the following key insights of a Christian understanding of human nature.

Human beings are ultimately religious creatures. Because God has made all of humanity in his image, humans are created to respond to and serve God in the totality of their lives. If we do not, we do *not* then become unreligious creatures. Rather, we place our faith in something else which, biblically-speaking, becomes an idol. This religious direction of the human heart – whether directed toward God or an idol – shapes every part of our being. Culture, then, becomes the corporate expression of this religious direction as it affects all

aspects of life. Thus, the whole of our cultural formation is shaped by the central religious directions of our hearts that underlie, integrate, shape, and direct the whole of our cultural life. These are the key insights and assumptions about human nature that help to shape and inform a missiological analysis of culture.

3.2.2 Cultural analysis of idolatry and ideologies

Bob Goudzwaard *et al*, in their recent *Hope in Troubled Times*, make an important contribution on the idolatrous ideologies that are driving three fundamental crises facing the world today. Goudzwaard's analysis embodies much of the elements of a missiological analysis of culture described above, and is instructive here.

Goudzwaard describes three tremendous crises facing the world today: growing worldwide poverty, degradation of the environment, and widespread terrorism and war (Goudzwaard *et al* 2007, 16-18). What is striking are the “missing solutions” to these global crises. That is, while analysis and commentary on these crises is growing, what is missing are solutions to these crises that correspond to the depth of the problems.⁶³ In some cases, the “solutions” being suggested to these growing problems are only escalating and deepening the crises we are facing. For example, it is often assumed that economic and technological progress will provide solutions to the environmental problems we are facing; however, it can be demonstrated that continued economic and technological progress are only making things worse on the environment. Coupled with these “missing solutions” is the growing anxiety and uncertainty about the future, which is breeding a sense of “ending” among many cultural commentators and analysts today.⁶⁴

A deeper cultural analysis is needed that probes to the depth of the problems we are facing today. Goudzwaard writes, “Many observers neglect how deep desires can coalesce into a modernist perspective, orientation, or worldview that, despite its claims to the contrary, is capable of contributing to, sustaining, and even entrenching global poverty, environmental devastation, and widespread violence” (Goudzwaard *et al* 2007, 26). What we need is an analysis that takes into account the deeper religious beliefs that are shaping the direction of our culture, and the particular ideologies which are at work in these growing global crises. That deeper analysis will come by probing the ideologies and idols at work in the global crises of our day and the religious beliefs that are giving them shape.

Many sociologists today define an ideology as an entire set of conceptions and beliefs that are subscribed to by a specific group of people. Building on the insights of Destutt de Tracy, a French education reformer who first coined the term “ideology” during the French Revolution, Goudzwaard highlights three elements involved in ideologies. First, an ideology takes a political or social end (or goal) and makes that end absolute. Second, an ideology requires a redefinition of the currently held values, norms, and ideas of a group of people so that they can legitimize the pursuit of the end that has become an absolute. Third, an ideology will then establish a standard by which the means and instruments are chosen which are needed in order to accomplish the end (Goudzwaard *et al* 2007, 32-33). An ideology defines as evil, untrue, or immoral those things which function as obstacles to the end; those things which serve to accomplish the end are defined as good.

⁶³ Goudzwaard cites both the 2005 UN report “Millennium Ecosystem Assessment” and the report from the board of the MEA, “Living Beyond Our Means: Natural Assets and Human Well-Being,” as examples of in-depth analysis of the growing environmental crisis that lack solutions corresponding to the depth of the crisis. He cites the 2004 study by Sir Martin Rees entitled *Our Final Century: Will Civilization Survive the Twenty-first Century*, which issues alarm over the growing crisis of terror and warfare and leaves little hope for any possible solution out of these global threats. And he cites the work of Jeffery Sachs, director of the UN’s Millennium Project and author of the book *The End of Poverty*, on how the MDGs are now hopelessly behind schedule and being acknowledged now as un-reachable by the year 2015.

⁶⁴ Witness various recent titles by cultural commentators, cited by Goudzwaard: “The End of History,” “The End of Ideology,” “The End of Faith,” “The End of Nature,” and “The End of Science.”

During modernity, ideologies have emerged which add three important new twists to these elements identified by de Tracy. First, modern ideologies have an added “rationalization” whereby they have sought to systematically articulate the most highly effective means to achieve the determined ends. Second, modern ideologies have a profound “radicalization” whereby the scope and depth of the ends and the means of achieving those ends have become totalitarian in nature. Finally, modern ideologies have a growing “instrumentalization” whereby they try to employ everything as an instrument in service of the ideology and its end (Goudzwaard *et al* 2007, 36).

Working with this broadened understanding of ideologies, Goudzwaard identifies four major ends that occupy people in our world today and have become dominant in a variety of corresponding contemporary ideologies:

1. The systematic resistance of all exploitative, oppressive, and dehumanizing powers that prevent the arrival of a better society.
2. The survival of one’s people, culture, group, or religion: the preservation of one’s hard-fought freedoms and/or cultural identity.
3. The pursuit of more material wealth or prosperity and the opportunity for continued material progress.
4. Guaranteed security: the protection of oneself, one’s children, and one’s fellow human beings against any attack from outside (Goudzwaard *et al* 2007, 38-9).

These goals are at work today in what Goudzwaard identifies as contemporary ideologies of revolution, identity, material progress, and guaranteed security. These ideologies become concrete in a society as *social forces*, and *institutions* are created to help put the ideology into motion. It is striking to note the way in which this process reflects the Old Testament pattern of how idol worship functions among a group of people. Goudzwaard highlights three practices from the OT pattern that we see at work in the process of ideology formation and implementation today. First, a group of people will objectively represent their god in some idolatrous form. Second, the idol is then venerated by having sacrifices brought to it. In turn, the idol repays the one making the sacrifice with happiness, health, protection, and wealth or prosperity. Goudzwaard calls this the “exchange” that we have with the idol – we sacrifice and in turn the idol brings blessing. Third, the people are then transformed into the likeness of the idol they have formed. Ideologies thus become an expression of the idols held in common by a particular group of people (Goudzwaard *et al* 2007, 39-40).

Consider four crucial implications for cultural analysis that flow out of this model, as it applies to contemporary ideologies in our world:

1. Identifying *idolatry* will help us determine if a legitimate goal has been turned into an ideological end.
2. Contemporary ideologies will not only show the signs of modern ideologies noted above, but will further be recognizable by the dynamic way in which the key indicators of idolatry are at work. That is, something will be elevated and/or venerated as an ultimate end or goal. People will then make sacrifices to the venerated idol, hoping for the blessings promised by the idol to follow. People will tend to follow wherever the idol leads, becoming transformed through the exchange with the idol.
3. Contemporary ideologies have the potential to promote dynamic forces in Western society in order to achieve their ends. These forces will continue to be marshalled at all cost in order for the ends to be achieved.
4. Contemporary ideologies tend to venerate something that brings prosperity or security to a people, which brings along with it a willingness to live under the control of such a

power. Along with this often comes a utopian hope for the future that captures our hearts. (Goudzwaard *et al* 2007, 42-45)

For the church in the West to understand its place in the Western story, Goudzwaard's analysis is particularly important for two reasons. On the one hand, Goudzwaard opens up the notion of cultural idolatry in very concrete ways as he analyzes the ways in which idols become a means to an end. For example, we have taken a *legitimate* human goal such as economic growth and made it into an *ultimate* goal for human life and, therefore, invested in particular social forces like technology in order to achieve our ultimate goal. On the other hand, Goudzwaard shows us the connection between idolatry and cultural stories, as ideologies become the new stories of meaning that have a way of encompassing our cultural idols (Goudzwaard *et al* 2007, 37).

Borrowing from Goudzwaard's work, and to briefly illustrate his model of cultural analysis, consider the broad contours of the contemporary ideology of *material progress and prosperity* that has dominated Western culture for years. He highlights the following signs of Western culture that point to this ideology: the elevation of endless progress as the absolute end to which the culture is oriented; the self-sufficiency of the means necessary to achieve endless progress – namely, technology, economics, and science; the creation of consumer desire in order to fuel economic growth; the commodification of money through the growing financial markets; the autonomy of financial markets; and the notion of vital economic interests which is used to justify horrific actions taken to protect those interests. Further, this ideology has redefined our cultural values, suggesting that efficiency, innovation, freedom, and self-interest are among the highest values of Western culture. This ideology has led to domination by free-market economies, with the concomitant call to follow wherever the markets lead us. The words of Andrew Carnegie are instructive and illustrative of the idolatrous faith that has undergirded this ideology of material progress:

We accept and welcome, therefore, as conditions to which we must accommodate ourselves, great inequality of environment; the concentration of business, industrial and commercial, in the hands of a few; and the law of competition between these, as being not only beneficial, but essential to the future progress of the race. . . . Such, in my opinion, is the true Gospel concerning wealth, obedience to which is destined some day . . . to bring "Peace on earth, among men of good will" (1962, 16-17, 29).

Goudzwaard has provided a helpful model for cultural analysis that seeks to build on much of the insights and elements of a missiological analysis of culture. The next section in this chapter will seek to provide a missiological analysis of the Western story, utilizing both the key elements of a missiological analysis of culture described above and elements of Goudzwaard's model.

3.3 The Western Story

Telling the story of the West will provide a broader context within which we can understand and discern the missional vocation of the church in the West. The Western story will be unfolded along four lines. First, the story of modernity will be told. Second, the story of postmodernity will be told, with emphasis on how it is a fundamental challenge to the modern story. Third, the rise of economic globalization will be briefly analyzed. Fourth, the dominant role of consumerism will be examined.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ The narrative that follows is indebted at points to *Living at the Crossroads* (Goheen and Bartholomew 2008).

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 3.3

3.3.1 Telling the modern Western story

The modern Western story can be told with three broad lines: articulating its religious beliefs; articulating its classical Greek roots; and reviewing its path from the Renaissance into the 20th century.

3.3.1.1 Rationalistic humanism

A good starting point in telling the modern Western story is to articulate the religious beliefs that together shape a confession that has influenced the direction of Western culture. The religious convictions at the centre of the modern Western story could be described as “confessional humanism:” the belief that autonomous man is capable of defining the world and solving the problems of the world in order to bring about a new world of freedom, prosperity, justice, and truth with his own rational resources (Goheen and Bartholomew 2008, 69).

Rationalistic humanism is a set of beliefs that is:

- *thoroughly secular* (God is removed from the story. Whether or not God actually exists is beside the point; God’s relationship to the world is irrelevant);
- *naturalistic* (this world of nature is all that there is);
- *rationalistic* (human reason is capable of understanding the laws that govern the world, and thus capable of giving humanity the power to rule over the world and subdue it for its own purposes); and
- *scientific* (the sciences, and tools of technology developed by the sciences, when combined with reason, can help humanity to rule over the natural world and can also help humanity establish a rational order to society and all aspects of societal life and leading to progress and happiness). (Goheen and Bartholomew 2008, 68-9)

As the Western story is unfolded, it will become clear that these basic religious beliefs have a profound shaping influence on it.

3.3.1.2 The beginning of the Western story

The beginning roots of the modern Western story can be found in the developments of Greek philosophy, starting with pre-Socratic philosophy. The pre-Socratic philosophers made a significant development in their argument that the world is best understood not through the use of myths or religious beliefs, but rather through trying to understand and then articulate a rational order to the world, which they believed could be found in the world through close observation and the use of reason (Wheelwright 1966). For example, Thales suggested earthquakes were not the result of the Greek god of the sea Poseidon, but rather came about when the earth experienced the turbulence of the water on which it floated (Kaufmann and Baird 1994, 7). These pre-Socratics began in these early efforts the attempt to explain the world entirely on the basis of reason and not with the use of myths or gods or religious beliefs of any kind.⁶⁶

Both Plato and Aristotle then had, of course, significant influence on the further development of this modern Western story. Plato’s significance can be summarized along

⁶⁶ See, for example, Francis Conford’s insightful study, *From Religion to Philosophy: A Study in the Origins of Western Speculation*.

several lines. First, his view of the world was thoroughly dualistic. He believed that reality has two basic realms: the material world which is visible and the spiritual world which is invisible (Helmbold and Rabinowitz, tr., 1956, 29-30). In the visible material world, we find particular things that we observe with our senses. In the invisible spiritual world, we discover universal ideals of the particular things we observe in the material world (e.g., the universal ideal of justice). The individual particular things of the material world participate in these universal ideals; however, the ideals themselves are what give us the unchanging, universal, and rational order for the world. Second, Plato's understanding of human nature was rationalistic. He argued that mankind, with the aid of reason, could gain access to the eternal, universal, and unchanging ideals and then use these eternal ideals to shape our lives in the visible material world. Third, Plato developed a dualistic view of the human person. Humans have material bodies, he argued, which belong properly to the visible material world. In addition, humans have rational souls, which belong properly to the invisible spiritual world of eternal, universal, and unchanging ideals. When we die, the material body expires and the rational soul is released from the body, able to return to the invisible world of ideals (Jowett, tr., 1920, 178-179). As Richard Tarnas argues, salvation was, for Plato, achieved through "the soul's direct encounter with eternal ideas" (1991, 43). Fourth, the orientation of Plato's whole worldview was upward, toward the eternal, universal, and unchanging spiritual realm of ideals. The way to get in touch with that world is through the use of reason. These four basic beliefs of Plato have had a tremendous influence on the story of the West, and began to set the trajectory of that story. It is hard to overstate the significance of Plato's thought in giving shape to the Western story.

Aristotle's contribution was also foundational. His concern was similar to Plato, in that he sought to find eternal, universal, and unchanging order in ideas and believed that the discovery of such order was vital in order to provide order for both individual and social life. For Aristotle, this truth was not discovered in the invisible world, but was actually to be discovered through careful observation and study of the visible world. Universal order and truth could be discovered by observation and study of the natural world with all of the particular and individual things observed. Universal order and truth would be discovered only as analytical tools were employed by human reason to discover that which is universal (Goheen and Bartholomew 2008, 74). While Plato's orientation was vertical, Aristotle's was firmly horizontal, and focused on the importance of rational study and observation of the natural world.

About 500 years after Aristotle, the ideas of Plato were renewed with the work of Plotinus and the "neo-Platonic" school of Greek philosophy. Plotinus is particularly significant because he put a type of religious cast around Plato's ideas, and synthesized during the medieval period a synthesis of a Christian worldview with four of Plato's central ideas: first, that there is a basic division in reality between the spiritual and the material; second, that human beings are made up of an inferior material body and superior rational soul; third, that bodily life in this material world is inferior to spiritual life; and fourth, that human life therefore would have an otherworldly, spiritual orientation. Plotinus' work marked an important waypoint in the early development of the modern Western story.

A final development of importance in this beginning of the modern Western story came from Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas, like Plotinus, represented the development of a synthesis between Christianity and Greek philosophy. In the case of Aquinas, that synthesis is between Aristotelian thought, neo-Platonism, and Christianity. Aquinas was a Christian, deeply committed to (a) the authority of the Bible, (b) the challenge of contextualizing the Christian faith in light of the enthusiasm in his culture for Aristotle's thinking and orientation, (c) the goodness and orderliness of God's creation, and (d) belief in reason as a God-given faculty that enabled mankind to discern the lawfulness of God's creation. Yet, Aquinas maintained the dualism of the classical Greek worldview. He saw reality as divided into two

realms, the lower realm of Nature and the upper realm of Grace. The upper realm was seen to be superior, and human life, therefore, should be oriented to the upper realm of Grace. At the same time, Aquinas wanted to maintain the goodness of the creation and the goodness of the lower realm of Nature. The body, the material world, social and cultural life, and the use of reason – all of these were good and belonged to this lower realm. In the lower realm Aquinas made room for Aristotle's thinking. Philosophical, scientific knowledge within the realm of Nature was a good thing, he argued. Emphasis on empirical reason, used to investigate the natural world and to discover the laws of nature, led Aquinas to develop what would be called "natural laws." As Tony Lane argues, "Revelation does not basically oppose human philosophy, but rather supplements it and brings it to completion and perfection. Thomas' system is like a two-storey house: Aristotelian philosophy provides the foundation and the first storey; Catholic theology perfects and completes it by adding the second storey and the roof" (2002, 94-95).

Aquinas later developed a hierarchy embedded in his dualistic view of the world. The lower realm was subordinated to the upper realm. Reason was subordinated to faith; the body was subordinated to the soul; society was subordinated to the church; science was subordinated to theology; and the material world was subordinated to the spiritual world. That said, Aquinas opened the door for the autonomy of nature and reason: he was committed to seeing grace permeate and perfect nature, as well as seeing reason subordinate to faith and science subordinate to the church, yet by continuing the classical Greek dualism with his notion of the two realms, he unwittingly opened the door for the notion of a limited autonomy of the lower realm of nature from the upper realm – something that would be exploited and opened wide by later thinkers. As the modern Western story developed, these two realms are separated and disengaged from each other. Most of human life as a result became severed from the authority of God and the gospel. Reason was separated from faith. Nature was seen as self-sufficient and not upheld by God. Society was separated from any norming authority of God's law or God's word. The church was separated from society and theology from the sciences. Hans Kung captures this tension in Aquinas' synthesis well:

Modernity was to draw conclusions from this: a belief in God apart from the world and a worldliness without faith, an unreal God and a godless reality. That was of course the last thing that Thomas himself intended. But was his grandiose and balanced synthesis between reason and faith, nature and grace, philosophy and theology, secular and spiritual power sufficiently protected against this split? . . . in connection with the history of his influence the fact cannot be overlooked that the Christian medieval synthesis presented by Thomas is one of extreme tension, and in the dynamic of historical development had effects which were to prove self-destructive: there was to be an unprecedented and all-embracing **movement of secularization and emancipation** 'at the lower level' (1996, 425-426, Kung's emphasis).

As a result of these syntheses, the dominant worldview during the middle Ages was a Platonic Christianity wedded with an Aristotelian perspective. The results of this worldview on the modern Western story were at least three-fold. First, the field of academic study was narrowed to the areas of metaphysics, law, theology, and logic. Second, there were limits placed upon scientific and technological development because of vertical orientation and otherworldly perspective. Third, the authority of the church over society was great, hindering human freedom and leading to social and cultural hierarchies throughout various aspects of Western culture.

3.3.1.3 The development of the modern Western story

The development of the modern Western story can be traced in five broad ways: first,

the rebirth of Greek classical culture during the time of the Renaissance; second, the Scientific Revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries; third, the Enlightenment of the 18th century; fourth, the Industrial Revolution accompanying and following the Enlightenment; and fifth, the developments of the story in the 20th century.

3.3.1.3.1 Renaissance

The modern Western story was developed significantly through the rebirth of classical scholarship during the Renaissance of the 14th and 15th centuries. This rebirth of Greek classical influence brought with it a renewed interest in the following: the study of what has become known as the “humanities,” namely, literature, poetry, history, art, and languages; the scientific examination of the natural world and the technological inventions to assist in it; the inherent worth of the individual and the importance of human freedom over against the authority of the church and institutions; and the re-emergence of classical humanism.

Renaissance humanism brought renewed interest in this world. Aquinas' two realms were unravelling and the focus was now squarely placed upon the natural world in distinction from the supernatural realm of grace. This renewed interest in this world would begin to move in a secular direction, with Aquinas' realms having a wedge driven between them and the upper realm of grace becoming totally irrelevant. The autonomy of human beings was firmly established, as it was believed that humans should become their own authority and a law unto themselves. Human freedom was defined as freedom apart from God's authority, from God's norms, and especially from the authority of the church. The writings of Pico della Mirandola, an important Renaissance thinker, capture this well:

The nature of other creatures, which has been determined, is confined within the bounds prescribed by Us. You, who are confined by no limits, shall determine for yourself your own nature, in accordance with your own free will, in whose hand I have placed you. I have set you at the center of the world, so that from there you may more easily survey whatever is in the world. We have made you neither heavenly nor earthly, neither mortal nor immortal, so that, more freely and more honourably the moulder and maker of yourself, you may fashion yourself in whatever form you prefer (1468).

The non-human world also shared in this autonomy – that is, nature was also separated from God and the authority of his word. The world became a mechanical structure that had within itself its own rules its own ordering. Like an intricate machine, it operated according to its own innate rules and laws.

Where could all of this lead, of course, except to the natural end that human beings should orient their lives toward the mastery of nature? As Goudzwaard argues, the Renaissance man made his relationship with nature central to his being: the earth became man's domain as the platform and instrument with which he could realize himself (1997, 13). The effect of this orientation toward the mastery of nature has been massive. Moltmann writes,

. . . [I]t is the boundless will toward domination which has driven and still drives modern men and women to seize power over nature. In the competitive struggle for existence, scientific discoveries and technological inventions serve the political will to acquire, secure and extend power. Growth and progress are still gauged by the relative increase in economic, financial, and military power (2001, 171).

3.3.1.3.2 Scientific Revolution

As the modern Western story progresses, it would be largely through the Scientific

Revolution of the 16th and 17th Centuries that the humanist vision reborn during the Renaissance would triumph over Christianity and the Christian worldview. Up until this point, both the humanist vision and the Christian vision vied for influence on Western culture. The Christian vision affirmed science and reason as good gifts from God. As a methodology with which to gain understanding, science is a powerful instrument that can be directed toward God and a Christian vision of life as it seeks to uncover the richness of God's good, orderly creation. Many of the influential figures during this time – including Copernicus, Kepler, and Newton – were committed Christians and sought to hold onto this Christian vision of life rooted in their faith.

The medieval synthesis, with its vertical and otherworldly orientation, was a serious obstacle to the development of science. A positive appreciation for this world and for science as a proper area of human vocation and calling were both lacking. The growing humanist vision, re-awakened again at the Renaissance, emphasized the importance of seeing humans as free and autonomous, and thus opened the door for the notion that science should be used to dominate the creation for mankind's purpose and uses. The new science that was emerging was caught in the crosshairs of these two visions, and it would be the humanist vision that would triumph as science began to be seen as a great power that humanity should use in its desire to dominate nature for its own purposes and use (Goheen and Bartholomew 2008, 88).

One of the most profound developments in the modern Western story during this time was the emergence and eventual dominance of methodological reason, with its foundationalist and objectivist epistemology. Two figures stand out: Francis Bacon and Rene Descartes.

Consider four of Bacon's seminal ideas:

1. Knowledge is power. He believed that scientific knowledge of the world would give humanity the power that would enable the building of a better world for all.
2. Scientific knowledge of the laws of nature would enable humanity to predict how nature would respond, and thus would give humanity the power to control and dominate nature. Jeremy Rifkin summarizes, "The first and last word of [Bacon's] human experience stated simply is: to be human, we must be in control. Action, not contemplation, is the goal. Any action that leads to greater control over nature is beneficial" (1979, 27).
3. This scientific knowledge could be coupled with technology, and together they would provide the tools needed to manipulate and control nature in humanity's quest for a secular paradise and other profitable social purposes.
4. For this to happen, mankind would first need to establish a new foundation for knowledge. That foundation would be the autonomous rational individual and the laws that govern nature.

Bacon argued that mankind needed a new method to free us from subjective distortions and beliefs, so that we could get true scientific knowledge of these laws that govern nature. For Bacon, that method was fundamentally empirical in nature. That is, knowledge would be based on scientific and experimental examination of the world and the inductive reasoning that would be employed to gain knowledge.

Rene Descartes developed many of the same ideas as Bacon, but in continental Europe (Bacon worked in England). Descartes' ideas were rooted in basic beliefs that included: autonomous scientific reason should be the authority for truth; science could capture laws of nature; technological tools could apply those laws of nature and allow humanity to master and control nature.; scientific knowledge and technology could together usher in great progress for Western culture; and, like Bacon, Descartes believed in the importance of finding a method to provide a foundation for this type of knowledge.

Descartes made an important contribution with his methodological view of reason. He felt that a rational method was needed that would ensure that our knowledge could be

completely objective and free from all subjective factors that might somehow inform or influence our knowledge. Descartes argued that the foundation for that method was *doubt*. In order to obtain this objective knowledge, we must doubt everything we claim to know. After doing this, humanity could start from the foundation of something that we are completely certain about and then rebuild our knowledge, piece by piece, ensuring that each piece added is something that is judged to be just as certain as the piece before it, according to laws of reason, mathematics, and logic. Descartes' method was a rationalist and mathematical method, providing a complementary perspective to Bacon's empirical and experimental method (Bernstein 1983, 115-118).

Building on Bacon and Descartes, Isaac Newton developed a scientific method based both on experiments and observation as well as mathematical rationality and precision. Newton's scientific method allowed science and technology to take a central role in the modern Western story. For many, science and all it represented became worthy of religious devotion – perhaps science could not only help us understand nature more fully and completely, but also deliver us from all the evil and suffering in the world?

With the Scientific Revolution, the humanist vision would triumph in the modern Western story. This would happen on the one hand because of the conflict that emerged between science and the church. The church largely reacted in a negative way to these new scientific developments and paradigms for knowledge. On the other hand, the humanist vision would triumph as well because of the religious divides in Western European culture during this time period. The Protestant Reformation had splintered the unity of the church. The church was increasingly fragmented into different confessional groups and traditions, many of whom were also connected with different political states. As each political state competed for influence and control over the European continent, increasingly the “wars” that ensued were also religious in nature. These religious wars breaking out over Europe stood in stark contrast to the advancement of scientific discoveries and knowledge. Science promised unity and progress; the Christian vision was seen as not only a hindrance to scientific progress but as something that was dividing European civilization. The humanist vision, embodied in the Scientific Revolution, triumphed.

3.3.1.3.3 Enlightenment

The time period of the 18th Century, referred to as the time of “Enlightenment,” is one in which the modern Western story comes to its maturity and full height. Rationalistic humanism becomes the dominant religious vision and the culturally formative worldview for Western culture. As Newbigin argues, the very notion that this new period was a time of “enlightenment” embodied the religious faith of this time:

‘Enlightenment’ is a word with profound religious overtones. It is the word to describe the decisive experience of Buddha. It is the word used in the Johannine writings to describe the coming of Jesus . . . The leading thinkers of the mid-eighteenth century felt themselves to be at such a moment of enlightenment. . . . In place of ‘dogmatic’ or ‘unscientific’ explanations which no longer satisfied the mind, the true explanation of things was now coming to light (1983, 7-8).

“Enlightenment faith” is perhaps most profoundly represented by *unwavering faith in progress*. New images of “paradise” emerged during this time period, as people spoke about a golden age that lay ahead, soon to be realized and actualized (Goudzwaard 1997, 40-42). A profound optimism came out of these utopian images – an optimism that, even today, wields influence. Christopher Dawson believes that, indeed, “Progress is the working faith of our civilization” (2001, 15).

Progress for Enlightenment thinkers was tied increasingly to *economic growth*: having

the greatest possible abundance of material objects suitable for humanity's enjoyment, along with the leisure time in which to enjoy them. Economic growth that ushers these things in would be the key to a happy future – *progress* which mankind could achieve.

After this unwavering belief in progress, the second pillar of Enlightenment faith was *faith in reason and science*. The world would be pushed to inevitable progress by reason and science, the very means necessary to arrive at this future of economic prosperity. Richard Tarnas captures this aspect of the Enlightenment faith well:

. . . the conviction that man was steadily and inevitably approaching entrance into a better world, that man himself was being progressively improved and perfected through his own efforts, constituted one of the most characteristic, deep-seated, and consequential principles of the modern sensibility. Christianity no longer seemed to be the driving force of the human enterprise. For the robust civilization of the West at the high noon of modernity, *it was science and reason, not religion and belief, which propelled that progress*. Man's will, not God's, was the acknowledged source of the world's betterment and humanity's advancing liberation (Tarnas 1991, 323).

The Enlightenment had a particular view of reason, one that could be described by three characteristics. First, it was a view of reason as *autonomous*. That is, reason must function independent of divine revelation and be liberated from faith as a law unto itself. Second, it was a view of reason as *instrumental*. Reason is a tool that must be employed in order to predict, control, and shape the world for humanity's purposes. Third, it was a view of reason as *universal*. Reason transcends all subjectivity and thus leads humanity into universal truth.

The third pillar of the Enlightenment faith was the belief in the ability of scientific reason to be translated into *technology*. It was Descartes and Bacon who argued for the union of science and technology. Progress would come as the tools of technology could be used to control nature for the benefit of humanity and the pursuit of material prosperity. Nature could be controlled by technology.

Likewise – the fourth pillar of the Enlightenment faith – *human society could be controlled* by the rational organization of the various sectors of society. Progress could also be achieved in the societal spheres of life as scientific reason was applied to the rational organization of those spheres. As Bury argues, what would emerge is a new social order which “could alter human nature and create a heaven on earth” (1932, 205). The spheres of social life, political life, economic life, and education could all be investigated and a rational order to these spheres could be discovered so that human society could be organized according to this rational order. As Van Gelder summarizes, Adam Smith's theories in economics led the way here and gave birth to the capitalist ideals; political theories were likewise developed that led to the development of the modern nation-state, based on social-contract theories of natural rights; massive urbanization began to develop along with all of the forms of urban life that would follow; and the increased differentiation of life that urbanization and economic specialization produced were given order and structure through the rational structure of bureaucratic organizations and corporations (1996, 118). This rational organization of the various societal spheres would lead humanity one step further to achieving the heavenly city here on earth. Outdated institutions and ways of organizing society had to be discarded in light of the fresh discoveries through the use of scientific reason. And, as this Enlightenment faith found itself widening its distance from the Christian worldview, the problems with the past organization of society were seen as having a lot to do with how the Christian faith had been allowed to give shape and order to society.

As the Enlightenment faith took root and grew, there would be an inevitable clash with Christianity and the gospel. When this conflict bloomed, rather than challenge the

Enlightenment faith with the comprehensive claims of the gospel and a fully-orbed Christian worldview, the church allowed the Christian worldview to become absorbed into the Enlightenment faith. More and more Christians surrendered the claims of the gospel to universal truth, thus abandoning the comprehensive claims of Christ and allowing the gospel and its claims to become more narrow and reduced in their scope.

Lesslie Newbigin unpacks the dichotomy of the Enlightenment faith that many Christians began to accept (1989). With the triumph of rationalistic humanism, scientific reason stood alone as the only judge of truth. Any truth claim had to pass through that lens. If a truth claim could be proved scientifically, then it would pass as fact, as truth, as public knowledge. Truth claims that did not pass through the bar of scientific reason were seen as opinions, values, beliefs, private matters. As a result, the gospel gets relegated to the private sphere of life. It is seen to no longer have any role in public life. Our public life as a culture must rather be shaped by an alternative faith, which asks us to proceed on the basis of rationality and scientific reason. The Enlightenment represents the maturity and high point of the modern Western story.

3.3.1.3.4 Industrial Revolution

Eventually, Enlightenment faith gains legs. It becomes embodied in social, political, and economic life – which was inevitable, given the nature of culture and the religious beliefs that shape it (described above). Through a series of social revolutions in the 18th and 19th centuries, Western society was brought into conformity with the Enlightenment faith.

The Industrial Revolution was the embodiment of that union between science and technology, which was so central to the Enlightenment faith. This union's dramatic industrialization of Western culture demonstrated the practical value and power of scientific reason, and further inspired hope in economic progress. Hundreds of years after his death, Francis Bacon's idea finally took firm root in the Western world. Scientific technology provided a dramatic rise in economic productivity. On the one hand, scientific technology led to the process of mechanization. Different industries were mechanized through the use of the steam engine and other similar technological advancements. These machines increased labour capacity. On the other hand, scientific technology also led to the process of specialization. Human labour was organized in a rational way in which jobs became specialized and ordered in factories so that work could be more efficient. Together, mechanization and specialization worked to increase productivity and efficiency, which in turn led to incredible economic growth and hopes of further boundless growth and progress.

All told, the Industrial Revolution functioned to support and confirm Enlightenment faith. The Enlightenment faith seemed to really work! Things were progressing and life was getting better. Economic growth was seen and celebrated. As Andrew Walker summarizes, “. . . Progress seemed the stuff of the universe, and science was the key that could unlock the secrets of utopian bliss” (57). This drive for economic growth through the use of technology would increasingly begin to give shape to all aspects of life (as the development of capitalism would demonstrate). Through these revolutions, the religious beliefs of the Enlightenment had become visible and tangible.

3.3.1.3.5 20th Century

As we consider the development of the modern Western story into the 20th century, we see it unfold along two very contrasting lines (Goheen and Bartholomew 2008, 103). On the one hand, there is continued optimism about technology, science, and economic progress. On the other hand, there is growing despair and the breakdown of the Enlightenment faith. We need to consider both of these lines.

The 20th century brought with it a sense of continued optimism and hope about the way in which science and technology could usher Western culture into continual economic

growth and progress. Emmanuel Mesthene captures this well:

We are the first . . . to create new possibilities almost at will. By massive physical changes deliberately induced, we can literally pry new alternatives from nature. The ancient tyranny of matter has been broken, and we know it . . . We can change it (the physical world) and shape it to suit our purposes . . . By creating new possibilities, we give ourselves more choices. With more choices, we have more opportunities. With more opportunities, we can have more freedom, and with more freedom we can be more human. That, I think, is what is new about our age . . . We are recognizing that our technical prowess literally bursts with promise of new freedom, enhanced human dignity, and unfettered aspiration (Mesthene, 484-5).

The number of advancements and developments that have taken place in the 20th century which embody this progress and optimism are too numerous to list here. Some of the following are illustrative: numerous scientific discoveries that have advanced the boundaries of knowledge; numerous “cures” discovered for diseases which in the past had ravaged humanity; recent work done which has mapped the human gene and DNA structure; numerous astronomical discoveries; space exploration; energy development; telecommunication systems; information systems; advancements in personal computing. Throughout, industrial and economic development has been tremendous. Material prosperity has grown significantly in the past century, with a level of private wealth that is unprecedented historically.

But, then, the other side of the story. The Enlightenment faith began to breakdown in the 20th century. This started first in Western Europe, where after World War I there was great despair and a loss of faith. Listen to how Carl Jung expressed it:

I believe I am not exaggerating when I say that modern man has suffered an almost fatal shock, psychologically speaking, and as a result has fallen into profound uncertainty. . . . The revolution in our conscious outlook, brought about by catastrophic results of the World War, shows itself in our inner life by the shattering of our faith in ourselves and our own worth . . . I realize only too well that I am losing my faith in the possibility of a rational organization of the world . . . The old dream of the millennium, in which peace and harmony should rule, has grown pale (Jung, 231, 234-5).

This despair emerged in North American culture particularly through the development of the counterculture in the 1960s. Rock music, drug culture, the hippie movement, student uprisings and protests – these and many other movements were profound cultural critiques of the Enlightenment’s unwavering belief in progress. This growing sense of despair and cultural critique carries right on into our present moment with the development of the postmodern critique, which will be examined below.

We can point to five critical factors that brought about disillusionment and a breakdown of the modern Western story and the Enlightenment faith in the 20th century. Each of these also highlights the many different injustices that have been created by the modern Western story and its embodiment in Western culture.

1. *Environmental destruction.* This is seen in some of the following ways around the world: the loss of habitats, the loss of animal and plant species, the loss of farmland and crops, the overconsumption of natural resources, the decay of the ozone layer, and the threat of inadequate clean water supplies (Goudzwaard 2009; Myers 30-35).
2. *Growing worldwide poverty.* The gap between the rich and the poor is staggering, and indicative. After several “decades of development” in which tons of dollars from the West were given to non-Western countries in an effort at development, there is a

widespread recognition of failure (Goudzwaard 2009). The dream of material prosperity and progress for the world has faded, with only a few rich, and the majority in ever-deepening, ever-wider poverty.

3. *Nuclear threats and proliferation of weapons.* The massive buildup of weapons and arms is a direct result of the technological growth and development rooted in the Enlightenment faith. The 20th century demonstrated the devastation and terror that has come through this massive militarization and nuclear threat. One has only to mention Nagasaki or Hiroshima to illustrate the devastation. We now live with the irony of wanting greater security, and trying to gain it through massive militarization.
4. *Economic and social agitation.* Among the often cited problems are the following: the breakdown of the nuclear family in the West; the enormous growth in divorce rates; growing unemployment and crime; and institutional racism and sexism.
5. *Psychological and social disorders.* In a fascinating study by Kenneth Gergen on the proliferation of psychological disorders in the 20th century, the following problems have all come to dominate recent scholarship in psychology: low self-esteem, obsessive compulsion, sadomasochism, identity crisis, seasonal affective disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, paranoia, bulimia, midlife crisis, and anorexia (Gergen, 13).

As the Enlightenment faith began to break down in the late 20th century, these factors would lead to the development of a profound critique of modernity, embodied in what would be called “postmodernism.” Before we look at the ways in which the postmodern story is challenging the modern story, it will be helpful to summarize some of the main themes emerging from the modern story in the West.

3.3.1.4 Important themes of the modern Western story

This brief telling can be summarized along two lines:

1. Characteristics of the modern Western story:
 - a. *Epistemological:* emphasizing methodological reason to provide universally valid, objective knowledge, and through it mastery over nature.
 - b. *Rationalist:* elevated human reason above all other aspects of human nature.
 - c. *Methodological:* allowing humanity to rationally order not just knowledge, but all aspects of society.
 - d. *Autonomous:* cementing earlier Greek belief, humans are inherently free from all external laws, able to determine their own laws and destiny.
 - e. *Unjust:* all of the above have created many injustices, which have come to shape present Western reality .
2. Idols of the modern Western story: (Walsh and Middleton 1984, 132)
 - a. *Scientism:* belief that human reason, especially the scientific method, can provide exhaustive knowledge of the world, and can enable humanity to progress toward a human utopia on earth.
 - b. *Technicism:* belief that scientific discovery can be translated into the formative, technological mastery of life. Modern humanity becomes, as Walsh and Middleton describe, “enamoured with the machine”, an image that captures this idol of technology. A machine is something that can be understood scientifically, can be used to further enhance our power to control nature, and has come to mesmerize many in the modern West (Walsh and Middleton 1984, 134). They cite Henry Adams’ description of the great machinery on display at the Great World’s Fair held in Paris in 1900:

The forty-foot dynamos (were) a model force, much as the early Christians felt

the Cross. The planet itself seemed less impressive, in its old-fashioned deliberate, annual orderly revolution that this huge wheel, revolving at arm's length at some vestigenous speed and barely murmuring – before the end one began to pray to it (Adams 1918).

- c. *Economism*: belief in the supreme value of economic growth and progress. Walsh and Middleton argue this idol is vitally connected to the other two: "In the context of a growing scientific and mechanistic worldview, it was almost inevitable that the ultimate goal of life would be something which could be mechanistically produced and mathematically qualified – namely, economic growth" (1984, 136). In particular, Adam Smith's capitalist ideal, based on governing self-interest, became a capstone to the other two idols. Walsh and Middleton write,

While scientism offered omniscience and technicism provided omnipotence, the god of economism (the absolutization of mankind's good ability to make economic choices) extends to all who listen the breathtaking promise of full and glorious material prosperity – nothing short of secular salvation (1984, 138).

Having summarized the modern Western story, it is important to continue into the postmodern story and its challenge to modernity.

3.3.2 The postmodern story challenges modern Western story

There is much debate today about what is meant by the term "postmodern." As Bartholomew has argued, the "postmodern" should be understood as the complex interaction of diverse shifts in philosophy, culture, and Western society.⁶⁷ Postmodernity should be understood primarily as a challenge to the modern Western story. Steven Connor characterizes the postmodern as the collapse of the grand story of modernity (Connor 1989). The French thinker Lyotard captured the heart of the postmodern shift: "Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives" (1984, xxiv). There are four fundamental ways in which the postmodern story is challenging the modern Western story.

3.3.2.1 Challenging optimism

Postmodernity is sceptical of the modern stories of progress, resulting as they did in 20th century environmental destruction, growing worldwide poverty, nuclear threats, proliferation of economic and social problems, and growth of psychological and social disorders. The idols of the modern story in the West, sketched above by Goudzwaard, promised us material prosperity, but what we have instead is poverty and wealth gaps between the rich and the poor. Modernity promised us truth, but instead we face a bewildering pluralism. It promised justice and peace for all, but instead we have growing oppression, warfare, violence and crime.

But postmodern scepticism strikes even deeper than that. It doubts the inherent goodness of humanity, so long assumed by the modern stories of progress. Michel Foucault has argued at length that all knowledge claims necessarily involve the use of power. What counts as knowledge is determined in the context of networks of power. Foucault argues, "We should admit . . . that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations" (1977,

⁶⁷ See Bartholomew 1997 for a wonderful survey of the historical development of the term "postmodern" as well as a survey of the various contemporary uses of "postmodern."

28). This power is never used in a neutral way, nor rarely even in a good way. Rather, often this power inherent in knowledge is used to control and oppress others (Smith 2006, 87). This has led to the preponderance of a “hermeneutic of suspicion,” whereby all truth claims are inherently suspect because of the embedded power plays at work in them.

3.3.2.2 Challenging modernity’s notion of human nature

The postmodern story challenges the autonomous modern self, what Walsh and Middleton term “independent, self-reliant, self-centering and self-integrating rational subjects” (1995, 47). This notion of human nature helped shape the belief in the inherent ability and right of humanity to master and control the non-human world, a belief central in the modern story. Herman Dooyeweerd aptly observes:

Proudly conscious of his autonomy and freedom, modern man saw “nature” as an expansive arena for the explorations of his free personality, as a field of infinite possibilities in which the sovereignty of human personality must be revealed by a complete *mastery* of the phenomena of nature (1979, 150).

Postmodernity challenges the paradox of human *control*, highlighting how the notion of autonomous individualism has so often led to the heroic individual exercising mastery over both the non-human and human world and thus perpetuating violence toward the “other” (Walsh and Middleton 1995, 49). The self-centred autonomous individual placed at the centre of the modern story has perpetuated much violence toward subjugated peoples and the non-human creation.

Postmodernity challenges the human *rationalism* of the modern story, instead emphasizing emotions, senses, the subconscious, desires, passion, imagination, instinct, and intuition – sometimes to a fault. Best and Kellner write of “. . . the possibility of a new postmodern mode of existence where individuals overcome repressive modern forms of identity and stasis to become desiring nomads in a constant process of . . . transformation” (1991, 77). And we see this, especially in human sexuality: resisting modernity’s exaltation of reason, postmodernity now exalts the non-rational aspects of human nature, like desire and passion.

And, postmodernity challenges human *authority*. In the modern Western story, each individual defined what it meant to be human and what its purpose was. But while postmodernity is not challenging this fundamental autonomy, it increasingly laments a profound loss of any core identity or meaning to human life. Richard Rorty, for example, argues that the human person is “a network of beliefs, desires, and emotions with nothing behind it” (1983, 585-6). There is nothing beneath or deeper than the networks and different ways in which we create our self and identity. As Kenneth Gergen argues, we are left with a saturated self in which we are free to continually make and re-make our identity as a human self (1991, 7).

3.3.2.3 Challenging epistemology

Having challenged modernity’s optimism and even its notions of human nature, postmodernity even stares down modernity’s ways of thinking and of learning, starting with its belief in the neutrality of reason. The modern Western story taught that methodological reason would provide a foundation to allow us to arrive at universal and objective knowledge – a neutral standpoint outside the relativities of culture and history. With this subjective knowledge the modern man would shape the world with technology and social planning, rationally ordering all aspects of life.

Throughout the 20th century, a variety of academic disciplines have grown in Western

universities which have pointed out how our knowledge and reason is affected by various subjective influences that are both social and personal in nature. For example, the study of philosophical hermeneutics has emphasized the importance of tradition and community in the knowledge process.⁶⁸ Developments in linguistic philosophy have helped us see the importance of language and the way in which language embodies worldview assumptions that shape our knowledge and understanding of the world. The development of cultural anthropology has helped us appreciate the importance of culture in all human societies. Psychology has helped us probe the depths of the subconscious and the way in which subconscious factors have powerful shaping influences on our perceptions of reality and self. Feminism has highlighted the importance of gender. Marxism has stressed the shaping influence of class distinctions. Liberationists have highlighted the importance of race and ethnicity. What each of these developments is challenging is the modern claim of neutral fact. Postmodernity challenges neutrality, and demonstrates that we are all shaped by tradition, community, culture, language, history, feelings, gender, ethnicity, etc. Our minds are not simply neutral mirrors of the objective reality we observe around us.

On the other hand, postmodernity also challenges modernity's profound *confidence* in reason, in several ways. The first is seen in postmodernity's social construction of reality. Postmodernists argue that there are no independent or objective norms for truth to which we can appeal, but rather that all such norms are human constructs of particular communities (Walsh and Middleton 1995, 32). All of our access to "reality" is mediated through our own socially-constructed linguistic and conceptual constructs. Thus, postmodernity challenges modernity's naïve confidence that reason gives us a privileged understanding of reality. In place of reason, postmodernity emphasizes doubt, mystery, subjectivity, bias, and suspicion. Postmodernity represents rejection of neutral, universal, and objective truth, instead stressing local, subjective, and biased truth.

3.3.2.4 Challenging injustices created by modernity

The postmodern practice of deconstruction is an effort to investigate why certain social constructions of reality are given a privileged status over others, thereby marginalizing other social constructions of reality (Walsh and Middleton 1995, 33). Deconstructionists argue that the modern story was inherently oppressive, tending (as described above) toward mastery and violence. They claim that the modern Western story's belief that neutral, methodological reason could provide universal truth was an ideologically motivated attempt to legitimate the Western story and suppress divergent stories. The modern story's belief in universal truth has led to visions and theories of the world that seek to reduce the inherent complexity and diversity of reality into a homogenous totality – a comprehensive and unified understanding of the world and of human life. These "totalizing"⁶⁹ tendencies have been inherently oppressive and created many injustices to those who are different and heterogeneous.

The work of deconstruction is to open up space for those who are different and have been excluded by these aversions to difference. This has taken various forms and is expressed in a variety of disciplines. Feminism has protested the violence to and domination of women that has happened throughout the modern story. Marxism has protested the oppression of the poor that is latent within the modern stories of progress and economic growth of capitalism. Other protests that are commonplace in postmodernity are against mistreatment of homosexuals, of non-European ethnicities and races, of religious minority groups, and of the environment. These minorities have all suffered because of the "totalizing" effect of the

⁶⁸ See Gadamer 1994 for a critique of the methodological rationalism of modernity from the perspective of philosophical hermeneutics. See MacIntyre 1988 for an insightful analysis of the role of tradition and community in all human knowing and formation.

⁶⁹ See Levinas 1969 for a detailed discussion of the modern tendency toward "totalization."

modern Western story. In this challenge to the modern Western story, the postmodern story invites us to celebrate the pluralism and diversity of all stories and abandon the modern quest for one story that is true for all.

Postmodernity also protests the injustices created by the rational organization of society that has shaped the institutional life of society in the modern story. Postmodern culture is noted by protests against bureaucracy, hierarchical structures of organizational life, authoritative leadership models, and the modern corporation; all of which are examples of the postmodern challenge to the way in which the rational organization of society has hindered human freedom.

Van Gelder highlights one influential modern thinker in this regard, Max Weber. As Van Gelder suggests, “Weber demonstrated the iron-cage effect of modernity that often functioned to limit human freedom. He noted how instrumental rationality served the forces of institutionalized bureaucracy and the modern nation-state by bringing control to human life” (1996, 120). Weber applied the rationalism of the Enlightenment to the reordering and control of social institutions and as a result much of societal life. This rational ordering of society, epitomized by Weber’s contribution, is challenged in postmodernity and in various ways throughout postmodern culture. Lee Hollaar summarizes this postmodern challenge well and is worth quoting at length:

. . . the rational structures, *a la* Max Weber *et al*, that seemed to epitomize high modernity no longer carry the same weight in the emerging climate of postmodernity. In reality, the former structures are becoming increasingly suspect. Hierarchies, for example, are going the way of the dinosaur. Pyramids of authority are being flattened out nearly everywhere. They are being replaced by networks and communities of common values. *Decentralization* is the word for the day: the push of power downward from the center to the margins, from vertical to horizontal, from ‘command-and-control’ organizations to ‘cultivate and coordinate.’ . . . The shift from the modern technique of centralized control is being replaced by a more decentralized, participatory form of decision making (2001).

Having explored the four crucial ways in which the postmodern story is offering a fundamental challenge to the modern Western story, it remains to examine two contemporary realities of our cultural context in the West that demonstrate the growing complexity of our context and the tension between the modern and postmodern stories.

3.3.3 Economic globalization

In addition to the postmodern challenge to the modern story, our contemporary cultural context in the West is profoundly shaped by the increasingly dominant role played by economic globalization. Joseph Stiglitz writes, “Globalization encompasses many things: the international flow of ideas and knowledge, the sharing of cultures, global civil society, and the global environmental movement” (2006, 4). At the heart of globalization is the growing global market, accelerated by growth in communications and information technologies and the impact these have had on corporations and the movement of global capital around the world. As Goheen and Bartholomew argue, “At the heart of globalization is market economics, which makes the process of buying and selling a strong contender for the driving motive of Western culture” (2008, 117).

Discerning our contemporary cultural context, then, takes on a new wrinkle. Rather than simply seeing modernity collapsing into postmodernity, in light of economic globalization we realize the continued shaping influence of the modern story in the West. Paradoxically and astonishingly, economic globalization, at its most fundamental level, is offering to the world once again the story of modernity. Through expansion of the global

economy and global markets, modernity is again dominating the Western story. As Richard Bauckham argues:

Economic globalization or the dominance of global capitalism . . . is undoubtedly a Western-dominated process in which a purportedly universal ideology – unfettered free-market capitalism as a self-evident good – serves the economic interests of those with economic power. Globalization is the new imperialism . . . (2003, 6).

Similarly, Bob Goudzwaard argues that globalization is both a form and method of modernity exercised on a global scale, suggesting that modernity's highest expression may in fact be seen in the process of globalization (2009).

In order to understand economic globalization as the spread of the modern story, it is important to consider briefly the function of classical economic theory and the development of neoclassical economic theory and practice.

3.3.3.1 Classical economics

Economic globalization is rooted in the modern story in the West. Specifically, those roots are found in classical economic theory that developed during modernity. Consider four elements of classical economics that have had a shaping influence on economic globalization and demonstrate how economic globalization has come to embody the modern story:

1. *The leading role given to economics.* As argued above, the modern story is a story of progress. The notion of progress so central to the modern story contains many of the seeds of globalization. Modernity saw humanity moving toward a secular utopia, characterized chiefly by material prosperity. It is not difficult to see the dominant role that economics and economic theory would have in the modern story to provide the necessary organization of economic life to achieve secular utopia.
2. *The mechanistic understanding of economic laws.* Adam Smith, one of the fathers of classical economic theory, believed that economic laws are built into nature, and our job is to discover them and then submit to them. There is no freedom to shape these economic laws; rather, like the laws of physics, they must not be defied. Newbigin wrote of this analysis,

The modern science of economics was born. Once again teleology was removed, because economics was no longer part of ethics. It was not concerned with the purpose of human life. It was no longer about the requirements of justice and the dangers of covetousness. It became the science of the working of the market as a self-operating mechanism modelled on the Newtonian universe. The difference was that the fundamental law governing its movements, corresponding to the law of gravitation in Newton, is the law of covetousness assumed as the basic drive of human nature (1986, 30-31).

3. *The “invisible hand” guiding the market to harmony between conflicting interests.* Adam Smith explains, “The rich are led by an invisible hand to make nearly the same distribution of the necessities of life, which would have been made had the earth been divided into equal portions among all its inhabitants; and thus, without intending it, without knowing it, advance the interest of society” (Smith 1790, Par. IV I 10).
4. *The “happiness calculation” and the “market calculation.”* Human happiness, it was believed, was directly connected to the amount of goods and services produced in the market (Goheen and Bartholomew 2008, 117). The belief was that if humans allow the market to be free for the economic self-interest of individuals, then it will guide all of us to a better future for all of mankind. Goudzwaard and deLange argue, “Indeed,

the free working of the market lies close to the centre of Western society's self-definition: in the West it is not government's place to tamper with the market, because this signifies a step away from a 'free-society' and towards a 'totalitarian society'" (1995, 48).

These four key elements of classical economic theory have a shaping influence on both the modern story and the practices of economic globalization, which has embedded these elements in our contemporary cultural moment.

3.3.3.2 Neoclassical economics

Neoclassical economics has further shaped the emergence of economic globalization today, and nuanced the classical economic theory that emerged in the modern story. Two things stand out. First, it has reduced economic laws to cause-and-effect relationships that are patterned after the natural sciences. In this sense, it is much like classical economics which built analogies between economic theory and the natural sciences. Following this analogy with the natural sciences, neoclassical economics claims to be morally and ethically neutral. That is, neoclassical economics argues that it is not and cannot recommend any specific moral or ethical direction for society. Rather, its task is simply to offer explanations of how economic realities work; the neoclassical economist is reduced to simply analyzing the mechanism of the market (Goudzwaard and deLange 1995, 51-53). Human needs, motives, and desires are removed from consideration.

Second, as a result of this reduction of economics, neoclassical economics has contributed to a very distorted perspective on economic life in the West. Several distortions can be highlighted (Goheen and Bartholomew 2008, 118). First, all human needs are merely accepted as a given and not questioned. In fact, through the advancements in marketing technologies, most "needs" are technologically generated and manipulated; lost is any sense of difference between a genuine need and a want. Second, there is the foundational belief that human needs are unlimited by nature – that human needs will never be satisfied, but will ever expand. Third, the non-human creation is seen primarily, if not exclusively, as data for economic calculation; as a result, the creation is terribly "objectified" and de-valued. Fourth, human labour is also reduced to simply one more production factor. This has led to the "de-humanization" of human labour.

As a result of these developments in neoclassical economic theory, and in light of the dominant role of that theory in shaping current economic practice, our reality includes what Goudzwaard and deLange call a "post-care" economy (1995, 65): "We engage in the highest possible consumption and production and only afterwards attempt to mitigate the mounting care needs with often extremely expensive forms of compensation."

In conclusion, as modernity has profoundly influenced current economic theory and practice, we see the ripple effects of the deistic faith of the Enlightenment project at work. This faith in natural law drives the mechanistic-naturalistic view of the market: there is no human alternative to simply obeying the market. This has led us to become blind to the realities that the market is really being shaped by those in power, and not simply by the mechanism of the "invisible hand," as Smith posits. Moreover, the thoroughly modern values of human rationality, autonomy, and individualism are ordering contemporary economic theory and driving economic globalization. While these modern roots are being challenged in postmodernity, the dominant pragmatism that shapes the West today, particularly in its North American expression, only seems to confirm the success of economic globalization. As Goheen and Bartholomew suggest, "For most Westerners, globalization works: it has increased the items available for consumption and has made the West richer as a whole. The result has been that consumerism, abetted by a commitment to globalization, has become the dominant worldview of our day" (2008, 118). Not only does economic globalization "work"

in the West, but Bauckham is right to urge the church in the West to awaken to the incredible danger and religious power of economic globalization. He argues that the great threat to the gospel and to the mission of the church in the West is not simply the postmodern challenge to modernity, but rather the threat of economic globalization and its accomplice, the ideology of consumerism (2003, 94-98). Let us consider, then, as a final aspect of the Western story, the dominant role played by consumerism.

3.3.4 Consumerism

The consumption of goods and experiences is a central reality of Western culture. On the one hand, consumerism is shaped by the modern story. As Edward Casey keenly observes, “We need to distinguish the increasingly convincing critique of the modern at the level of theory . . . from the fact that, at a practical level, we remain thoroughly enmeshed in modernity, largely because of the stranglehold that technology, the stepchild of modernity, has on our daily lives” (1983, 389-90). The increasingly central place that technology plays in our daily lives in the West, and the celebration of continued technological developments, particularly as those are embodied in consumer products, is on the one hand a fruit of the modern story of progress and technology. Furthermore, in so far as economic globalization has enriched Western societies through the expansion of global markets and the global increase in consumer demand, it is not hard to see how consumerism is intimately tied to the development of economic globalization.

On the other hand, consumerism is tied to the postmodern story as well. As noted above, the postmodern story is a fundamental challenge at several levels of the modern story in the West. In light of this challenge, and the inherent nature of the postmodern challenge itself, a vacuum of meaning and purpose has been created in Western culture. As Goheen and Bartholomew suggest, “a vacuum at the centre of a culture cries out to be filled” (2008, 114). The postmodern story has left us with a fragmented culture, lacking a defining story to fill the core. In fact, in many ways the postmodern story is a reaction to the idea of even having a centre to define our culture at all. The consumption of goods and experiences has come to fill this void. The pragmatic, consumerist view of life is providing a centre to our cultural life in the West (Heslam 2002, 7-8).

Given this cross-pollination from both the modern and postmodern stories, it is not hard to understand the central role that consumerism is playing in Western culture. Consumerism has indeed begun to play such a dominant role in the life of Western culture, it is the new metanarrative which is shaping the West today. Susan White argues:

If there is an overarching metanarrative that purports to explain reality in the late 20th century, it is surely the metanarrative of the free-market economy. In the beginning of this metanarrative is the self-made, self-sufficient human being. At the end of this narrative is the big house, the big car, the expensive clothes. In the middle is the struggle for success, the greed, the getting-and-spending in a world in which there is no such thing as a free lunch. Most of us have made this so thoroughly ‘our story’ that we are hardly aware of its influence (White, 1998, 3-4).

Not only has consumerism become the dominant story that provides our life with meaning, but it has also come to represent the idolatrous assumptions of the Western culture. There are four signs of idolatry visible in consumerism.

1. *Consumerism seeks to engulf everything in our lives.* Our consumer culture has placed consumption at the centre of our lives and out of this centre of consumption, we draw the basic values that govern the way we approach all aspects of life. Everything becomes engulfed by consumption. As Don Slater suggests, “If there is no principle

restricting who can consume what, there is also no principled constraint on what can be consumed: all social relations, activities and objects can in principle be exchanged as commodities” (1997, 27).

2. *Consumption has re-defined freedom.* The freedom of individual choice in our private lives has become another core value in Western culture derived from this centre of consumption. While modernity argued for freedom from tradition and religion, consumerism seeks the freedom to choose whatever product or whatever experience you personally want.
3. *Consumption promises to meet our needs.* However, the whole consumer lifestyle is based on our needs never being met. As Don Slater argues, the “market society is therefore perpetually haunted by the possibility that needs might be either satisfied or underfinanced” (1997, 21).
4. Like the great world religions, *consumerism has erected cathedrals* in which we gather to pay homage to our gods and cultivate our religious lifestyle. In the Middle Ages, the cathedral of the Catholic church was often the central architectural figure of cities. In contemporary cities in the West, that centre now features shopping malls. Not only has it become the centre of cultural life, but the mall has itself become an embodiment of the religious faith of our culture. As James Smith argues, it is “actually a *religious* space because it is suffused with practices that constitute a kind of *worship*. . . . they both *reflect* what matters to us and *shape* what matters to us. They also inculcate particular visions of the good life through affective, precognitive means, and do so in a way that trumps other ritual formations” (2009, 93). Smith describes the many “liturgies of consumerism” practiced and embodied in the contemporary shopping mall. These liturgies hold out a vision of the good life and go a long way in actually shaping us, through the many rituals of consumerism, into embodying the “good life” that is held out in the mall.

3.3.5 Conclusion

The story of the West continues to unfold. The modern Western story, with its roots in classical Greek culture, its development into the 20th century, and its continued embodiment in economic globalization and consumerism, continues to have a shaping influence on the West today. The religious beliefs of this modern Western story are alive and well in our world today. Economic globalization can be seen as the heightened expression of those beliefs and the evangelization of those beliefs around the globe through the spreading of the modern story. At the same time, this cultural story is being challenged at many turns by postmodernism. All the while, consumerism is emerging as the dominant idol of our time as it seeks to fill the void of meaning and purpose left by the postmodern challenge to the modern story.

As these diverse cultural realities are encountered, the church in the West finds itself in a context filled with both challenges and opportunities. Given this broader cultural story and context, it remains to examine eight important themes of the Western story that are facing the church.

3.4 Contemporary themes facing the church in the West today

This broader context of the cultural story of the West helps to situate the following eight themes that have important implications for the church in its mission to Western culture as it seeks to discern its missional vocation. Each of these eight themes can now be highlighted in greater detail. This will be done along two lines – first, by discussing the ways in which each theme emerges from within the cultural story of the West, and, second, by discerning the missional issues arising from these themes that bear particularly on the church as it seeks to discern its missional vocation.

3.4.1 Importance of the local context

Summary: The postmodern story has challenged the modernist claims of objectivism, and has become sceptical of the grand stories that have dominated the West throughout the modern period, including the modern story itself. In place of metanarratives, postmodernity celebrates the smaller stories that are situated in the local and particular contexts of people and their particular cultures and histories. The postmodern story invites us to celebrate the pluralism and diversity of all local stories and abandon the modern quest for one story that is true for all.

Implications for mission: There is a growing recognition that contextual factors ought to shape and influence everything that is done by the local church in its local mission. The whole study of contextualization has been an important missiological contribution to this issue. Part of this stress on allowing the local context to shape our thinking and practice of mission has led to an aversion to “models” for mission that claim universal validity. What works at Saddleback Church or at Willow Creek is not what will necessarily work in each place. As Tony Jones argues, the emergent movement is stressing that all theology is local: it is always *my* theology that is specific to *my* local context. This has led emergent churches to describe themselves as “local theological communities” (Jones 2008, 112). Another expression of this theme is seen in the shift from doing community development work in ministry “to” or “for” a local community to an emphasis placed on doing ministry “with” the local community.

3.4.2 Challenges to the modern forms of leadership and authority

Summary: Lee Hollaar has argued that the postmodern story “is by its very nature an assault against the idea of a single, all-encompassing authority, whether ideological or governing” (2001). Modern hierarchies of power and authority are suspect in the postmodern story. Authority must be exercised in a dialogic and communal fashion, not in the autocratic form of modernity. This is all part of the larger postmodern challenge to the injustices created by modernity, particularly those abuses of power that were embedded in authority structures and leadership models. The postmodern story has become suspicious of all potential abuses of power and authority embedded in leadership structures and leaders. Moreover, the postmodern story has rightly rejected the modern domineering forms of leadership and the abuses of power and authority that have placed the autonomous rational individual at the centre (Goheen 2001b). Postmodernity emphasizes instead the role of community and the dialogical process within the community, all in an effort to displace the rational individual as the centre point in authority and leadership structures.

Implications for mission: The postmodernist wants power bases to be broad, and lines of authority and hierarchy to be short. There must be higher degrees of accountability that allow communities and networks of communities to be involved in all levels of decision-making (Hollaar 2001). Leadership must emphasize community building and the building of a common vision. This autonomy of community dialogue may in fact be postmodernity’s new idol, displacing the modern idolatry to the rational autonomous individual (Goheen 2001b). Some emergent and missional communities are experimenting with flat leadership, where authority and decision-making is completely embedded in the local community and not in the hands of a few. Consensus-decision making is the preferred method for many of these communities. Any form of hierarchy is suspect, as are all potential abuses of authority and power.

Finally, as Alan Hirsch argues, for many missional and emergent movements, there is an explicit attempt to adopt leadership and authority models from recent discoveries in the “Quantum age” of physics and biology, seeking to learn from work done in quantum physics, chaos theory, and the study of organic living systems (2006, 250-254; cf. Wheatley 1999). Through the study of “living systems,” leadership models are emerging that emphasize

complexity, chaos, and order that rise from chaos – leading to “chaordic” models of leadership and authority. Hirsch points to the four principles at work in organic living systems that must shape our thinking and practice of leadership: the recognition that equilibrium leads to death; the reality that living systems work best at the edge of chaos; the principle that living systems self-organize and evolve when on the edge of chaos; and the disturbing complexity evidenced in living systems (2006, 258-264). Leadership that learns from these principles will learn to keep the church highly agile and avoid the state of equilibrium; will force the community to the edge of chaos by directly facing the difficult and challenging issues facing the community in its missional context; will learn to cultivate environments within which the missional imagination of God’s people might self-emerge from within the community; and will avoid linear strategic planning that seeks to enhance the effectiveness of what is without seeking radical innovation and change (Hirsch 2006, 258-264).

3.4.3 Suspicion of truth, certainty, and confidence

Summary: The postmodern story is a challenge to the epistemology of modernity, noted for its objectivist and rationalist understanding of truth. Methodological rationality, argued Descartes, would provide us with certainty and confidence about truth claims; the type of certainty that would ensure all truth claims were universally valid. The postmodern story has unmasked the idolatry of this rationalism. The rationalist epistemology has been deconstructed and the rationalist understanding of human nature that went along with it. Postmodernism has challenged both.

Implications for mission: Truth is not timeless, argues Tony Jones, but is rather always fleeting and embodies a complexity that is never able to be “nailed down” with certainty (2008, 114). Humility must replace certainty in our posture. Jones argues that emergents are embracing relativity, without necessarily being swept into relativism. That is, there is a growing humility about doctrine that can acknowledge the mistakes of the past, the socially-constructed nature of all knowing, the relativity of context and tradition, the importance of communities of discernment and dialogue in the interpretative process, and a humility that comes to terms with the relativity of our position (2008, 115-116). This does not lead necessarily to a full-orbed relativism, devoid of absolute truth claims. Rather, it is a growing sense that truth cannot be definitively articulated and captured by finite humans (2008, 153). There is a wider rationality that embraces the role of the imagination, arts, creativity, and emotions and is able to come to terms with mystery and paradox that are part of reality and the Christian tradition.

3.4.4 Fear and suspicion of institutions

Summary: In the modern story, particularly during the post-Enlightenment time of Industrial and social revolution, there was an intentional effort to rationally order the various sectors of society and public life. This organization was one of the ways in which the Enlightenment faith flourished and sought to usher Western culture into unlimited progress and growth. Economic globalization continues this trajectory and is driven by this Enlightenment faith. At the same time, the postmodern story has reacted to this organization of society with fear and suspicion of institutions, including the institutional church. In particular, as Alan Hirsch aptly describes, many modern organizational and institutional models were based on the Newtonian worldview of the modern period: highly controlled and regulated, leading to a great amount of predictability and stability (Hirsch 2006, 250; 266-7). The birth of bureaucracy was a result of the scientific organization of institutional life, occupied with technique, control, and the application of “universal truths” regarding organizational theory applied to local institutions (Hollaar 2001).

Implications for mission: The postmodern story is challenging the lack of fluidity,

agility, and adaptation that is seen in institutions like the church, leading to the fundamental missional challenge of being unable to respond to the rapid cultural shifts being experienced in the postmodern world (Hirsch 2006, 267). Coupled with this is the growing challenge to the introversion and complacency of the church that is seen to be a potential by product of the institutional forms and expressions.⁷⁰

The following are several missional implications to postmodernity's rejection of institutions:

- a growing suspicion and cynicism toward the bureaucracy and hierarchy that are seen to be part of the institutional expressions of the church;
- growing movements calling for a “post-institutional” expression of the church in the West, including those who are leaving the institutional church behind in search of these alternative expressions;
- the re-emergence of instrumentalist views of the church, which emphasize the importance of following God’s mission in the world while relativizing the place of the institutional church in that mission; and
- historical arguments that suggest the church in the West since the time of Constantine has been crippled by the reality that it changed from a movement to an institution, therefore suggesting that the only way forward is to recover the nature of a *movement* and the practices of Jesus that were part of the apostolic, “pre-institutional” communities.

Tony Jones points to attempts being made to re-configure the church away from institutional expression into “open-source networks” (2008, 182). He sees the following six characteristics as vital to shifting the church into an “open-source network”: open access that places knowledge and leadership in the hands of the community and subverts our current leadership structures; trust in human goodness that sees the leader emerge as a broker of conversation, and dialogue emerge as the primary teaching method; mutual accountability that leads to greater empowerment and collaboration; agility to listen and respond to the missional needs and realities of the local church community and context; connectivity that allows each autonomous local gathering of believers to be ecumenically and globally aware; and messiness that dispels the fear of failure and abandons aspirations for large numerical growth (2008, 182-191).

3.4.5 Stress on the non-rational aspects of being human

Summary: As a challenge and reaction to the modern story, the postmodern story has placed a stress upon the non-rational aspects of being human. Consumerism is heightening this with its emphasis on the consumption of experiences and goods to enhance human comfort and pleasure.

Implications for mission: There is a growing desire to stress the role of the arts and other aspects of human creativity as an important part of the church’s mission in the West today. This emphasis is particularly strong in the emergent church movement (Bolger 2005, 64ff). McLaren laments the way in which the “secular/scientific virus” has affected the modern church, eclipsing the role of the imagination, creativity, and mystery in the formation and practices of Christian communities (2000, 194-5). In addition, the following issues related to this theme have important missional implications: the growing distrust of logic and metanarratives; the recovery of paradox and mystery as important aspects of the Christian faith experience; the need to discern how the church community should be engaged culturally,

⁷⁰ See, for example, the devastating critique of institutional forms and expressions by Pete Ward in *Liquid Church* or the yearning for a return to the “pre-institutional” church movements of the apostolic era expressed by Halter and Smay in *The Tangible Kingdom* or Hirsch in *The Forgotten Ways*. In each of these critiques, there is a strong association made between the institutional forms and expressions of church life and the introversion and complacency of the church in the West.

particularly in the various arts and media that bombard Western societies; the place of multimedia forms of communication and expression in the church community and its corporate gatherings for worship; and the non-representational views of language that leads to the questioning and suspicion of theological truth claims in general.

3.4.6 Reacting to the individualism of modernity

Summary: The stress on the human person as an autonomous rational individual has roots that run deep in the modern story. Individualism indeed has been a hallmark of the Western story. With one side of its mouth, the postmodern story is challenging the individualism of modernity, challenging the way in which individualism has suppressed communal aspects of reality and life. We are by nature communal beings, and the postmodern story is seeking to capture this over against the emphasis on the autonomous individual that dominated modernity. Yet at the same time, postmodernity continues the individualist emphasis in its own way, through rampant consumerism aided by technologies that isolate individuals from communal life.

Implications for mission: The powerful shaping influence of the consumerist culture in which we live presents an enormous challenge to the mission of the church today. Yet on the other hand, the postmodern desire to challenge the individualism of the modern story has led to a stress on the importance of community and communal aspects of truth, reality, and life. We have also noted above the way in which community factors significantly in postmodern challenges to modern forms of leadership and authority as well as the postmodern suspicion and fear of institutions. The church in the West has much it can learn in this regard from Christians in non-Western cultures that have had to grapple with the challenges of contextualizing their faith and practice in communitarian cultures, as opposed to the individualist consumer culture of the West.

3.4.7 Addressing the burning global crises of our day

Summary: The modern story brought with it a number of injustices and idolatries that have had a profound impact on the global community. An important part of the postmodern story has been to challenge and protest the injustices created and perpetuated by the modern story. The postmodern story has helped give voice to those whose voice had been silenced during the modern period. Furthermore, the postmodern story has raised our awareness and awakened our attention to address the global crises facing us today.

Implications for mission: There are many who decry the complacency and complicity of the church in the West in relationship to these global crises. Some of the leaders within the emergent church movement, for example, have become outspoken leaders urging the church to recapture a vision for the kingdom of God that would move it out of complacency into intentional engagement in the social, economic, and environmental crises facing the world today.⁷¹ As Scot McKnight suggests, there is a political and praxis-oriented emphasis among many in the emergent and missional church movements, calling the church to deeper engagement in working for social justice at both the local and global levels (McKnight 2007). Tom Sine cites the concern for “a broad range of social issues, including social justice, reconciliation, and creation care” among emerging churches as a hopeful indicator of a group of what he has called “new conspirators” who are seeking to change the world by engaging the turbulent times we live in (2008, 39). And yet, by so often limiting their understanding of the contemporary culture to postmodernism, many within the emergent and missional church movements fail to come to terms with the underlying structural powers that are contributing to

⁷¹ Brian McLaren’s recent *Everything Must Change* and Rob Bell’s *Jesus Wants to Save Christians* are two poignant examples of this movement to awaken the church to become more engaged in addressing the burning global crises of our day.

these injustices. They are missing the power of economic globalization and how it is producing a consumerist culture and contributing toward injustice at a global scale. A broader and deeper understanding of our cultural story is critical for the church in the West today in light of these complex global realities.

Another important missional issue that has arisen in light of this emphasis is the tendency toward polarizing word and deed ministry in the church. A dichotomy between word and deed has plagued the church throughout the modern missionary movement, polarizing aspects of mission that ought to never be separated. As David Bosch argues, “The relationship between the evangelistic and societal dimensions of the Christian mission constitutes one of the thorniest areas in the theology and practice of mission” (1991, 401).⁷² With the growing concern to activate and mobilize the church to address the burning global crises we face today, there is a renewed tendency toward this polarization.

3.4.8 Understanding the postmodern shift

Summary: The way in which the shift from modernity to postmodernity is understood has important implications for the mission of the church in the West. First, some indicators of this theme will be highlighted, demonstrating the diversity of perspectives.

As Tony Jones argues, an important, if not dominant concern among those in the emergent church movement is to uncover the ways in which the gospel has been domesticated by modernity and the Enlightenment (2008, 37-40, 70-75). This concern is one that the emergent church movement has picked up from Lesslie Newbigin. Jones suggests that the emergent movement in fact began largely with the concern to wrestle with the implications of postmodernity and deconstructionism in order to identify the assumptions of modernity and the Enlightenment that are operative in the church in the West (2008, 39-42).

Similarly, Gibbs and Bolger describe the huge cultural shifts that they see taking place in this dramatic transition from the modern period to the postmodern period. They define the emerging church movement as “missional communities arising from within postmodern culture and consisting of followers of Jesus seeking to be faithful in their place and time” (2005, 28). Gibbs and Bolger describe the present postmodern context as a liminal phase in which the church in the West needs to go through a period of dismantling and rebuilding (2005, 28-29). Because of the uncertainty and rapid rate of change that mark the postmodern transition, the focus of the emerging church movement is to create space for conversation about what needs to be dismantled and what should be rebuilt, with the caveat that it is more clear what the church is emerging from than what it might emerge into (2005, 28-29).

One of the emphases by many in the Emergent church movement is the discontinuity between modernity and postmodernity. Brian McLaren argues that we are living in a changed world – where the cultural shifts that have taken place in the transition from modernity to postmodernity are enormous and therefore we need new maps for the church and new kinds of churches. He wants to emphasize the discontinuity, and indeed calls us to *maximize* the discontinuity of the cultural changes in moving from modernity to postmodernity. Maximizing the discontinuity will help the church wake up to the radical changes needed in order to respond to these radical changes. McLaren suggests we need re-invented churches and not simply renewed or restored churches (1998, 11-24).

⁷² At the well-known International Congress on World Evangelization, held in Lausanne in 1974, this issue was divisive and led to a “radical evangelical response” that challenged the evangelical legacy of polarizing these issues. The response from the “radicals” included this challenge to move beyond this polarity: “There is no biblical dichotomy between the word spoken and the word made visible in the lives of God’s people. Men will look as they listen and what they see must be one with what they hear . . . There are times when our communication may be by attitude and action only, and times when the spoken word will stand alone: but we must repudiate as demonic the attempt to drive a wedge between evangelism and social concern” (Douglas 1975, 1294).

On the other hand, there are others arguing for a different perspective on the modern to postmodern transition. DeYoung and Kluck argue that the emerging church movement is greatly exaggerating the differences between modernity and postmodernity (2008, 152). They suggest that the line between the two is not always important nor particularly clear and dramatic. Furthermore, they suggest that there are universal human needs that remain unchanged throughout any significant cultural shift, and that therefore nothing fundamentally new is emerging at the spiritual level of human need. McLaughlin similarly argues that the tendency in the emerging church movement is to provide a cultural analysis of both modernity and postmodernity that “does not take into consideration the diversity found within each era” (2008, 113).

Implications for mission: There are two broad implications of this debate. First, the question that needs to be wrestled with is how the church can be faithful to one gospel and embrace plural expressions of that gospel in diverse cultures – all while seeking to avoid ethnocentrism, relativism, syncretism, and irrelevance. These are vital issues facing the church in the West today, as it seeks to faithfully embody, demonstrate, and proclaim the gospel in its cultural contexts.

Second, how we understand culture will have profound implications for how we engage in mission. For example, as Carson argues, much of the emerging church movement is flowing out of a particular understanding of postmodern culture that emphasizes discontinuity with the past; and therefore, places particular emphasis upon the need for dramatic change and shifts in the church (2005, 43). But even opponents to this discontinuity, like DeYoung and Kluck, come up short here. Like those within the emergent church movement, they focus on the epistemological expression of the modern story and fail to engage the modern story in its economic form, a form that is wielding power indeed in globalization and consumerism. In focusing exclusively on the epistemological issues, they miss what may indeed be the larger threat to the gospel and the mission of the church.

Postmodernity represents a profound cultural challenge to modernity, including in issues of epistemology. However, the postmodern challenge goes well beyond epistemology, and includes other dominant religious beliefs and assumptions of modernity. Modernity had three idolatrous religious veins: scientism, technicism, and economism. Postmodernity has economic globalization and consumerism.

The result: a modern-postmodern hybrid of rampant individualism, desire, and injustice.

3.5 Conclusion

A missiological analysis of the cultural context in the West today is crucial for the church in the West to be equipped to be a witness to the good news of the Kingdom of God in its contemporary cultural context. Indeed this is a vital skill that the church in the West needs for it to discern its missional vocation today. The key insights of a missiological analysis of culture have been identified and then utilized to tell the cultural story of the West. Within the broader context of that cultural story, eight important themes facing the church in the West today have been identified and examined in greater detail. With this broader depth of understanding of the cultural context of the West today, these themes can be better understood and the complexity of the cultural context of the West appreciated. The depth of this cultural analysis and understanding will prove important, for a church seeking to recover its missional identity and discern its missional vocation.

CHAPTER FOUR: ENGAGING THE EMERGENT AND MISSIONAL CHURCH MOVEMENTS

3

4.1 Introduction

Discernment of missional vocation for the church in the West must take place in the context of dialogue and engagement with those from other theological and ecclesiological traditions. There are two important movements attempting to recover the missional identity and role of the church in the West. Those two movements are loosely defined as the “Missional Church” movement and the “Emergent church” movement. These movements encompass a wide diversity of theological and ecclesiological traditions and backgrounds but are held together by a common desire to discern missional vocation as the church in the West seeks to renew its missional identity. In this chapter, these two movements will be unfolded: their histories, practices, theological and philosophical emphases, and growing diversity. Through the engagement with these movements, six important themes for missional discernment will emerge which face the church as it seeks to discern its missional vocation.

4.2 Emergent church movement

The Emergent church movement is a growing, global, inter-denominational movement that is finding expression in many diverse ecclesiastical and theological traditions. While there might be some merit in trying to make a distinction between this larger movement of what is sometimes called “emerging churches” and the more specific “Emergent movement” that is often associated closely with the Emergent Village network and the authors and church leaders affiliated with it, I will be treating these two expressions of this larger movement together. Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger define emerging churches as “missional communities that are arising (emerging) from within postmodern culture and consisting of followers of Jesus seeking to be faithful in their place and time” (2005, 28).

4.2.1 Brief History

Initially, there was movement, particularly in North America, around an emerging generational ministry focus among youth pastors and young church planters to the so-called “Generation X.” Networks began to emerge around this generational issue. Within the United Kingdom context, alternative worship movements began. These movements led to the emergence of a “church within a church” – expressions of the alternative worship movements among both youth groups and post-youth-group communities.

As both of these movements began to evolve, they morphed into something deeper. Youth leaders and planters began attending to the cultural shift from modernity to postmodernity and began to realize that this shift encompassed something that was much wider and deeper than the generational reality. The search was on for new forms of church and “church practices” that would somehow go deeper than finding strategies for growth or renewal; and, at the same time, would be relevant with and connect to the emerging postmodern culture in the West. Rumblings began in the 1980s and 1990s among a group of young pastors who were wrestling deeply with the realities of postmodern culture and the implications of these cultural shifts, coupled with a desire to move beyond the liberalism of the left and the fundamentalism of the right (Jones 2008, 7-20).

Tony Jones’ insight into the desire to move beyond the perceived dichotomies of liberalism and fundamentalism resonates with Scot McKnight’s keen insight into what he describes as the “ironic faith” that influenced this movement as it began. McKnight identifies

eight catalysts to the Emergent movement:⁷³

1. For Emergents, the evangelical doctrine of inerrancy does not sufficiently express the truth about the Bible.
2. The gospel Emergent leaders heard as children and teens is a caricature of Paul's teaching. They are discovering Jesus, the gospels, and "kingdom of God" theology, and are keen to emphasize these parts of biblical theology over the legacy of a largely Pauline theology of the New Testament.
3. The Bible and science debates affect Emergent leaders, leading them to embrace the Bible as largely narrative in form and to not see it in an antagonistic relationship to modern science.
4. Many of these leaders, along with others in their generation, have been badly burned by the lack of integrity among popular evangelical leaders of their era (Swaggart, Bakker, etc.). This has pushed them to champion the importance of integrity and authenticity and also become leery and at times downright suspicious of established church leaders and their potential to abuse power and authority.
5. Emergent leaders are deeply affected by the multiculturalism and pluralism of the public school systems in North America and Europe. These realities and ideologies have made them more pluralistic in their view of world religions and broad in their understanding of what it means to be "Christian" (i.e. more loose on the boundaries between who is "in" and who is "out").
6. Through appreciation of postmodern thinkers, particularly Caputo and Derrida, Emergent leaders are learning to exercise a Deconstructionist critique of the Bible and sometimes of God. This is particularly the case with "difficult" passages of the Bible (e.g. the ban on the nations in the OT; portrayals of God's wrath and judgment, etc.).
7. The homosexuality issue, particular the heated cultural debate that has ensued in North America, has deeply affected them. McKnight cites a growing shared belief among Emergents that the Bible's teaching on this issue is much more sophisticated and nuanced than the pro-gay and anti-gay tendencies they see in culture and the church.
8. Finally, Emergent leaders are also greatly shaped by the postmodern critiques of language. As a result, many are keenly sensitive to the limitations of language to capture theological truths and the way in which language is culturally shaped and therefore limited.

These sensitivities have made many Emergent leaders particularly keen to suggest what they see as distortions of Western theology due to the cultural influences of modernity. (McKnight 2008)

This historical context has led some critics, like D.A. Carson, to describe the Emergent movement as a "protest movement." Carson sees in the movement a four-fold protest along the following lines: a protest against the institutional established church in the West; a protest against conservative forms of evangelicism, particularly Fundamentalism and Dispensationalism; a protest against modernism, especially modernist epistemologies; and a protest against seeker-sensitive, mega-church movements within evangelicism (2005, 20-36).

Against the backdrop of this brief historical context, it is easier to appreciate what many leaders within the movement have described as the "liminal phase" in which the movement finds itself. This time of "liminality" is one of "dismantling and rebuilding." So it is wise to look back to what this movement is emerging *from* more than what it is emerging

⁷³ McKnight describes these as catalysts that "moved disaffected evangelicals from an ironic faith within evangelicism to a fork in the road: either abandon traditional evangelicism for an emergent form of post-evangelical Christianity, or abandon Christianity altogether" (McKnight 2008).

into.

McKnight's catalysts above are helpful in identifying the nuanced realities from which the movement is seeking to emerge. A key piece here is the cultural shifts that those in this movement feel we in the West are experiencing, from modernity to postmodernity. Because of the uncertainty of our time period, those in this movement are calling for space to have a conversation about what it would look like to dismantle the church in the West and rebuild it. The Emergent "conversation" is about what we need to dismantle and what, as well as how, we begin to rebuild in a postmodern culture (Gibbs and Bolger 2005, 28-29).

Even in this time of liminality, the Emergent movement is gaining a greater sense of definition. Jones has sought to provide some more clarity and definition to the movement. In *The New Christians*, Jones cites the four values and their attendant practices that are commonly shared among members of the Emergent Village, a key network in this global movement. Says Jones, "In the language of a religious order, we call these four values our 'order and rule'" (2008, 222-226):

- a commitment to following God in the ways of Jesus, with particular emphasis on Jesus' message of the kingdom of God;
- a commitment to honour and serve the church in all of its forms and traditions;
- a commitment to follow Christ into the world and be committed to seeking the restoration of God's world; and
- a commitment to respectful conversation and dialogue with all who participate in this growing global movement.

Building on this need for greater definition, Phyllis Tickle is calling Emergent leaders to boldly articulate the new form of Christianity that she sees arising at this transitional time in the history of Christianity. In the closing words of *The Great Emergence*, Tickle writes of Emergent leaders, "They must begin now to think with intention about what this new form of the faith is and is to become; because what once was an emerging but innocuous phenomenon no longer is. The cub has grown into the young lion; and now is the hour of his roaring" (Tickle 2008, 163).

4.2.2 Key practices of this movement

For such a diverse and growing movement, it is challenging to summarize the key practices of churches that are being shaped by and participating in this movement. We can begin with the following key practices, core to the movement.

The first Emergent practice can be broadly described as "*following the ways of Jesus in the world.*" A few things stand out as part of this core practice. First, an emphasis is placed on seeing the gospel of the kingdom of God as the key to understanding not only Jesus' proclamations but also his lifestyle and practices (Gibbs and Bolger 2005, 47-8). There is a strong emphasis on every disciple of Jesus being called to follow Jesus in a life that is "on mission," to erect signs of the kingdom of God in this world. Rob Bell speaks of the church as a people who have committed themselves to being a certain way in the world, a people who follow the ways of Jesus in the world. He evokes the image of the Eucharist and the church's calling to be the body broken and the blood poured out for the healing of the world – a "Eucharist people" (Bell 2008, 150-8).

Emergents see the kingdom of God and our mission within it as larger than the institutional church. Gibbs and Bolger argue, "The church is not necessarily the center of God's intentions. God is working in the world, and the church has the option to join God or not" (2005, 42). Adding to this emphasis, Emergents see mission primarily as the mission of God, *missio Dei*. *Missio Dei* is seen as God's effort to renew all of creation; and therefore, many would define the task of those who follow Jesus as seeking to discern our place in this

mission of God in the world. Gibbs and Bolger summarize this core practice well:

In Jesus, they [emerging churches] discovered a long-forgotten gospel, the idea that we have an invitation to participate with God in the redemption of the world. Emerging Churches accepted this offer, and they joined the *missio Dei*, God's outward movement to humanity. Jesus announced the kingdom of God, and this is the message emerging churches seek to proclaim in their newly formed missional communities (Gibbs and Bolger 2005, 64).

A second key Emergent practice is what Gibbs and Bolger refer to as “*transforming secular space*.” What is primarily at stake here is a very intentional desire to foster practices that deconstruct the sacred/secular dichotomy that has been inherited in the West from the Enlightenment tradition. Borrowing heavily from Gibbs and Bolger, consider some of the implications of “transforming secular space” that are often noted by Emergent leaders. The first is the drive to see all of life as sacred space. “Church” becomes not so much an institution, a place, or a people, but rather signals intentional practices of life that become part of a sacred rhythm of fellowship and service. Second, there is a desire for so-called “secular life” to become infused into our spirituality, our worship, and our so-called “sacred” spaces (e.g. mainstream music becoming part of our “worship music” and providing clues for liturgical practices of confession, etc.). Third, there is an intentional move from systematic to non-linear ways of thinking, telling the truth and reading the biblical text. This includes an emphasis on truth as embodied – hearing what God is doing concretely in the lives of people. There is an aversion to propositional language and monological speech to communicate truth. A fourth implication of this is a desire to see non-textual ways of communicating and embodying the gospel. An emphasis is placed on aural and visual forms of communication and embodiment of truth. Fifth is the focus on “incarnational engagement with culture,” to practice embodiment of truth in our culture. Finally, Emergents seek what Ray Anderson has described as “secular sacrament” (Anderson 2006, 104-105). Brian McLaughlin describes it this way: “[The] secular sacrament of the kingdom of God involves living life in the manner intended by God, but does not necessarily include personal salvation in the process . . . the mission of God’s people is to be a kingdom blessing to the world, not necessarily a soteriological blessing” (2008, 107).

A third key Emergent practice is *emphasizing community*. When it comes to thinking about the church as a community, the focus for many in the Emergent movement is on the kingdom of God, and the church’s relationship to the Kingdom becomes a defining core for its ecclesiology. That relationship emphasizes the church as a people who are sent out into the world seven days a week to embody the life of the kingdom of God, in contrast to the church as a people gathered one day a week for worship. Stress is placed on the church as the community called to be a servant and sign of the kingdom, being the community of those who are called together in order to be sent into the world as witnesses. Emergent churches see the need to deconstruct church practices in light of this; anything that hinders the church from being witness, sign, or servant of the kingdom of God must be dismantled. We must be willing to question all church practices and ask how they can serve or be part of the kingdom mission of the church (Gibbs and Bolger 2005, 96).

In this process, Emergent churches place emphasis not on numerical growth, but on the strength of relationships and community bonds – ensuring strong levels of connectedness and community. This takes the form of de-centralized, smaller gatherings which can more effectively be a visible sign and servant of God’s kingdom in a particular place. To emphasize one “gathering” over against the rest of the life of the community runs the risk of perpetuating the secular/sacred dichotomy that Emergent churches are keen to deconstruct, as noted above. Emergent leaders see 25-40 people as an upper limit in these communities, in order to maintain this strong relational connectedness and kingdom focus. Larger gatherings

are suspect, and have strong potential to inhibit the kingdom focus. Any “gatherings” must be useful to support the life of the community, and flow out of the organic connectedness the community experiences together (Gibbs and Bolger 2005, 102).

A fourth area of key Emergent practices concerns the hospitality and practices of inclusion. The following practices are part of this theme: the Eucharist as a central act of worship, with the emphasis on the meal as a place of hospitality and welcome to the stranger; creating safe places for community gatherings with an emphasis on the gathering for corporate worship as a safe place for inclusion of the stranger and outsider; a softening of boundaries that would tend to exclude others, and intentional fostering of a “come as you are⁷⁴” culture in the local community; a stress on embodied relational evangelism where presence is emphasized before proclamation, changed lives before changed beliefs, and belonging before believing; and the desire through these practices of hospitality and inclusion to embody a public faith that is attractive instead of a privatized faith. Gibbs and Bolger summarize these practices well, “Emerging Churches focus on changed lives rather than changed beliefs. People do not want to be converted, but experiencing the life of the kingdom may be welcomed by many. The focus is to create cultures of the kingdom and to allow God to do the work” (2005, 128-129).

A fifth area of key Emergent practices is in the area of worship. As a brief survey of Dan Kimball’s landmark book on Emergent churches would demonstrate, issues and habits of worship have been a key area of practices that Emergent church leaders have focused on.⁷⁵ Some of the key practices that stand out in this area include: a critique for what is seen as the way in which modernity made church “non-participatory” in many established patterns of worship and worship gatherings (e.g. seating arrangements, centrality of pulpit, etc.); a desire to practice worship as a place where people share journeys and offer up their lives to each other and that cannot therefore be dominated by one person from the front; a movement to dialogical preaching models and methods instead of monologue; and the ongoing tension of seeking full participation in corporate gatherings in practice, while trying not to succumb to the dangers of becoming insular and non-missional in a desire to stay small and ensure high levels of participation (Gibbs and Bolger 2005, 156-172).

A sixth area of key practices relates to the arts. In Emergent churches a high value is placed upon creativity and using the full range of creative gifts in the community. There is emphasis on the importance of everyone being able to create and contribute toward the corporate expressions of worship and to use of all the various arts in the worship gathering and life of the community. Beyond the corporate experiences of the community, Emergent churches also seek deep cultural engagement with the arts and creative gifts (Gibbs and Bolger, 173-190).

A seventh key practice is the re-thinking of leadership practices and roles. Leadership practices within Emergent churches tend strongly toward non-hierarchical models of church leadership. Leadership shifts to a more facilitative role, with many Emerging Churches experimenting with the idea of “leaderless groups.” Leaders as facilitators are to create space for the group to discern its calling and embody the various practices highlighted here. Power is diffused throughout the group. Decision-making is on a consensual basis (Gibbs and Bolger 2005, 192-213). McLaughlin summarizes these practices around leadership well: “This type of leadership flattens the typical modern hierarchy and creates a community in which ‘all members help make decisions and take turns leading, actions that serve as a

⁷⁴ See John Burke’s wonderful description of these practices in his *No Perfect People Allowed: Creating a Come as You Are Culture in the Church*.

⁷⁵ A huge portion of Kimball’s 2003 book on Emerging Church is dedicated to the way Emerging Churches are experimenting with worship and different models preaching (eight of the 11 chapters in part two are on these issues). We should also recall that the U.K. expression of the Emergent church movement was initially largely an alternative worship movement.

counter to the control and oppressive tendencies of modernity”” (McLaughlin 2008).

Finally, an eighth key Emergent practice is the renewal of ancient spiritualities. Gibbs and Bolger highlight the rediscovery among Emergent church leaders of ancient practices and disciplines of spirituality. Celtic and other contemplative traditions, including those of Ignatius like *Lectio Divina* and the *Examen*, are reflected in the practices of discernment, reflection and meditation, and communal listening to God’s spoken word. Monastic orders are also taken by many Emergent churches, leading to what has been called a “neo-monasticism”: a truly eclectic spirituality from a variety of ecclesiastical and theological traditions, most of which are largely pre-modern in nature (Gibbs and Bolger 2005, 217-234).

4.2.3 Key theological and philosophical emphases

4.2.3.1 Relationship between gospel and culture

The Emergent church movement prioritizes the need to understand deeply the relationship between the gospel and culture in the West today. The movement engages this issue in a far less academic way than might be the case within the Missional Church movement (Bolger 2007). That is, this is largely not a philosophical or theoretical problem, but rather is focused on relating the gospel to people in our culture who find themselves presently outside of the institutional church.⁷⁶ Yet it must be noted that even though many leaders in this movement see themselves as being largely pragmatic, theological and philosophical assumptions do of course underlie their practice and are embedded in their practices.

Brian McLaren has led the way for this movement on this issue. As McLaren puts it, we are living in a changed world where enormous cultural shifts have taken place, and so we need a changed church, or at least new maps for the church and new kinds of churches (1998, 11-17). McLaren argues that it is important for the church in the West today to emphasize the discontinuity of the cultural shift we are experiencing from modernity to postmodernity. This discontinuity will help us realize more clearly and decisively that we need re-invented churches in the West, not renewed or restored churches. The emphasis among Emergent leaders is on the prophetic and provocative posture toward culture and cultural change in the West (McKnight 2006, 2007). McLaren does not simply highlight discontinuity, he also emphasizes the importance of engaging in our postmodern world in light of numerous opportunities that postmodernity provides the church, and allowing the postmodern world to deconstruct the “modern viruses” that have plagued the church today (1998, 159-198).

As McKnight points out, within the Emergent church movement, there are three postures taken in relationship to postmodern culture. The first is a critical stance toward postmodernity in which the stress is placed on doing ministry *to* postmoderns, often with a very sharp edge that emphasizes the dangers of the postmodern situation. The second posture is a mildly critical stance in which we seek to do ministry *with* postmoderns, seeing postmodernism largely as the cultural context within which we are called to live out the gospel. The third is the posture of those who seem largely devoid of criticism about postmodernism and instead are seeking to do ministry *as* postmoderns, largely embracing much of the postmodern story. As McKnight laments, this third group gets much of the publicity and criticism in light of the tendency toward polarities and false dichotomies that this group embodies (2007).⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Dan Kimball’s recent *They Like Jesus but Hate the Church* is a good example here, looking in detail at some of the key cultural barriers that often keep postmoderns outside the institutional church (2007).

⁷⁷ McKnight puts it this way: “They love either-or claims, especially when one side wins and the other side loses – as in ‘relational rather than rational.’ While I think such language is much more often a ranking of truths by the *via negative* rather than some superficial false dichotomy, no one can dispute that the emerging folks have

Jones argues that the Emergent movement is critically concerned with unmasking the ways in which the gospel has been domesticated by modernity and the Enlightenment project. The movement largely began by wrestling with the implications of postmodernity and deconstructionism for the church in the West today, particularly in order to identify the assumptions of modernity and the Enlightenment operative in the church in the West (Jones 2008, 40-43).⁷⁸

4.2.3.2 Disillusionment with modern forms

A second theological emphasis within the Emergent church movement is a growing disillusionment with the modern forms of church and established churches. McLaren argues for totally reinvented churches (1998). Bolger suggests that one of the key characteristics of the Emergent church movement, in contrast particularly with the Missional Church movement, is what he describes as disillusionment with ecclesiology and the church (2007). And Jones has put it perhaps even more starkly, when he suggests that the church in the West today is simply dead; the modern church has outlived itself and its usefulness to God (2008, 4). Jones highlights at several points how the Emergent church movement finds the modern forms of church problematic. Emergents work to move beyond the differences that have divided Christians in the modern period, especially the fundamentalist and liberal camps. Emergents want to emphasize a generous orthodoxy that appreciates the contributions of all branches of Christianity and seeks to form something new that will be inclusive of the diverse branches. Wanting to move beyond the way the modern church has become over-institutionalized and bureaucratic, Emergents believe the church should function more like an open-source network. This “open-source network” way of functioning will provide for the whole community open access to all learning and instruction, over against the teacher- or preacher-dominated models of the modern church. Even details like the seating arrangement need to be altered to reflect this way of operating. The pastor should be seen as a broker of a conversation and dialogue, not the primary speaker. Leadership structures should be flattened out. Jones summarizes much of this posture by suggesting that often Emergents are starting new churches in order to save their own faith, not necessarily as an outreach strategy (2008, 197). The disillusionment with the established and modern forms of church threatens to undo the faith of the Emergents; newer expressions are needed to save their faith. The Emergent movement is a post-institutional church movement in many ways, and is leading to a growing call to re-examine the institutional church in the West today.⁷⁹

One of the more theological arguments within this movement is a small but very influential book by Pete Ward entitled *Liquid Church* (2002). In this book, Ward’s concern is for a renewal and reformation of the church in order for it to be an effective agent in changing our culture. He describes “liquid” as a new way of being God’s people in worship and in mission where the emphasis is placed on the church as primarily a network of people and relationships and communications, but not as a gathering of people that meet at a certain time and place. Ward wants to see a shift from thinking about church as structures, institutions, and meetings to thinking about church in less formal ways. He argues that there will be three

at times embraced such language in order to create a clear divide and to pound in some stakes. False dichotomies might be the opiate of the emerging style; as for opiates, it has to be one of the more charming ones” (2006, 13).

⁷⁸ Given this emphasis on questions and issues of gospel and culture, it is striking to note the absence of a well articulated model for contextualization, which is what this whole issue raises from a missiological perspective. The absence of such a critical tool as this, as well as the absence of a well-articulated understanding of the nature of culture, has hindered the Emergent church movement in its engagement with and understanding of the cultural context in the West today. This issue will be addressed more fully in the final chapter, after a model for contextualization and cultural discernment is developed in the next chapter.

⁷⁹ There is a growing amount of literature being spawned by this growing disillusionment. See Sanders 2007, Cunningham 2006, Duin 2008, Viola and Barna 2008, and Kinnaman and Lyons 2007.

implications to this type of shift: first, we will discover that the church is not an institution; second, we will realize that “church” happens whenever people communicate with each other; and third, the emphasis will be placed on living as Christ’s body in the world, with no weekly gathering together required for this. Ward argues that Paul’s nuanced use of the word ἐκκλησία and his understanding of the church as the body of Christ provide us with liquid, organic notions of what the church is and move us beyond the static and “solid church” ecclesiologies of the past. Ward concludes by arguing that we need a “liquid reformation” of the structures and social organization of the church in the West, because the liquid culture in which we live moves us to engage in what God is doing in the world beyond and outside of the institutional church (2002).

4.2.3.3 Instrumental view of the church

A third theological emphasis for the Emergent movement, flowing out of the previous, is the growing instrumental view of the church. That is, within the *missio Dei*, Emergents tend to marginalize the place of the church: it either serves the larger purposes of the kingdom of God or, if it is unable or unwilling to do so, is bypassed.

Doug Pagitt argues that there are essentially three types of responses to the cultural shifts in the West today. The first option is that the church can seek to return to the Reformation and seek to hold onto tradition; the second option is that the church can seek to make deep systemic changes, but in the end still see itself as the centre of God’s mission and thus avoid significant theological changes as it relates to the role and identity of the church; and the third option is to embrace the reality that the church is not necessarily the centre of God’s intentions, but rather to see that God is working in the world, and the church has the option to join God or not in his mission in the world (Gibbs and Bolger 2005, 42). Pagitt argues that the church has no privileged place in God’s mission, and must continually orient itself toward the world so that it might participate in what God is doing, wherever it might find God at work in the world (2007, 131). The focus must be on engaging in the work of the kingdom of God wherever that work might be. The church may be an instrument in God’s kingdom purposes, but the church is not essential nor necessarily the main instrument God will use.⁸⁰

4.2.3.4 Epistemological assumptions

A fourth key emphasis found within the Emergent church movement concerns its shared epistemological assumptions, reacting to the foundationalism and rationalism of modernity that has affected the church in the West. Emergents are particularly keen to expose the ways in which the modernity of the West has shaped the way the church has approached its theology and practices.

Emergents argue that language is “non-representational” (McLaren 1998, 66). That is, our minds are not a mirror of reality and our language and thoughts do not therefore represent a neutral, unbiased representation of objective reality that is external to our minds. Rather, we are profoundly limited and shaped by our perspective and social location. Theologizing, as a result, should be seen as an art, not as a rigid science that seeks to provide dogmatic certainty. We need to develop a different rhetoric when we speak and do theology; a rhetoric where our words are simpler, softer, and fewer (McLaren 1998, 89).

Connected to this is a growing emphasis placed on *mystery* as an important

⁸⁰ Scot McKnight disagrees, arguing that the lack of clarity about the relationship between the kingdom of God and the church in the Emergent movement presents a major weakness: “According to the New Testament, the kingdom vision of Jesus is, it seems, only implemented through the church. Only in the community of Jesus does one hear about the problem of Adam and Eve’s rebellion and the need for resolution through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit. . . . we need more reflection by Emergents on the relationship of kingdom and church” (2008).

epistemological category. Our words should be seen as servants of the mysteries of faith, not as a tool to articulate all the answers. Certainty must give way to mystery and answers must be trumped by more questions. Combined with this is the growing deconstructionist perspective on tradition, which leads many Emergents to be especially sensitive to the ways that modernity has domesticated the church and the gospel in the West. These “modern viruses,” to use McLaren’s language, must be deconstructed so that the church can be freed from the epistemological assumptions of the past. Thus, we must learn to embrace the postmodern aversion to certainty, the sensitivity to context, and the importance of our own subjectivity (McLaren 1998, 162-164).

Jones adds further nuance with some additional assumptions that are shaping this movement. First, Jones argues that an envelope of friendship and reconciliation must surround all debates about doctrine and dogma, instead of the modernist concern for right doctrine that sought to emphasize correct thinking in a way that divides (2008, 78-9). Second, we must place emphasis on the local, conversational, and temporary nature of all of our theologizing. Complexity is highlighted, averting our tendency to simplify and “nail-down” mysterious theological concepts (2008, 112-114). Third, we must become increasingly aware of our relative position to God, to one another, and to history in such a way that this awareness breeds a humility open to dialogue and ongoing discovery (2008, 115, 140-42). Fourth, Emergents believe that truth, like God, cannot be definitively articulated by finite human beings. Rather, we must be willing to embrace paradox and a wider rationality that allows space for the imagination, creativity, intuition, emotions, and dialogue (2008, 153-159).

4.2.3.5 Biblical-theological starting point

A fifth emphasis that must be briefly mentioned is the biblical-theological starting point for mission. It is striking that the majority of Emergent leaders take as their starting point for biblical and theological reflection on mission one of the following:

1. *The mystery of the incarnation of Jesus Christ.* The so-called “incarnational model” of Jesus’ life becomes a starting point for the church to follow Jesus in its desire to “incarnate” the gospel in our culture.
2. *The life and practices of Jesus Christ during his earthly ministry.* Great emphasis is put on how Jesus’ life and ministry was centred around the kingdom of God and his engagement with the world in his life and ministry. The church is then called to continue the kingdom practices of Jesus in its own context today.
3. *Missio Dei.* As noted above, this tends to move in a direction that emphasizes God’s relationship with the world and his work outside the church, presenting the church with the option of joining God’s mission in the world or being passed by in that mission

What is lacking in all of these starting points is a robust biblical-theological understanding of the mission of the church that at the same time does full justice to the biblical understanding of the *missio Dei*, the kingdom of God, and the OT mission of Israel as it relates to the mission of God’s people in the NT.

4.2.3.6 Praxis oriented

As Scot McKnight argues, the Emergent church movement has a praxis oriented emphasis (2007), especially in three key spheres. First, worship: Emergents like creative, experiential worship that seeks to challenge many of the assumptions and practices that have shaped the modern expressions of public worship gatherings – especially preferring participatory dialogue in place of monological preaching, as well as inclusive seating

arrangements and other intentional steps to encourage experiential participation in the worship event.

Second is orthopraxis. Emergents focus more on faith practices beliefs. In fact, there is in many cases an aversion toward tying down a strict orthodoxy filled with doctrinal content. Peter Rollins puts it this way: “. . . orthodoxy is no longer (mis)understood as the opposite of heresy but rather is understood as a term that signals a way of being in the world rather than a means of believing things about the world” (2006). How a person lives will be more important than what a person believes. Most in the Emergent movement will not deny the need for beliefs, but the emphasis is placed squarely on the need to live the right way, embodying the ways of Jesus rather than the teachings of Jesus (McKnight 2007).

And third is missional living. The Emergent church movement overlaps with the Missional Church movement in this regard, and shares a concern for the church’s concrete participation in the life of local communities. This is participation where God’s redemptive work is already occurring, in the holistic redemptive work of God to bring (McKnight 2007).

4.2.4 Growing diversity

The Emergent movement is marked by a growing diversity, and is increasingly difficult to define. McKnight suggests measuring the diversity within the movement in large part by distinguishing how “soft” or “hard” the postmodern tendencies are among those in the movement. “Softness” would characterize those who are more critical of the postmodern story, while “hardness” would characterize those who are perceived to uncritically embrace much of the postmodern story (McKnight 2006, 10-14).

In a similar vein, Ed Stetzer has suggested three different categories to capture the diversity of the Emergent movement. Stetzer suggests that we can see some as trying simply to be “relevant” to our present cultural context, seeking this relevance by fine-tuning their worship styles, outreach, evangelism, discipleship, and leadership to be more contextually relevant within the culture. Others are moving toward what he calls a more “reconstructionist” approach, finding fault with the current structures of church and moving towards other models like house churches and intentionally small, incarnational missional communities. A third group is what he calls “revisionist,” those who are leaning to the theologically liberal, either seriously questioning or abandoning key orthodox teachings of the Christian faith on atonement, the reality of hell, and biblical authority, to name a few. Mark Driscoll, once an insider and leader within the Emergent movement, has followed Stetzer in using these same categories and in critiquing the doctrinal and theological diversity within the movement (Stetzer 2006, 188-190).⁸¹

The growing diversity within the movement presents a challenge to those who would seek to define it. However, for those within the movement, the diversity is noted and celebrated, including in a recent collection of essays, *Emergent Manifesto*, which draws together over 25 different voices from the growing “Emergent Village,” an online forum for the Emergent church movement. Jones summarizes well the contribution this book brings:

I hope that you can see the beauty in the mess that is this book. It’s not one, univocal message. But, seriously, who would want a garden of all green beans? No, you’ve got to have variety, and that’s what you’ll find in the pages that follow. What is Emergent Village? A mess. A beautiful, *good* mess (Pagitt and Jones 2007, 15).

⁸¹ Dan Kimball, another insider and early leader within the Emergent movement, has recently formed , along with McKnight, a new movement named for now “The Origins Project.” This has been formed in part because of a growing dissatisfaction with the Emergent movement’s lack of focus on evangelism or doctrinal clarity (Kimball 2008a and 2008b). They will take as their starting point the Lausanne Covenant to provide doctrinal clarity and an evangelistic agenda. See <http://theoriginsproject.org/> for more details about this movement.

While fully aware of this growing diversity, the key practices and emphases described above clarify what might be termed a centre of the movement. Likewise, Phyllis Tickle, in her recent *The Great Emergence*, seek to define what she terms an “Emergent Centre:” a networked authority marked by its egalitarianism and its practices of open source discernment, “wait[ing] upon the Spirit and rest[ing] in the interlacing lives of Bible-listening, Bible-honoring believers;” a distrust for metanarratives and logic; a belief in paradox and mystery; a relational concept of reality and the human self; and a desire to “re-write” Christian theology into something Jewish, paradoxical, narrative, and mystical. Tickle acknowledges the necessary deconstruction phase through which this movement has passed, but calls on the leaders of this movement to move boldly into the future by bringing greater definition and clarity to the new faith that is emerging from within the Emergent movement (Tickle 2008, 162-163).

4.3 Missional Church movement

The second important movement within the Western church that is seeking to engage Western culture with the gospel and is contributing greatly to a renewal of a missional understanding of the church’s role and identity is the Missional Church movement. Following the pattern above, we will first explore the brief history of this movement and then survey the key practices of churches that are identifying with this movement.

4.3.1 Brief history

The pioneering work of Lesslie Newbigin is absolutely essential to understanding the birth of the Missional Church movement, particularly the work he did in the latter part of his life as he took the tools and insights of a lifetime of missionary experience in India and applied them to the task of addressing the challenges facing the church in the West and calling the church in the West to a missionary encounter with our culture. This is not to ignore the important contributions of David Bosch, but focus will be given to Newbigin’s contribution to this movement given his role as the father-figure of this movement, particularly in its North American expression. Goheen provides a helpful summary of the significance of Lesslie Newbigin’s work, in five areas.

First, at the heart of all of Newbigin’s thinking and life was the gospel – and especially the event at the centre of the gospel, the cross of Jesus Christ. Newbigin sees the cross as the “clue” that he must follow if he is to make sense of the world and his life in it. He stresses two ways in which the gospel was foundational to the church: the gospel as public truth and the gospel as universal history. The biblical story – unlike the Hinduism of India and unlike the Western humanism of Europe – locates truth in a story of God’s redemptive deeds and words in history, which culminate in Jesus Christ. In Jesus, the end and the meaning of cosmic history is revealed and accomplished. Newbigin felt nothing was more urgent than that the church believe the gospel and make it the starting point and power for its life.⁸²

The second is what Goheen has called “the logic of mission” for Newbigin. If the gospel is true and tells us where history is going, then mission must follow. Jesus did not write a book, but rather he gathered, nurtured, and left behind a community that would make known the good news of the kingdom of God by embodying it in its life, expressing it in its deeds, and announcing it in its words. Mission flows out of the gospel.⁸³

⁸² The way Newbigin articulated the gospel is equally important: against the relativism of Western culture, Newbigin affirmed that the gospel is public truth – a truth that is true for all people. Against the fundamentalist belief that the gospel is a set of unchanging eternal propositional truths, Newbigin argued that the gospel is first and foremost events that form a story that reveals the meaning and goal of world history and thus provides the clue for understanding and living in the world (Goheen 2004, 2).

⁸³ Four key elements of his view of mission are critically important for us today: (1) Mission is not optional but is central to this moment in redemptive history. (2) Mission is ecclesial. Mission defines the church’s identity.

Third, if the gospel is to be made known, the church must be one, Newbigin believes. He worked tirelessly toward the cause of unity of the church, because he believed strongly that mission and unity could not be separated. Listen to how Goheen summarizes the importance of this:

If the church is to make known the good news that at the end of history all things will be brought together under one head, even Christ, then as a preview it must embody this in its life. Its divided life is a scandal, equivalent to a temperance movement whose members are habitually drunk; in both, the life of the community contradicts their message. It is only when the unbelieving world sees evidence of a reconciled community that they will believe the message of the gospel (2004b, 4).

Fourth, Newbigin offers significant insights in the ongoing struggle of the church to discern the relationship between the gospel and culture. Newbigin's understanding of this was shaped by his experience of cross-cultural communication of the gospel in India. If he was to communicate the gospel in India, he would need to both use the language and cultural categories of his audience *and* challenge the religious commitments that were foundational to those forms. Newbigin began to see that this problem was not found just in India, nor was it limited to verbal communication of the gospel. Rather, all cultures are shaped by foundational religious commitments which in turn shape its institutions and forms. The more deeply one senses the contradiction between the gospel and the worldview of the culture, the more that the church will experience what Newbigin saw as a "painful tension" (1951, 51). How the church struggles to live within that tension is at the heart of the missionary encounter with the culture.

Fifth, Newbigin believes that the missionary encounter of the gospel with Western culture is the most urgent task facing the church in the West, and ought to be a priority task for missiology: "It would seem, therefore, that there is no higher priority for the research work of missiologists than to ask the question of what would be involved in a genuinely missionary encounter between the gospel and this modern Western culture" (Newbigin 1986, 3). In that encounter, Newbigin sees four essential tasks: the cultural task of engaging in a missiological analysis of culture; the theological task of recovering the gospel as public truth; the ecclesiological task of recovering the missionary understanding and practice of the church; and the epistemological task of unmasking the idolatry of reason and other philosophical assumptions reigning in Western culture (Goheen 2004b, 7-8).

Within this broader horizon of Newbigin's contribution, we can situate the particular contribution he made toward the development of a missional ecclesiology for the church in the West. Goheen has done extensive work in this area and has provided a helpful summary of Newbigin's missional ecclesiology that has so profoundly shaped the Missional movement (Goheen 2000 and 2002a).

The church's relationship to the world should be defined Christologically, and for Newbigin this had three important facets. first, the church should embrace and celebrate the creational goodness of its culture and place because Christ is Creator of the world; second, the church as a sign and foretaste of the consummation of all things for the place in which it is found because Christ is the one in whom all things are consummated; and third, the church as a people who identify with the culture of their place while rejecting the idolatrous power of sin manifest there because the cross of Christ brings both God's salvation of the good creation

Mission is not one ministry of the church but must define the very nature of the church and all that it does. (3) Mission is as broad as human life. Mission is God's sending the whole community of God's people to make known the good news in all areas of life. (4) Distinction between mission and missions. Newbigin stressed the ongoing importance of "missions." Missions are intentional activities of the church to create a Christian presence and witness to the gospel where there is no such effective presence.

and judgment on the power of sin (Goheen 2002a).

Newbigin's influence led to the emergence of Gospel and Culture movements that began to explore the various implications of his work for the theology and practice of the church in the West. The Gospel and Our Culture Network (GOCN) in North America has significantly brought Newbigin's insights to bear on the Missional movement. The GOCN is a movement within North America made up of theological educators, pastors, denominational leaders and administrators, and other local congregational leaders from a variety of confessional traditions, all devoted to the task of developing and encouraging a missionary encounter with North American culture. Similar movements were birthed in the U.K., South Africa, and Australia/New Zealand – again by practitioners and academics who are building on the insights of Newbigin and seeking to address the unique challenges of a missionary encounter with culture. The GOCN movement has been generated by both cultural and ecclesiastical shifts – culturally the shifts from modernity to postmodernity, and ecclesiastically the growing reality of decline of the church and cultural displacement to the fringes of society.

Goheen highlights two broader contexts within which we must understand the GOCN. The first is the World Council of Churches (WCC), particularly the International Missionary Council, and its work to flesh out the structures of a missionary ecclesiology. The GOCN has embraced the *missio Dei* framework developed within the WCC, in which the church seeks to situate its mission and understanding in terms of the central role it plays in the broader mission of God to restore the creation. After the secularizing of the *missio Dei* framework in the WCC and the relativizing of the church that came along with it, the GOCN is a renewed attempt to flesh out the structures of a missionary ecclesiology, specifically focused on a North American context (Goheen 2002c).

The second broader context of the GOCN is the loss of Christendom and the desire to rethink ecclesiology in light of that reality (Goheen 2002c). Guder describes the “functional” Christendom that has been operative in North America and is now crumbling:

Various churches contributed to the formation of a dominant culture that bore the deep imprint of Christian values, language, and expectations regarding moral behaviors. Other terms like “Christian culture” or “churched culture” might be used to describe this Christian influence on the shape of the broader culture (Guder 1998, 48).

This sort of cultural impact by the church in the West is crumbling, and the GOCN is seeking to re-think ecclesiology in light of these realities.

A key development for the Missional Church movement was the publication of *Missional Church* in 1998. Various leaders from the movement were brought together to begin bringing definition to the movement’s ecclesiology, and to explicitly push beyond the methodological and model-driven answers of how the church responds to the reality of North America as a mission field. Instead of a methodological and pragmatic focus, *Missional Church* looked at something deeper; namely, a theological re-thinking about the nature of the church in light of the shift from a church-centred understanding of mission to a God-centred understanding of mission (*missio Dei*). *Missional Church* argues that mission lies at the very centre of the nature and identity of the church. It goes on to then identify 5 key elements in a missional ecclesiology: (1) missional ecclesiology is biblical and must be grounded in what the Bible teaches; (2) missional ecclesiology is historical and must build on and take account of the historical developments and reflections on the church; (3) missional ecclesiology is contextual and will develop within particular cultural contexts and seek to be faithful and relevant within those contexts; (4) missional ecclesiology is eschatological which will drive the church to be dynamic in its movement toward the consummation of all things; and (5) missional ecclesiology must be practiced and therefore the missional understanding of the

nature of the church must be translated into practice(s) (1998, 11-12).

As others have pointed out, the missional movement, in contrast to the Emergent movement, has tended to take root among more established mainline and evangelical churches, looking at how these churches can make the shift to a missional posture and practices within their communities. There has also been more academic and scholarly effort in this movement than in the Emergent movement.

4.3.2 Key practices of this movement

Defining the key practices of the Missional Church movement can be difficult, due to the increasing diversity and unique emphases that are emerging within the movement. However, most who find themselves within the Missional Church movement would resonate with and find solid connection to the GOCN in North America.⁸⁴ Within the GOCN, a team was compiled to give expression to the common practices that were being found within churches who were resonating with the Missional movement and seeking to transform their congregations into Missional Churches.

The following twelve practices are identified as key to Missional Churches:

1. Proclaiming the gospel story of God's salvation in a multitude of different ways;
2. Teaching all members to become disciples of Jesus, and expecting all to grow as disciples;
3. Treating the biblical story as normative in the church's life, and having it inform and shape all of the church's practices;
4. Understanding itself as living in contrast to the world as an alternative community because of its participation in the life, death, and resurrection of its Lord;
5. Discerning God's specific missional vocation for the entire community and for all of its members in its local place;
6. Becoming known for acts of self-sacrifice on behalf of one another, both in the church and in the local community;
7. Practicing reconciliation and moving beyond homogeneity toward a more heterogeneous community in its racial, ethnic, age, gender and socio-economic make-up;
8. Placing high value on mutual accountability and support for engagement in the mission;
9. Practicing hospitality that welcomes the stranger into the community and makes space for the "other";
10. Celebrating, in the central act of worship, both God's presence and God's promised future;
11. Seeking vital public witness in its local place, and the transformation of public life, society, and communities; and
12. Recognizing itself as always an incomplete expression of the reign of God, and working toward more faithfully living life within the reign of God that has arrived in Jesus Christ (Barrett 2004, 159-172).⁸⁵

⁸⁴ For authors and leaders as diverse as Michael Frost, Alan Hirsch, Ed Stetzer, Mark Driscoll, and Dan Kimball, there is a shared starting point in their identification with the GOCN as a starting point for their missional practices and thinking.

⁸⁵ The work of the team led by Barrett offers a broad summary of practices and empirical indicators that have been identified within churches seeking explicit identification with the Missional movement spawned by the GOCN. Other work has been done in seeking to capture "empirical indicators" of Missional Churches. Minatrea has developed his own unique list of nine practices after field research into churches that were seeking missional transformation (2004). Hirsch has come up with six key elements in what he describes as "missional DNA or mDNA" (2006). Stetzer highlights best practices of Missional Churches in his *Breaking the Missional Code* (2006). And Driscoll outlines practices he learned in moving from Emergent to Missional

4.3.3 Key theological emphases

The theological emphases of the Missional Church movement can be summarized along four lines. The first is the understanding of mission as *missio Dei*. There is a commonly-held, theocentric understanding of mission, what Hendriks has termed a “theocentric reconceptualisation” of mission (2004, 25). Mission is first and foremost the mission of the Triune God to restore and renew the entire creation. The church finds its identity as the community of people God has chosen to participate in this creation-wide mission.

The second emphasis is on the gospel, understood primarily to be the good news of the coming of the reign of God. Out of this comes an understanding of the church that is oriented to and shaped by its place and task in the kingdom of God. As an agent of the kingdom of God, the church is called to advance the reign of God in all areas of life, seeking to bring God’s restorative rule to bear and reverse the effects of sin’s curse. The church is a people called by its very nature to be an extension and continuation of the kingdom mission of Jesus, called to represent the reign of God in its communal life together, called to function as a servant of the kingdom of God in the world, and called as the messenger of the kingdom of God proclaiming the good news and heralding the arrival of the kingdom of God in power.

The third Missional emphasis is on the communal dimension of the church’s mission, following the lead of the GOCN. Reacting against the reduction of mission to the calling of individuals in culture, the GOCN has emphasized the church as a community called to embody the life of the kingdom of God *together*. Hirsch describes “communitas” as “the dynamics of the Christian community inspired to overcome their instincts to ‘huddle and cuddle,’ and to instead form themselves around a common mission that calls them onto a dangerous journey to unknown places, a mission that call the church to shake off its collective securities and to plunge into the world of action” (2006, 277). As Newbigin puts it, the church is called to be a hermeneutic of the gospel in its local place, an inherently communal task that defines its mission and purpose.⁸⁶

A fourth Missional emphasis is the tendency to see the church largely in terms of an alternative community or contrast society in its relationship with Western culture. Again, this emphasis finds its roots in the GOCN. Goheen argues that, at least in part, the anti-Christendom mentality within the GOCN has been responsible for this counter-cultural perspective on the church’s calling in culture (2002c). The GOCN has seen modernity’s Christendom produce a church that had accommodated itself to culture and become blinded to its idolatrous shifts, particularly individualism. Reacting to this, the GOCN and Missional Church movement have emphasized the calling of the church as an alternative community or, as Alan Roxburgh summarizes, “as a contrast society . . . formed around beliefs and practices, which continually school and form it in a way of life, which cannot be derived from the particular culture in which it is found” (2007a, 8).

4.3.4 Diverse contributions

Within the growing Missional movement, there are unique and diverse contributions being made. Having highlighted the shared theological emphases, it remains to capture the spectrum of these diverse emphases and contributions which are beginning to shape the movement and missional conversation. There are six areas that can be distinguished.

in his *Confessions of a Reformation Rev* (2006).

⁸⁶ Newbigin writes, “How is it possible that the gospel should be credible, that people should come to believe that the power which has the last word in human affairs is represented by a man hanging on a cross? I am suggesting that the only answer, the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it” (1989, 227).

4.3.4.1 Incarnational ministry

For some within the Missional movement, “missional” has become closely identified with the call to “incarnational ministry.” Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, both leaders of the Missional movement in Australia, emphasize the importance for the Missional Church to practice ministry that is incarnational in its local communities. Both are, in fact, quite critical of the institutional church in the West, even contrasting at times the “missional” church with the “institutional” church (Frost and Hirsch 2003, xi). They see three distinctives in the Missional movement: (1) an incarnational ecclesiology; (2) a messianic spirituality; and (3) apostolic leadership (2003). As they explore an incarnational ecclesiology, they move from Christology (heavy emphasis on Christ’s incarnation and the ministry practices of Jesus in the secular world) to missiology (having an incarnational presence in our cultural context and following the practices of Jesus) to ecclesiology (the nature, functions, and forms of the church in its practice and life) (2003, 16). Put simply, they take the incarnation of Christ as the theological starting point for their reflections on mission and ecclesiology.

Given this starting point, they draw out five important implications for incarnational ministry. First, the incarnation must guide our cultural expression⁸⁷; second, the incarnation calls us to identify deeply and closely with our local context and the people within it; third, the incarnation reminds us that an abiding presence in the local community is important; fourth, the incarnation gives us a sending impulse into our local communities that runs counter to the impulse or desire to extract people out of a community into a gathered church community – a centrifugal mission rather than a centripetal one; and fifth, the incarnation calls us to find culturally meaningful ways to understand Jesus and communicate about Jesus (Frost and Hirsch 2003, 35-40). Based on these implications, they look at various models for being incarnational in a local community. They emphasize the importance of the church’s three key relationships in practicing incarnational ministry: communion with Christ, communion with one another, and commission to the world.

In his more recent contribution, *Exiles*, Michael Frost adds further nuance to this incarnational emphasis by describing “missional practices” necessary for smaller missional communities that find themselves on the margins and fringes of culture, alienated from the institutional church, and living as exiles in a post-Christian world (Frost 2006, 3-8). Halter and Smay have made a similar contribution in *The Tangible Kingdom: Creating Incarnational Community*, where they call Christians in the West to a pre-institutional form of Christian community that seeks to recover the incarnational practices of Jesus and the pre-institutional church (2008, 51-56). Such incarnational communities would seek to form themselves around shared missional practices that move them out into the local community to leave behind the comfort of the institutional church, live among, listen to, and love unconditionally those in their local context. What is needed, they argue, is to allow “church” to emerge out of this missional and incarnational way of life, so that its practices, structures, and leadership are defined by this incarnational posture (2008, 38-41).

4.3.4.2 Contextualization

A second contribution to the Missional movement is in the all-important challenge of contextualizing the gospel in the cultural context of the West. Understanding the relationships between gospel, church, and culture is of primary significance in the missionary encounter (Hunsberger 1996, 8-9). Among scholarship on these relationships, two bear specific mention.

⁸⁷ This is what they will call “contextualization.” However, as will be argued in the next chapter, the issues of contextualization address much more substantial and formative issues for the church than merely reflecting on what our cultural expression might look like.

Ed Stetzer highlights the central importance of the Missional Church's task of contextualizing the gospel in the local community. He sees the heart of the shift to a missional ecclesiology as the process of learning to "break the code" of the local cultural context in which the church finds itself. For Stetzer, breaking the code will only happen as the church learns to be deeply engaged with its local cultural context, and so becomes both faithful and relevant (2006, 89-107). Stetzer calls the church in North America to learn once again the missionary posture and make cultural engagement a primary task. He proposes a "missional matrix," in which the local church's work is grounded in biblical foundation, and Spirit-empowered in its application to the local place. This movement from foundation to application happens as the church begins to find the interactions between Christology, Missiology, and Ecclesiology, driven by three questions Stetzer insists the church answer: "Who is Jesus and what has he sent us to do? What forms and strategies should we use to most effectively expand the kingdom where we are sent? What expression of a New Testament church would be most appropriate in this context?" (Stetzer 2006, 54).

Along similar lines, Mark Driscoll is keen to equip the Missional Church movement to wrestle deeply with contextualization, re-thinking its evangelistic practices while avoiding syncretism with the cultural context of the West (2004). He works to maintain theological orthodoxy while at the same time reshaping the church's practice of mission and ministry. Driscoll was an early leader within the Emergent movement, who eventually left the movement due to his concerns about what he perceived to be its lack of theological orthodoxy.

While these and other contributions are helping the Missional movement learn to engage the culture of the West with the gospel, this area is one that is in need of further thought. The movement has not historically given priority to the gospel-and-culture relationship, focusing instead on questions of ecclesiology. And what scholarship has emerged on contextualization needs to deepen and broaden. Methodologies for evangelism and effective witness to the gospel are extremely important, but the Missional Church movement – indeed the entire church in the West – needs a deeper awareness of the cultural story in which we find ourselves, and the important questions and issues that arise when seeking to faithfully contextualize the gospel in our cultural context.

4.3.4.3 Biblical-theological orientation

A third major branch within the Missional movement is the biblical-theological contributions to it. Historically, the contribution of the landmark *Missional Church* book was in large part to define the biblical and theological trajectories of the Missional movement. What is needed now is ongoing biblical-theological reflection on the missional nature of the church, as well as engagement with the major confessional and theological traditions within Christianity that have shaped our various ecclesiologies.⁸⁸

Craig Van Gelder's *The Essence of the Church* is an important contribution to this end. Van Gelder offers the following summary definition: "The church, as the people of God in the world, is inherently a missionary church. It is to participate fully in the Son's redemptive work as the Spirit creates, leads, and teaches the church to live as the distinctive people of God" (2000, 31).

Van Gelder explores historical and theological developments both within missiology and ecclesiology and argues that a fully robust missional ecclesiology must draw from four important sources: biblical-theological perspectives on the church; historical and confessional perspectives on the church; contextual perspectives arising out of the study of

⁸⁸ Noteworthy examples of biblical and systematic theological reflections that are influential among missional church movement leaders include the following: Hall 1989, Hanson 2001, Lohfink 1984 and 1999, Moltmann 1993, Volf 1998, N.T. Wright 1992, and Chris Wright 2006.

contextualization within missiology; and perspectives on the churches' ongoing development and guidance by the Holy Spirit in its local community, along with ways of discerning this guidance.

Van Gelder offers an important contribution to our understanding of the mission of the church in light of the NT emphasis on the kingdom of God, drawing out the importance of focusing that mission on the redemptive reign of God to restore all of creation; the mission of God as Trinitarian; the mission of God as eschatological; and the church as missionary by its nature (Van Gelder 2000, 74-99). He then looks at four primary biblical images for the people of God and how they inform this missional understanding of the church: church as people of God, body of Christ, communion of saints, and creation of the Spirit. It is striking how these images are rooted in systematic theological reflections on ecclesiology (2000, 107-112). Finally, he rounds out his biblical-theological contribution to the nature of the church by recasting the four classical attributes of the church in a missional framework: the church as Holy, Catholic, One, and Apostolic (2000, 116-125). Van Gelder seeks to develop a model for the ministries and structures of the Missional Church that are rooted in and informed by these biblical-theological insights.

Significant work in this area is also being done by the growing movement of Allelon, under the leadership of Alan Roxburgh. Allelon is a hub of missional activity and movement within North America, the U.K., and Africa. What is striking in Roxburgh's work on Missional Church is that he re-imagines the biblical-theological starting point for the missional movement. He insists that God is the starting point of the missional conversation, not the church (Allelon 2008). He argues that the whole missional movement in the West has been de-railed by the continued focus and emphasis on the church and about how to make the church work:

Whether within established traditions of the post-Reformation era or among newer, postmodern Emergent churches, the conversation remains colonized by an ecclesiocentric imagination. Without a return to an understanding of God as the subject there can be no Missional Church, only churches using missional language to find new ways of making church work in a culture that has radically changed from the one in which Christianity was at the centre (Allelon 2008, 1-2).

Instead, Roxburgh draws our attention back on God with two basic questions: "Who is this God revealed to us in Jesus Christ?" and "What is this God up to in the world?" Building on a Trinitarian understanding of God – the Triune God existing in a community of self-giving love for the sake of the world – Roxburgh defines the core identity of the church as the communion of God that gives itself for the sake of the world (Allelon 2008, 2).

God's missionary nature, argues Roxburgh, must be expressed in terms of the *missio Dei*. Missional Church is fundamentally a call to move from a church *with* a mission to become a church that *is* missional in all its life; it is a call from an ecclesiocentric to a God-centred community for the sake of the world. Roxburgh identifies several factors at work in both the UK and in North America that have made the church the primary centre of the missional conversation and have dissociated the missional language from the *missio Dei* and instead used it as a label to lay over programs, activities, and ministries designed to make the church work or look successful. At the heart of it is a loss of place in society and the assumption that the main issue is for the church in the West to diagnose the problem within the internal life of the church, remedy the problem with a specific set of programs, and then finish our missional work by clarifying the nature and purpose of the church. Roxburgh laments,

The church was the problem and needed a method to fix itself. Behind this kind of assumption lies a deeper unspoken conviction: the church is the key

issue that must be addressed; it is the central subject of all the questions about the mission of God in the world; get the church right and everything else will follow (Allelon 2008, 5).

For Roxburgh, the work of the GOCN and publication of *Missional Church* only continued and solidified this focus of the missional conversation on issues of ecclesiology. By contrast, Roxburgh recasts the focus of the missional conversation along the following six lines:

1. We must restore God as the subject of the missional conversation. The church is not the focus or centre of a missional engagement with Western culture.
2. The primary locus of engagement is the gospel and culture relationship, with ecclesiology as a sub-set of that primary relationship.
3. Focus should be put on the development of a missional theology and praxis for engagement with the neighbourhoods and communities in which we live and work. The shape and purpose of the church emerges out of that theology and praxis.
4. We live in times of rapid, discontinuous change and therefore we must avoid the default processes and questions of the past.
5. In our present postmodern context, we must learn to ask different questions within different kinds of contexts.
6. The guiding principle for the nature and function of the church will be framed by Luke 10:1-12, where the set of questions shaping our listening and discernment are focused (Allelon 2008, 9-10).

Roxburgh argues that the questions arising from Luke 10 should shape the role of the church. As we enter towns, villages, and neighbourhoods where we live and work, how might we discern what God is up to in these places? As we sit at the tables of others and enter their narratives, how might we hear the ways in which the gospel already intersects with their stories? As we dwell like this, becoming the stranger and taking the posture of being served, how will we listen and discern what God is doing? We allow the gospel to challenge our assumptions as we listen to the gospel in the context of the *other* we encounter in these ways. Finally, out of all these experiences, we then are in a position to ask the ecclesiological questions, which Roxburgh articulates in the following way:

What then will it mean to be the church in this place and among these people given what God is already doing here? Here, the shape of the church isn't already assumed but emerges from these interrelationships. This does not mean we must give up or let go of all the traditions that have shaped us to this point; they will be relativized and we will be challenged to make sense of them from within the contexts of neighbourhood (Allelon 2008, 10).

4.3.4.5 Organizational change models and communal discernment

A fourth branch of contributions in the Missional movement is the important work being done on organizational change models and methods for communal discernment of the church's missional vocation in its local place. Van Gelder makes more explicit connections between the nature of the church as missional and both purposes and strategies for ministry as well as discernment for engaging our changing cultural context. He gives focus both to the Spirit's role in creating the church, a perspective which nuances the nature of the church as missional; and the Spirit's role in shaping the ministry of the church, a perspective which clarifies the purpose and practices of the church (2007).

Patrick Keifert is another important leader in the Missional movement's work in organizational change and communal discernment. Through extensive work as a church consultant, working through processes for missional transformation and change, Keifert has

developed tools to equip churches in the West to find again their places in society. These new place must lead churches to renewed discovery of their particular visions and missional vocations in the local communities within which God has situated them. Keifert has developed processes and models for the necessary mentoring, partnership, learning, and planning that must take place in order to enable the transition into missional practices and engagement with the local context.

4.4.4.6 Missional leadership

The Missional Church movement has also engaged questions and issues of discipleship and leadership within the church. This concern for missional leadership and the uniqueness of what contributes toward a leader being equipped to lead a Missional Church has been highlighted by various people within the missional movement. Alan Roxburgh has made an important contribution on the process of developing missional leadership capacity for the local church (Roxburgh 2005, 2006). Frost and Hirsch developed the APEPT model for missional leadership, which has served as a practical tool for leadership assessment and development (2003, 169-171). Hirsch has further developed this APEPT model, with particular emphasis on the apostolic gifting needed in the missional leader (2006, 149-177). Hirsch has also been developing tools for the church to re-think and re-structure its whole approach to discipleship in light of the missional transformation that is being sought out (2010). Stetzer addresses this issue as well, highlighting the need for missional leadership which is able to lead communities in cultural exegesis so that they might break the cultural codes of their local places (2006). The GOCN also gave early recognition to the importance of wrestling with the leadership models that have come along with the Christendom legacy, and how the Missional Church conversation can begin to shift our models for church leadership (Guder 1998, 183-220).

It has been primarily the contributions of Alan Roxburgh that have shaped the leadership efforts of the missional movement. Roxburgh has given detailed reflection on the uniqueness of missional leaders for missional communities. Among those contributions, the following can be highlighted. Roxburgh explores how the missional imagination must be cultivated among God's people by the leadership; models for missional change in making the transition into a missional understanding of the church; different images that will help shape the role of the leader in a missional community; the importance of coming to terms with the reality of rapid, discontinuous change in our present cultural context in the West and the unique challenges this change presents to leaders; and models for understanding the different phases and stages of change, with insights into the unique leadership challenges at each stage and phase (2005, 2006). This area of missional leadership will continue to be cultivated and developed, given the importance of leadership in the local church and the role leaders must play in missional transformation.

4.3.4.7 Missional practices and empirical indicators

A final branch or contribution in the Missional movement is work that is being done to identify missional practices and empirical indicators. What sorts of signs should one begin to find in a church that has made the transformation into a missional community?

These practices and indicators are being identified on both corporate and personal levels. As noted above, the work edited by Lois Barrett was a significant contribution toward identifying essential corporate practices in Missional Churches. Minatrea developed his own research project and empirical indicators in *Shaped By God's Heart: The Passion and Practices of Missional Churches*. Alan Hirsch has argued for what he refers to as six missional DNA indicators that need to be activated again in the church in the West: the confession of Jesus as Lord; disciple making; missional-incarnational impulse; apostolic environment of leadership; organic systems of organization; and commitment to

“communitas.” Hirsch argues that these six corporate practices that are part of the missional DNA latent within every follower of Jesus and need activation by the Holy Spirit through the gifts of an apostolic missional leader (2006, 15-26).

But, perhaps most significant are Michael Frost’s efforts to recover the original genius of Jesus’ teaching and lifestyle example during his earthly ministry, as well as recover the missional practices of the early followers of Christ in the apostolic era. Frost is concerned to help Christians live in the tension of not being at home in the world nor in the contemporary church in the West. He is writing to a growing number of Christians in the West who are dissatisfied with current expressions of the church, trying to inspire among them a Christ-centred faith and lifestyle of “missional practices” (2006, 3-27). Frost confesses his own lack of hope for the future of the institutional church in the West, but sees hope in the death of Christendom – hope that Christians who resonate with the feeling of displacement both culturally and from the institutional church will rediscover these missional practices and over time develop like-minded Christ-followers, who together might begin the formation of alternative communities of people living out these practices together.

4.4 Critical issues for a missional ecclesiology arising out of these movements

The Emergent and Missional Church movements are two important movements that are seeking to develop a missional ecclesiology in the West today. Having looked at each of the Emergent and Missional movements’ histories, practices, theological and philosophical emphases, and the growing diversity within the movements, it remains to highlight six critical issues for missional discernment surfacing within these movements. These are issues that are facing the church in the West today and must be addressed in the discernment of missional vocation as the church in the West seeks to renew its missional identity.

4.4.1 Missio Dei

In both of these movements there is a renewed emphasis being placed on the importance of understanding mission primarily as the *missio Dei*. This theological reconceptualisation of mission sees mission not first as an activity of the church, but first and foremost as the mission of God and flowing out of God’s very nature and purposes for the world.

Emergent church leaders like Pagitt argue that the church in the West needs to re-think its role. Rather than look toward renewing the ecclesiology of previous tradition, or simply finding more effective strategies and methods for our current ecclesiologies, we need to embrace the reality that the church is not necessarily the centre of God’s intentions and instead recognize that God is working in the world and the church has the option to join God or not. Emergents are starting new, post-institutional expressions of church that allow Christians to discern and join with God’s activity in the world

Meanwhile, Missional leaders like Michael Frost call those in the West who have lost faith in the institutional church to embody missional practices in their local communities, by which those of like mind may find themselves over time coming together for mutual encouragement, support, and celebration of what God is doing in their communities. Frost embraces Ward’s “liquid church” model to differentiate these communities from the institutional “solid church” mentality prevalent in the West today (2006, 134-135). Finally, Alan Roxburgh is also calling the Missional movement back to focus on God’s activity in the world and away from a focus on the church and questions of ecclesiology (Allelon 2008).

The *missio Dei* conversation is, of course, not limited to these two movements. Rehearsing two debates that occurred within the context of the World Council of Churches will be helpful here.

Konrad Raiser has argued that we have to move our attention from a Christo-centric understanding of mission to the Holy Spirit’s work in the world (Goheen 2000, 157; 2004a,

4). For Raiser, this revision was needed to respond to the growing complacency, introversion, and structural rigidity of the institutional church, all of which had prevented it from cooperating with others to address the burning global crises of the day. For Raiser, Christology must focus on the historical ministry of Jesus of Nazareth and the practices which characterized his earthly ministry; and therefore, the church is called to follow the earthly Jesus by taking a servant posture that ministers to the needs of the world. While Raiser acknowledges that the institutional church is a distinct body in the world, he wants to minimize this and instead emphasize the need for the church to live in solidarity with the world so that it might be better enabled to respond to crises and needs of its contemporary situation. As Goheen argues, for Raiser eventually this distinction between the world, and the church as a distinct institution, would fall away and collapse (Goheen 2004a, 6).

Newbigin's response to Raiser is instructive for us today. Newbigin argues that a focus on Christology does not downplay the significance of the institutional church. The church is called to be distinct and separate from the world because it is a community that has begun to share in the life of the age to come. The church also bears God's purposes for the world, and will therefore at times stand in antithesis to the world. Furthermore, argues Newbigin, the church's distinctiveness from the world will take an institutional form, as a Christianity without an institutional form cannot offer a true alternative community to the world. Yet at the same time, Newbigin shares Raiser's concern to find structures enabling the church to address the needs of the day and overcome the tendency toward introversion (Goheen 2004a, 6).

The second WCC *Mission Dei* debate was over J.C. Hoekendijk's instrumental view of the church, which became influential in many circles of the WCC. Hoekendijk made important contributions within the ecumenical movement toward the development of a missional ecclesiology, and an emphasis on *missio Dei* that led him to argue that the nature of the church must be defined by its function – which he describes as being a sign and witness to the kingdom of God in the world. In this function, the church must take on a servant form in the world as it recognizes its task to be no more than functioning as a sign of the kingdom, and therefore always pointing away from itself (1964, 43).

Hoekendijk argued that the order of the God-Church-World relationship needs to be inverted to God-World-Church. He argued for an “open ecclesiology,” allowing church to happen wherever people gather in the name of Christ and witness to the signs of God’s *shalom*-activity in the world (WCC 1968, 16-19, 92). For Hoekendijk, the focal point for mission becomes God’s work of bringing *shalom* in the world. The church as a people or institution is understood in an instrumental way, which opens the door to the potential irrelevancy of the church as an institution.

Both Lesslie Newbigin and Hendrikus Berkhof engaged Hoekendijk’s work, and offer valuable insight relevant to the *missio Dei* issues arising within the Emergent and Missional movements. Newbigin argues that the church’s relationship to the kingdom of God must always be seen to be three-fold: the church is a sign, an instrument, and a foretaste of the kingdom of God. Particular emphasis needs to be placed upon the last image Newbigin uses, so that we avoid the instrumentalism inherent in Hoekendijk. Goheen summarizes well:

Hoekendijk believed that the church could be sufficiently defined by its function, i.e. its participation in God’s work in liberation, seeking justice, and peacemaking in the world. Newbigin protests this interpretation of the church. The church cannot be understood solely in terms of its instrumental role within society. The church is also a place where the life and salvation of the kingdom is experienced in foretaste (2004, 6).

Berkhof on the other hand understood two factors that need to distinguish a missional ecclesiology. First, the church must find its identity and purpose through its participation in

the mission of the Triune God. Second, the church must acknowledge that it does not exist for itself but is continually oriented to the world. This dual orientation, orientation to God and orientation to world, forms two poles of orientation for a missional ecclesiology, with the orientation to God being the primary (Goheen 2000, 158).

Building on both Berkhof and Newbigin's insights, Goheen argues for a way forward in our understanding of the *missio Dei* that moves us beyond the limitations of both Raiser and Hoekendijk's approaches. Following Berkhof, Goheen argues that the church has two fundamental orientations:

1. **Toward God:** the church is sent to continue the kingdom mission of Jesus in between the times. This has three implications:

- a. Understood in light of the biblical story as a whole, the church is given a unique calling to witness to a kingdom both already present and not yet consummated.
- b. The church participates in the mission of God both as a locus God's redeeming work and as the called people of God who are taken up into that mission as God's chosen instrument.
- c. The church is therefore a sign, an instrument, and a foretaste of the coming kingdom of God in the world.

These three perspectives keep the kingdom mission of the church central (Goheen 2002a, 349-350).

2. **Toward the world:** the church must seek to discern its vocation in a Christological way (Newbigin 1977, 118-119). Again, this has three implications:

- a. As Christ is sustainer and creator of the world, the church should always love the creational goodness of its culture and place.
- b. As Christ is the one in whom all things are reconciled and consummated; the church must be both a sign and foretaste of the true end for which its particular place exists.
- c. As Christ died and rose again for the world, the church must both identify with its cultural context and yet reject the idolatrous twisting of its cultural story and the power of sin that is judged and defeated by Christ on the cross.

In this dual orientation, toward God and toward the world, the church must prioritize its orientation to God and then move from there to its orientation and relationship to the world. Without this priority of orientations, the church will have no way of discerning where God is at work in the world, nor of discerning what constitutes God's work in the world (Goheen 2002a, 351-352).

4.4.2 Moving beyond false dichotomies

A second critical issue surfacing in both the Emergent and Missional movements surrounds a number of false dichotomies that are becoming prevalent.⁸⁹ While there are a wide-ranging number of issues that polarize both of these movements, focus will be given here to those with particular relevance toward a missional ecclesiology. There are four

⁸⁹ In their book, *Why We're Not Emergent*, Kevin DeYoung and Ted Kluck highlight a wide range of false dichotomies, or polarities, that are being emphasized with the Emergent church movement, covering a host of theological issues. Wanting to move beyond a number of "either/or" polarities they see in the movement, they hold out hope for a vision of the church in which "we could be marked by grace and truth, logical precision and warm-hearted passion, careful thinking and compassionate feeling, strong theology and tender love, Christian liberty and spiritual discipline, congregational care and committed outreach, diversity without doctrinal infidelity, ambition without arrogance, and contentment without complacency" (2008, 251).

dichotomies that stand out in this regard.

First is the dichotomy between the church as incarnational and the church as attractional. Frost and Hirsch argue that a Missional Church is characterized by an incarnational ecclesiology, not an attractional ecclesiology. They write, “By incarnational we mean it does not create sanctified spaces into which unbelievers must come to encounter the gospel” (2003, 12). The Missional Church must have a sending impulse, not one that seeks to extract people from the community into a particular program or service.

Second, the dichotomy made between the institutional church and the fostering of kingdom or missional communities. Frost and Hirsch suggest that the church in the West today needs to orient itself toward a missional understanding, which they explicitly contrast with an institutional understanding of the church (2003, xi). Frost builds on the work of Ward’s “liquid church” notion to urge those who have given up on the institutional church in the West to find ways of forming liquid, missional communities, that stand in sharp contrast to solid, institutional churches (2006, 130-135). Gibbs and Bolger, along with Jones, argue that the Emergent church movement in many regards can be seen as a movement that is seeking a post-institutional expression of the church and sees the institutional church as inherently problematic for a missional expression today (Gibbs and Bolger 2005, 18-23, 28-29; Jones 2008, 4-7).

Third, the argument found often within the Emergent church movement that a dichotomy between the “sacred” and “secular” spheres of life is necessarily expressed and embodied whenever the church places an emphasis on gathering corporately for worship (Gibbs and Bolger 2005, 66-67). This concern to overcome the modernist dichotomy of life which relegated religion into the private, sacred sphere of life is important. However, it remains to be seen if this dichotomy is overcome by in fact relativizing the importance of the gathered community for corporate worship and seeking to broaden the notion of “worship” and “sacred” to include all forms of Christian service and activity in the world and all spaces in God’s creation (Gibbs and Bolger 2005, 67-79).

The fourth dichotomy is seen in the sharp contrast made between centrifugal and centripetal mission. Frost and Hirsch argue that a Missional Church is entirely centrifugal in its orientation and must jettison any form of centripetal mission (2003, 39). This emphasis is often contrasted to other traditions being shaped by the Missional Church movement, which emphasize the importance of centripetal mission as the church becomes an alternative contrast community that seeks to draw people into its community by its countercultural way of life (Guder 1998, 142-182; Roxburgh 2007a).

A helpful distinction within the Reformed tradition of ecclesiological reflection – between the church as a *gathered* community and the church as a *scattered* community – has great potential for moving past these false dichotomies.⁹⁰ There are four important dynamics that the gathered and scattered distinction seeks to honour and that can move us beyond these false dichotomies.

1. The church as a *gathered* community has various gatherings – some of which involve the classical Reformed three marks of the church (preaching of the gospel, administration of sacraments, and exercise of church discipline), but many of which feature other activities that the community engages in. For example, the church is gathered corporately for weekly worship, gathered in homes for fellowship and study of the word of God, gathered at various times throughout the week in demonstrating the coming kingdom through deeds of mercy and justice, and gathered corporately at

⁹⁰ See Spykman for background on this distinction within the Reformed tradition of ecclesiological reflection, particularly for how it is rooted in the distinction made between the church as an organism and the church as an institution (1992, 468; see also Berkhof 1979, 410-412). For a more recent exposition of this theme see also Halter and Smay, *And: The Gathered and Scattered Church*.

different times and in different sizes for prayer and discernment.

2. The *scattered* church is engaged in various vocations in various sectors of society. An emphasis on the communal dimension of the church's mission does not need to lead to a neglect of the individual Christian's missional vocation in the world (Goheen 2000, 435). One of the keen insights by Newbigin is the dual importance of both the communal mission of the local church and the calling of individual believers. On the one hand, Newbigin argues that "the most important contribution which the church can make to a new social order is to be itself a new social order" (1991a, 85). On the other hand, Newbigin argues, "I do not believe that the role of the church in a secular society is primarily exercised in the corporate action of the churches as organized bodies in the political or cultural fields . . . On the contrary, I believe that it is through the action of Christian lay people, playing their roles as citizens, workers, managers, legislators . . ." (1972, 72).
3. There is an important rhythm between the gathered and scattered gatherings. Both movements are understood under the broader framework of mission, and both are ways that God's people are participating in God's mission to redeem and restore creation. Both nourish and feed each other. God's people are *gathered* to be nourished in the gospel through worship, fellowship, and service, as well as equipped to be sent out as the *scattered* community throughout the week living out kingdom vocations in every sphere of life. The gatherings equip God's people and send them out for missional vocations as a scattered community.
4. The *gathered* community also has a corporate and communal vocation in its local community. Using the unique gifts that God gives each local congregation, and given the unique context of its local place, the gathered community will discern its missional vocation for its time and place. Thus, missional vocation is expressed both at the personal level and the corporate level for the Missional Church.

4.4.3 Culture

A third critical issue arising in both Emergent and Missional movements is the issue of culture, wrestling with its relationship to the gospel. The discipline of missiology has addressed these questions under the rubric of "contextualization," and there is much insight developed within missiological reflection on contextualization from which both movements can profit. The way in which this relationship is articulated and understood has a shaping influence on both of these movements. Both movements, however, have been hampered by either underdeveloped or unarticulated models of contextualization.⁹¹

Without such a model and tools for developing awareness of what is involved in the relationship between gospel and culture, both movements tend at times toward syncretism (in their desire to be relevant to the cultural context) and at other times toward irrelevance (in their desire to avoid syncretistic accommodation to the cultural context). Consider two examples. Ward argues that a more liquid church can respond to the consumer demands of contemporary culture in a much quicker way than can the established church. He points to important ways that consumerism and the market economy can influence our experience of church. And he suggests that more liquid forms of church can reshape our ecclesiology around the notion of worshippers as consumers, where the church is able to offer the responsive, flexible patterns of life that appeal to the variety of tastes and preferences of those who experience the Christian community (2002, 63-76). Pagitt, a leader within the Emergent

⁹¹ A notable exception is Leonard Sweet's typology of the gospel/culture relationship and the typology for different ways of responding to social and cultural change. Sweet's typology provides a matrix with two overlapping spectrums created by the categories of high/low change in message on the one hand and high/low change in method on the other hand. His typology of responding to social and cultural change has three paths that he describes as reactive, responsive, and redemptive (2003, 19-21).

movement, in seeking to define how the church can respond to the current cultural context in the West, marked by tremendous changes in the shift from modernity to postmodernity, offers three options: the church can resist the cultural shifts and seek to return to the practices and theology of the Reformation; the church can seek to make deep systemic changes in its practice, but resist making theological changes and insist that Christianity and the church should still have a central place in culture; or the church can begin to see that the church is not necessarily the centre of God's intentions, but rather emphasize how God is working in the culture and the church has the option whether or not it wants to join God in that work (Gibbs and Bolger, 42). Ward and Pagitt offer simplistic alternatives for a way forward, both of which fail to take into account the complexity in the encounter between the gospel and our cultural context. For Ward, the way forward is largely accommodation to the consumerism of the West. For Pagitt, the options are narrowly limited by the polarity created between an irrelevant rejection of cultural change and a syncretistic accommodation to the displacement of the church's position in the West.

Both movements are seeking to wrestle with the implications of the shifts in Western culture from modernity to postmodernity. One of D.A. Carson's helpful insights in his critique of the Emergent movement is the importance of understanding the perspective of Emergent leaders, who emphasize the sharp discontinuity between modernity and postmodernity and so suffer from a lack of substantive critique of postmodernity. Carson questions much of the Emergent church movement's analysis of our cultural moment and the shift to the postmodern, particularly the way in which Brian McLaren has read the postmodern shift and sought to draw out its implications for the church today.⁹² Carson argues that modernism has come to be equated with absolutism in the Emergent church movement, which focuses almost exclusively on the injustices created by modernist absolutism in its various forms. Similarly, he laments the tendency by Emergents to lump together all social change under the rubric of *postmodern* so that postmodern becomes almost synonymous with cultural change itself. For Carson, postmodernism is not something terribly unique, and is largely a movement that he regards to be fading (2005, 29-86).

In his influential *The Church on the Other Side*, Brian McLaren highlights five core values of postmodernism, describes fifteen opportunities that postmodernism has presented the church, critiques seven viruses of modernity that the church has caught and postmodernism can deconstruct, and then concludes with ten guidelines for the revolution that postmodernism is able to bring to the church (2000, 159-201). McLaren's insights into the postmodern are all hampered by the lack of an integrated perspective that would allow him to place all the different pieces of postmodernism into the context of a larger story, and also see how the postmodern story can be seen as a cultural critique of the failure of the modern story. Without that larger framework in which to place both modernity and postmodernity, the summary of postmodernism and the ways in which it can deconstruct the viruses of modernity in the church feels reductionistic and narrow. Furthermore, we are not left with any helpful model for how we are to think through the encounter between the gospel and Western culture. It is striking that McLaren's affirmation and critique in this regard are rather selective. We are given modern viruses that have damaged the church but no discussion of any postmodern viruses that threaten the church. We are given fifteen opportunities that postmodernity brings the church but no discussion of the opportunities that modernity brought to the church.

Carson's critique suffers from much of the same. He challenges the Emergent understanding of both modernity and postmodernity, particularly sensitive to the way in which the epistemological issues are emphasized and especially critical of what he feels is a

⁹² Carson's critique highlights the following three weaknesses he sees in McLaren's work: an articulation of modernism that is reductionistic and wooden, highlighting the rationalism and absolutism of modernity as central; a dismissal of confessional Christianity because of its penchant for propositional truth; and a condemnation of modern Christianity that is intellectually coherent and theologically shallow (2005, 59-69).

reductionistic understanding of modernism. Yet he has not provided a model for contextualization from which to engage the issues he is raising, and he too lacks a broader perspective in which to locate the modern and postmodern stories. Carson's own critique and proposals for a way forward are largely centred on questions of epistemology and truth claims – a reductionist perspective on both modernity and postmodernity.

In addition to these weaknesses, there is a glaring omission in the cultural analysis of Western culture within both movements, which threatens to hinder discernment of the church's missional vocation as well as open the door to cultural syncretism. There is a distinct lack of analysis of the two dominant powers in Western culture, economic globalization and consumerism. The fixation on the postmodern challenge to the modern story has prevented leaders in both movements from addressing two arguably greater threats to the gospel. As Bauckham argues, "It may well be that, only if Christianity in the West becomes a movement of resistance to such evils as consumerism, excessive individualism and the exploitation of the global periphery, can Christianity in many other parts of the world be credibly distinguished from the West's economic and cultural oppression of other cultures and peoples" (2003, 97-98). It is shocking to see the absence of any depth of analysis of Western culture in these two critical areas facing the church.

4.4.4 Worldview articulation

Fourth, both movements highlight the importance of worldview articulation for the mission of the church in the West. The starting point for the church in its encounter with Western culture *must be* the gospel and the biblical story, and the articulation of a worldview becomes the way that the church explicates the comprehensive scope of the gospel and therefore the comprehensive and broad dimensions of the church's mission and witness (Goheen and Wolters 2005, 141-142).

Goheen and Bartholomew articulate further the following worldview to explicate the interrelationship between the gospel and the church's mission. As they suggest, the starting point is the gospel: the good news declaration that the kingdom of God has arrived and the power of God is at work to renew the entire creation by his Spirit. This good news declaration can only be understood fully in the context of the entire biblical story, the story that reveals the true story of the entire world. The gospel is thus public truth, telling us both the goal of all history and how God is at work to restore all of human life. The mission of God is the central storyline of the Bible, and the church is essential to the gospel as the community defined by its mission to make known the good news of God's kingdom through its life, words, and deeds.

The witness of the church to the comprehensive demands of the gospel will call the inhabitants of the dominant culture to conversion, to the different way of life offered by the church in the biblical story. Insofar as the church is faithful to the biblical story, there will be three aspects to this missionary encounter. First, the foundational beliefs shared by a cultural community will be challenged. A missionary encounter requires the church to live fully in the biblical story and to challenge the reigning idolatrous assumptions of culture. The culture must be understood and encountered in light of the Bible rather than allowing the Bible to be absorbed into the formative religious assumptions of the culture; only in this way is the culture challenged at its roots. Second, the church will offer the gospel as a credible, alternative way of life to the wider culture. The church must embody in its life the coming kingdom of God, a life that will contrast with the lives of those outside the church. Third, there must be a call for radical conversion, an invitation to understand and live in the world in the light of the gospel. All three of these aspects of the missionary encounter with culture at this deep level are aided by the articulation of a biblical worldview, as worldview articulation becomes a fruitful way to mediate the comprehensive claims of the gospel for all of life (Goheen and Bartholomew 2008, 1-9).

This type of worldview articulation helpfully addresses the three following issues that surface in both Emergent and Missional movements. First, there is the rightful concern in both movements to get beyond the sacred/secular split that has dominated modern Western culture and crippled the church's witness in culture. For Gibbs and Bolger, this move beyond the sacred/secular split is a key characteristic of Emerging Churches:

A consequence of the creation of a secular realm was modernity's penchant to break everything up into little parts for classification, organization, and systematization. Thus, in the modern period, many dualisms were introduced to church life . . . the natural versus the supernatural; public facts versus private values; the body versus the mind and spirit; faith versus reason; power versus love . . . These capitulations to the dualisms of modernity affected every level of the church, including worship, Bible study, power structures, and mission. Postmodern culture questions the legitimacy of these dualisms. Correspondingly, every one of these modern divisions is greatly opposed by emerging churches (Gibbs and Bolger, 66-67).

Gibbs and Bolger provide some suggestions for overcoming the dualisms of modernity in worship. First, the incorporation of secular music, film, and literature in the corporate worship experience as a way to take back so-called "secular space" and culture. Second, an insistence that there are no non-spiritual domains of reality and culture, and so move to sacralise all of life and all of our cultural engagement. Third, attempts to move beyond the systematic and linear towards non-linear ways of being church, including (a) moving beyond the preacher as the teller of the story to the telling and sharing of many stories, (b) embodying truth in the community as a central part of being church together, and (c) communicating the gospel in non-linear and non-textual ways through a recovery of visual and aural forms (Gibbs and Bolger, 66-71).

Frost and Hirsch also urge moving beyond the sacred/secular dichotomy with their notion of recovering a "messianic spirituality," embodying a Hebraic worldview over a dualistic Hellenistic worldview. This "messianic spirituality" includes (a) recovering a spirituality rooted in the life and teaching of the historical Jesus, (b) moving beyond the speculative theology that has pitted orthodoxy against orthopraxy, (c) seeing history as the vehicle of revelation of God and God's will for the world, and (d) recovering a sense of the God of everyday, where all of life is filled with God and God's presence in the world (Frost and Hirsch 2003, 111-126). This sort of Hebraic outlook, argue Frost and Hirsch, will lead the church to see its missional action in the world as sacramental – concrete and tangible, rather than isolated and confined by modernity's dualisms.

Further, Frost and Hirsch argue that the whole God-Church-World scheme that has marked our thinking and practice as church is inherently dualistic. You enter into the middle neutral space called "church" and here you meet like-minded people and encounter God through corporate worship experiences. After those experiences, you go out into the "world," where your experience of God is left behind and where you interact with the world through various other activities of work, mission, evangelism, or service. Moving beyond this dualistic fragmentation, they argued for an integration of these three spheres of God, Church, and World. This integration allows the church to be incarnationally engaged with the world in its local place, practicing missional discipleship and encountering God in everyday life (2003, 157-162).

From these two expressions by Gibbs and Bolger, as well as Frost and Hirsch, we see partial attempts at worldview articulation and the importance of worldview articulation for the encounter of the gospel and church with culture. However, both suffer from simplistic solutions (e.g. the call to move the secular world into the corporate worship experience), reductionistic analysis (e.g. the notion that a corporate worship gathering experience is

necessarily caught up in a sacred/secular dichotomy of life), and a less than clear understanding of what is involved in the gospel's encounter with culture (e.g. the argument that postmoderns are suspicious of power and authority, so we need to reject the sermonic form of gospel communication and move to a dialogical model.)

The second issue within these movements that would be helped by worldview articulation regards God's work outside the institutional church. This issue is often raised in the context of discerning the relationship between God, Church, and World. While God is certainly at work beyond the church as an institution, neither movement has yet provided a compelling understanding of the nature of God's work outside the church and the implications that might have for the ministry of the church. What is more common, as noted above in several examples, is the broad notion that God is somehow at work in the world and our task as the missional people of God is to discern the nature of God's work so that we might join him in that. As noted above, there are some inherent challenges with this task, particularly when the emphasis is placed upon God's work outside the church in response to the growing frustration towards the institutional church and its introversion. One of the perennial challenges facing the church is the provisional and ambiguous nature of our experience and ability to identify where God is in fact at work in our world today. John Bolt argues:

The history of identifying specific social and political movements as harbingers of the “new age of God’s Spirit” (from Eusebius’s praise of Constantine, to Thomas Muntzer’s revolt, to the Puritans, to the German Christians, to the ‘blessing’ of Soviet, Chinese, Cuban, and Nicaraguan revolutions, to the civil religion of the American Religious Right) should serve as a warning here (1998, 263).

The articulation of a biblical worldview is an important step to begin to make sense of the cosmic scope of God's redemptive work in creation, in which the church as both an institution and organism is intimately involved.

Ward makes a fairly unique contribution to this issue. Building on Moltmann, Ward argues that we need to recover a sense of the “Spirit of Life.” We need to see the work of the Holy Spirit, or “Spirit of Life” outside the institutional church, beyond the Christian community, and beyond the activity of individual believers. He sees the Holy Spirit as the energy of God that creates and sustains life, active in the world and responding to people's searching. In this way, God is active in people's lives in a vibrant way that also begins to connect with people's desires for things that are life-giving. Ward suggests that Abraham Kuyper's distinction between God's work of common grace and special grace is helpful in distinguishing between the life-enriching activity of the Spirit of Life and the saving activity of God in the world. He also builds on the insight of Jonathan Edwards and his notion that God is at work to create spiritual desires in people, desires that we are called to tap into, offering God's special grace as the fulfilment (Ward, 79-86).

However, Ward has not offered us clarity into how, if at all, this discerning of where the Spirit of Life is at work in the world is connected to the local Christian community. As Goheen argues, without understanding the dual orientation of the church, in terms of its relationship to both God and the world, the church will have no way of discerning where God is at work, or what constitutes God's work in the world (Goheen 2002a, 351-352).

Lesslie Newbigin offers these sobering words about the difficulty of seeking to identify the work of God in the world throughout history, through political, economic, social, or cultural processes:

Certainly, God is at work in the world, both to build and to pull down, both to plant and to uproot. But when, as so often happens, we suppose that whatever looks like the wave of the future is to be identified as the work of the Holy Spirit, we are already a long way down the road to a pagan worship of power.

God is at work in the world, but the world in its wisdom does not know God. It has been so from the beginning, and it will always be so, that the word of the cross is foolishness to the wise of this world and a scandal to the pious of this world, but for those whom God calls to be witnesses against the world for the sake of the world, it is the power and wisdom of God (Newbigin 2003, 109).

The third issue within these movements that would be helped by worldview articulation is the call to engage the global crises of the day. There is a growing emphasis in both of these movements on equipping the Western church to wrestle with global crises. Brian McLaren is taking a lead in this, as he has stepped down as pastor of his church in Maryland and is now engaging through speaking and writing the urgency of the global crises today.⁹³ Tom Sine is another voice, pointing to the ways in which the Emergent, Missional, Mosaic, and Monastic church movements are on the front lines of engaging the global crises of our day in local communities around the world (2008). Worldview articulation can help equip the church not only for understanding these global issues within the context of the cultural stories out of which they are emerging, but also for helping the church find structures, ways of communal life, and vocational callings that begin to engage these crises in a direct, concrete way, at both global and local levels.

4.4.5 Differentiating nature, activities, and organization of church

Both the Emergent and Missional movements are committed to a missional understanding of the nature of the church. But from this basic theological starting point about the nature of the church, one can then begin to debate what the church does, its activities, and finally the way in which the church organizes what it does, in light of its nature. The nature, activities, and organization all flow together and are helpful distinctions to make when beginning to articulate a missional ecclesiology. Differentiating these three aspects of a missional ecclesiology is becoming increasingly important, for the following six reasons.

First, this differentiation will help avoid the growing pragmatism that envelopes the discussion of a missional ecclesiology. Looking at empirical indicators, models, and practices is indeed very important for understanding the Missional Church. “What are the activities of a Missional Church?” is an important question to be asking, but the tendency to reduce the conversation about a missional ecclesiology to activities and models must be resisted. Such a reduction will result in “missional” becoming just another way of grabbing hold of the latest model or types of activities that a church “ought to be doing” in order to be successful or contemporary, without engaging in the deeper, more fundamental questions these movements raise about the nature of the church. Failing to make this distinction risks allowing the pragmatism of North American culture to reduce the conversation about a missional ecclesiology to a formula about “7 steps to becoming missional” or “9 indicators of a Missional Church.”

Second, this differentiation will bring clarity to the important task of missional discernment. The activities of a Missional Church ought to be largely shaped by the local context in which the church finds itself. Thus attempts at an authoritative list of empirical indicators will be, and should be, quite challenging.

Third, these distinctions also help situate both movements’ frustration with the institutional expressions of the church in the West. Has the institutional church allowed its organizational structure to compromise its missional nature? What message does the activities and organization of a church send, and is that message consistent with a missional nature? How can the organization and activities of the church reflect a more consistent expression of a missional nature?

Fourth, and flowing out of the questions just identified, distinguishing between a

⁹³ See also his website <http://www.everythingmustchange.org/> which highlights current activities on this front.

church's nature, organization, and activities provides early clarity when articulating a missional framework and perspective for all three of these issues. The contribution of *Total Church* is striking in this regard (Chester and Timmis 2007). This is an effort to reshape various activities of the church around a missional understanding of gospel and community. This intentional effort to integrate leads to very fruitful insights into the following practices of the church: evangelism, social involvement, church planting, world mission, discipleship, pastoral care, spirituality, apologetics, theology, and ministry among children/young people.

Fifth, these distinctions will counter a growing danger in both movements of equating certain types of activities and/or certain ways of being organized with being "missional." What is clear is that both movements have been mutually shaped by the work of Lesslie Newbigin on the importance of recovering a missional understanding of the nature of the church. However, as demonstrated above, there is a growing diversity of expressions regarding the activities and organization of the church. Many of these expressions, especially in missional leadership and missional preaching, are experimental, and need to be distinguished from the "missional" label itself. What is the nature of leadership in a missional church? Is the practice of leader-less or "flat leadership" communities necessarily implied in the missional nature of the church? Can there be room for both monological and dialogical models of preaching in a missional church? Does the missional nature of the church necessitate one form of preaching over another? Such a diversity is not necessarily to be avoided, but in fact is part of the contextual shaping that is necessary for these movements to become rooted in many different places and contexts.

Sixth, these distinctions are a place where the development of a missional ecclesiology can be aided by some of the systematic theological traditions of reflection on ecclesiology. The ecclesiological traditions of reflecting on the "three marks" or "four attributes" of the church are two examples of traditions that can enrich our understanding of the nature, activities, and organization of the church.

4.4.6 Important biblical-theological issues

Finally, the sixth set of critical issues arising within both movements is biblical-theological questions that the church in the West must face in seeking to develop a missional ecclesiology. The first is the relationship between the kingdom of God and the church. Both of these movements have a strong emphasis on the gospel as the gospel of the kingdom of God. This emphasis needs to be met with an understanding of the kingdom of God that seeks to root the kingdom within the entirety of the biblical story. Further clarity needs to be brought to the relationship between the kingdom of God and the church.⁹⁴ As noted above, there is a tendency among some to miss the importance of the community of God's people in the *missio Dei*. This is related to the tendency to pit the church, particularly the institutional church, over against the kingdom and place the emphasis on seeking to build kingdom communities in light of the growing frustration with institutional expressions of the church.

A second issue concerns the growing emphasis placed upon the incarnation as an important starting point for missional expressions of the church. For some, like Frost and Hirsch, this is the important biblical-theological starting point for ecclesiology (2003). For others, this leads to an emphasis on recovering the historical practices of Jesus and the call to embody in our culture similar practices (Gibbs and Bolger 2005). In both cases, the starting point on Jesus' incarnation and/or historical practices is not sufficiently grounded in the larger biblical story, which is essential to truly grasp the significance of Jesus' person and work. Our missional ecclesiology must be rooted in the biblical story as a whole. At the same time, our ecclesiology must also be rooted in a more robust Christology than either of these movements is providing. As Bosch argues, a reductionist Christology has a large impact on

⁹⁴ See McKnight 2008b for an insightful critique on this important issue.

how the church understands and practices its mission (1991, 512-518).

A third issue concerns the nature of the gospel itself. Our starting point for everything must be the gospel. And yet right there at the starting point, there is great disparity of understanding today. Some in these movements caricature the “Paulinity⁹⁵” of our understanding of the gospel in the West, with its focus on the atonement and/or justification by faith. Others stress the importance of seeing the gospel only as the gospel of the kingdom (Gibbs and Bolger 2005, 47-49). Critics of these movements are eager to recover doctrinal orthodoxy for the sake of preserving the truth claims of the gospel in our postmodern world (Carson 2005). What is needed is a way to recover the centrality of the gospel and the full-orbed implications of the gospel.

Lesslie Newbigin points to an important way forward by rooting the gospel in events in history. Newbigin’s insight is crucial:

We are speaking about a *happening*, an event that can never be fully grasped by our intellectual powers and translated into a theory or doctrine. We are in the presence of a reality full of mystery, which challenges but exceeds our grasp. . . . Down the centuries, from the first witness until today, the church has sought and used innumerable symbols to express the inexpressible mystery of the event that is the center, the crisis of all cosmic history, the hinge upon which all happenings turn. Christ the sacrifice offered for our sin, Christ the substitute standing in our place, Christ the ransom paid for our redemption, Christ the conqueror casting out the prince of the world – these and other symbols have been used to point to the heart of the mystery. None can fully express it. It is that happening in which the reign of God is present. (Newbigin 1995, 49-50)

The starting point is to recognize that the gospel concerns the historical events surrounding the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The heart of the gospel is what Jesus Christ has done in history, in which the ultimate meaning of world history has been revealed.

4.5 Conclusion

We have surveyed two important movements within the West that are seeking to recover the missional identity and role of the church in a postmodern cultural context. Both have been unfolded in terms of their historical roots and development, the key practices that distinguish them, the theological emphases of each movement, and the growing diversity in each movement. Out of this analysis, six themes for missional discernment emerging from these movements and facing the church in the West as it seeks to recover its missional role and identity have been identified. These themes and the issues surrounding them, many of which are beginning to coalesce with the themes arising out of the global and local context described in chapter one, as well as the cultural story of the West described in chapter three, will be issues for discernment that will be treated in greater detail in the final chapter. How can the church in the West discern its missional vocation as it seeks to recover its missional identity? Engagement with these movements and the themes arising from within them is vital for discernment of missional vocation.

⁹⁵ “Some would say that we have exchanged ‘Christianity’ for ‘Paulinity.’ Christianity was about the kingdom of God coming to earth for everyone, they would say. Paulinity is about a select few escaping earth and going to heaven after they die” (McLaren 2006, 91).

CHAPTER FIVE: DEVELOPING A FRAMEWORK FOR DISCERNMENT

4

5.1 Introduction

Our central research question has been “**how** can the church in the West discern its missional vocation as it seeks to recover its missional identity?” The final aspect of answering this question will be unfolded in this chapter. The focus of this chapter will be to provide a framework⁹⁶ for discernment of the church’s missional vocation in the contemporary cultural context of the West. This framework will seek to provide important guidelines for church leaders to discern the particular vocation of their congregations as they seek to live out their missional identity and role in their local places. This framework will also seek to provide a means to analyze and discern the particular themes highlighted throughout this study, themes which have emerged from the global and local context, from our analysis of the Western story, and are important in both the Missional and Emergent church movements.

5.2 The need for a framework of discernment

There are four important reasons why a framework of discernment is needed to assist the church in the West today in carrying out its missional role as it practices discernment of its missional vocation.

First, both the Missional and Emergent church movements need a wider framework within which to approach the contextualization that is central to both movements. Newbigin has led both movements to make contextualization a primary concern for the church, but there continues to be a largely methodological and pragmatic focus to it.⁹⁷ Methods and practical application to the church’s local ministry are important considerations – indeed, as will be argued below, discernment of missional vocation can only happen in the context of local engagement by the Christian community. But there are broader issues involved as the gospel enters into a missionary encounter in a particular culture, which a framework for discernment will bring into focus. Models of contextualization are no doubt shaping the way that both movements wrestle with these issues, but those models are largely unarticulated or underdeveloped.

Second, there are a number of issues arising with the emergence of the postmodern challenge to the modern story that have particular bearing and insight into the need for a framework of discernment. The postmodern challenge to the modern story is:

- *opening up the non-rational aspects of human nature and human knowing*, in light of the idolatrous rationalism of the Enlightenment story (Goheen 2001a, 23). This emphasis is broadening the scope of what is involved in human knowing and discerning, an important implication for a framework of discernment;

⁹⁶ The choice of the word “framework” is intentional and important, particularly when contrasted with a similar term “model.” A model too quickly begins to function like a template and can become too prescriptive in its application. Moreover, the notion of model can also be tied too quickly to the methodological rationalism of the Enlightenment and the modern story. In contrast, a framework provides parameters that help shape the process for discernment. A framework seeks to frame the issues within a helpful set of guidelines and boundaries, within which remains a great deal of flexibility and space for creativity.

⁹⁷ For example, Stetzer places emphasis on breaking the cultural code of our local communities *so that* we might find culturally relevant methods for ministry in the local place (2006), and Driscoll highlights the importance of deepening our cultural understanding *so that* we might find ways to practice orthodox ministry in our cultural context and engage in relevant forms of evangelism (2004).

- *challenging the neutrality of methodological reason* that triumphed during the Enlightenment. Countering the arrogant truth claims of methodological reason, postmodernity is emphasizing tradition, community, culture, language, history, feelings, gender, and ethnicity - all of which highlight the subjective nature of all knowing;
- *challenging the confidence in reason* that marked the modern story since the Enlightenment. Attention is now being given to the socially constructed nature of truth claims, as well as the space being opened up for the categories of mystery and doubt (Walsh and Middleton 1995, 32). As Tickle has argued, there is growing distrust in metanarratives that seek to capture the fullness of reality, and more space is being opened for paradox and the unknown (2008, 160-161);
- *ushering in what Van Gelder calls a “Hermeneutic Turn”* in Western epistemology that has profound implications for how congregations and their leaders discern their contexts and God’s calling to them (2004); and
- *proposing new ways of understanding human organization.* As Alan Hirsch has argued, the developments and applications of Einstein’s theory of relativity and quantum physics have led to the understanding of human organizations as complex living systems that often function in chaotic and complex ways, contrary to the linear dynamics that shaped modern organizational theory under the Newtonian paradigm (2006, 250-251).

These insights from the postmodern challenge to the modern story have important implications for how local congregations respond and adapt to their changing environments.

Third, the growth and development of Christianity in the non-Western world has implications for the church in the West as it seeks to discern its missional vocation. As Lamin Sanneh argues, cultural translation of the Christian faith into the vernacular and local contexts in each culture is part of the inherent “DNA” of Christianity (1989). Christianity, by its very nature, is a faith that has from its very earliest beginnings been able to translate itself into new cultural contexts. So the church in the West has much to learn from other “gospel and culture” encounters in the world today. The work being done in this regard from Asian, Latin American, and African perspectives is invaluable to the church in the West as it seeks to engage in its own encounter with Western culture. As Andrew Walls demonstrates, we are living in an “Ephesian moment” in the history of Christianity, where churches in every place badly need to learn from each other, as we all seek to discern what God is calling us to do and be in our particular place; without each other we remain incomplete in our cultural specificity, as well as blind to our own forms of cultural captivity (2002, 72-81).⁹⁸

While there are many voices emerging from Asia and Latin America, particular attention will be given to African voices. The growth and development of Christianity in Africa will particularly help this framework for missional discernment in the West. The growth of African Independent Churches (AICs), for instance, has exposed the ways in which secular and modernist worldview assumptions often accompanied Western missionaries. As a result, often these Western missionaries were perceived as threatening the stability and vitality of African social, religious, and economic structures and ways of life. Many of the AICs arose out of a deep desire for an authentic African expression of Christian faith, an expression

⁹⁸ Walls comments, “There are two dangers. One lies in an instinctive desire to protect our own version of Christian faith, or even to seek to establish it as the standard, normative one. The other, and perhaps the more seductive in the present condition of Western Christianity, is the postmodern option: to decide that each of the expressions and versions is equally valid and authentic, and that we are therefore each at liberty to enjoy our own in isolation from all the others. . . . The Ephesian metaphors of the temple and of the body show each of the culture-specific segments as necessary to the body but as incomplete in itself. . . . We need each other’s vision to correct, enlarge, and focus our own; only together are we complete in Christ” (Walls 2002, 78-79).

that was threatened by not only the colonial experience in general, but particularly by the cultural captivity of the Western church as it was imported to Africa during the height of the modern missionary movement (Mwauru 102).⁹⁹ The Enlightenment worldview greatly impacted missionary thinking and practice in Africa, and resulted in a largely negative view of African culture; a view that AICs seek to correct by their desire to find expressions of Christianity that respect and honour the creational good in African culture (Oduro 2008, 37-9).

Musopole demonstrates the numerous ways in which Enlightenment epistemology has shaped Western theology and the missionary practices that flow out of that theology (1998). The modern story, rooted in the classical Greek worldview, has shaped theology in the West at very basic levels. Theology has been separated from mission into a largely academic exercise, emphasizing propositional truth and rationalism (Musopole 1998, 13-43). A framework for discernment will need to be freed from the rationalism that has so powerfully shaped Western theological traditions, and our brothers and sisters in Africa have much to teach us in this regard.

African theologians also emphasize the importance of missional praxis in the discernment process, a crucial insight for the church in the West. As African theologians have been forced to wrestle deeply with the encounter of Christianity and African primal traditions of religion and spirituality, they have recaptured the character of theology as an inherently missional activity that flourishes best “on the frontier with the non-Christian world” (Bediako 1995, 259). Theology wrested from the Enlightenment epistemological assumptions of the West will be a theology in which discipleship and obedience are integral parts of the knowing and discernment process and where theology will be engaged in reflection on missional praxis and engagement (Musopole 1998, 15-16).

The fourth and final reason for the need for a framework of discernment comes from the growing recognition of the contextual nature of all the various disciplines of theology. The discipline of practical theology is being shaped by the need to recover an understanding of the local and contextual, aimed at shaping the Christian community for faithful witness in its particular cultural context (Fowler 1999, 78). Theologian Douglas John Hall helps us see how all theology is contextual by its very nature, because (a) theology is a human enterprise and is therefore shaped by all of the limitations and conditions that shape all human activity; (b) God has revealed himself within the particularities and parameters of our creaturely and cultural contexts; and (c) theology is a confessional activity of the church as it seeks to confess its faith in the context of its situation in God’s world, and will therefore seek to shape that confession to speak into its particular context (1989, 93-110). While the notion of “contextual theology” is a relatively new way of understanding the nature of theology, it is something we see at work both within the development of Scripture and throughout the history of the church (Bevans 2002, 3-9).¹⁰⁰ There is much within this rich tradition of contextualization and contextual theology that can shape a framework of discernment for the church in the West today.

5.3 Survey of models and frameworks

It will be helpful to reflect upon various approaches to this issue that have already

⁹⁹ Cultural captivity greatly hindered the effectiveness of Western missionary work during this time. However, Lamin Sanneh has also demonstrated how the missionary impulse of Bible translation into the vernacular languages in Africa worked powerfully to strengthen and develop the indigenous cultures (1989). His research into the power of vernacular language in cultural development has helped to balance our perspectives on the obvious negative impact of colonialism on Christian mission. It is, however, beyond the scope of this chapter to delve into the nuances of colonialism and its impact on the modern missionary paradigm (cf. Bosch 1991, 302-313).

¹⁰⁰ See Flemming 2005 for a helpful analysis of how contextualization is at work within the NT canon.

been developed in recent years and that shed light on the development of a framework of discernment. These approaches come from four sources: the study of contextualization in the field of missiology; the development of congregational processes for discernment and decision-making in the missional church movement; the explicit reflection on a methodology for doing missional theology in an African context; and reflections on methodology in the discipline of practical theology. Insights that are important for developing a framework of discernment from each of these sources will be briefly highlighted.

5.3.1 Contextualization models

The study of contextualization has been a major area of focus in missiology since the term came into common usage in the late 20th century (Bosch 1991, 420). Stephen Bevans provides a very helpful typology and overview of the various models of contextualization that are prevalent today (2002).¹⁰¹ Bevans' study is an important contribution to the study of contextualization in missiology; for many his work has become the benchmark for comparing models of contextualization. Bevans' contextual insights are worth enumerating as follows.

Theological method: Bevans argues the place of culture in the development of a theological method is becoming more prominent. For some, culture and social change are placed alongside of Scripture and tradition as a “third loci” for doing theology, while for others culture is an important contextual factor shaping the theological enterprise and the form it takes. Further, the issue of who does theology is important to consider. The place of the congregation and the role of the trained theologian in the process of doing theology are crucial to clarify. Finally, he highlights the important issue of considering the role of the “non-participant” in the process of doing contextual theology, highlighting the challenge of including “cultural outsiders” in the theological process (2002, 16-20).

Theological orientation: Bevans contrasts the different emphases between a “creation-oriented” and “redemption-oriented” contextual theology. The former will tend to affirm the created goodness of culture and see more continuity between culture and theology. The latter will stress the discontinuity and emphasize the fallen nature of culture and its need for redemption (2002, 21-22). The issues raised by this question of orientation are critical for a framework of discernment.

Criteria for orthodoxy: In the development of contextual theology, attention must be given to the means of distinguishing between faithful contextualization and unfaithful syncretism. The reality of pluralism in contextual theology cannot be denied and yet criteria for distinguishing this pluralism from postmodern relativism are important (2002, 22-23).

Cultural identity, popular religiosity, and social change: Bevans highlights issues particularly important in light of the colonial past and the ways in which that past has shaped these issues (2002, 25-26).

5.3.2 Congregational processes for discernment

Patrick Keifert argues there has been in recent times a “return of the congregation,” back from being simply as passive consumer of theology to being the primary location and actor to generate theology. Three primary forces are driving this return. First, the theological conviction that God’s self-sacrificing, loving presence continues to be available through the word and sacraments within the gathered Christian community of Christ followers. Second, the philosophical conviction that practical reasoning, seen as a practice of biblical wisdom that mediates between the modernist dichotomy between theory and practice, is an essential

¹⁰¹ Bevans analyzes six different models for contextual theology today, offering a helpful summary table to compare and contrast the models. Bevans' six models include the Translation Model, Anthropological Model, Praxis Model, Synthetic Model, Transcendental Model, and Countercultural Model (2002, 141-143).

tool that is birthed within the local congregation as it seeks to interpret and discern God's word for its particular place and time. Third, the missional renewal that has transformed the role and identity of the local congregation within the missional framework of the *missio Dei*, in which the gathered worshipping community occupies a central role (Keifert 2009, 16-25). Flowing out of these convictions, Keifert has developed congregational tools for discernment that seek to assist local congregations in the discovery of innovative missional practices for their time and place (2006).

Further, Van Gelder has offered his own framework for discernment to assist the local congregation in its "Spirit-led" participation in the *missio Dei*.¹⁰² It is a framework that emphasizes the importance of engaging the local congregation in a process that is biblically-theologically framed, theoretically informed, communally discerned, and leads necessarily to strategic action for missional engagement (Van Gelder 2007, 104-114).

Important work is also being done by scholars rooted in Appreciative Inquiry, a mode for initiating and discerning stories and practices that are creative and life-giving. When applied to the missional church, Appreciative Inquiry becomes a way of forming an interpretative community that is able to awaken and release the life-giving forces latent within God's people that will enable them to discern God's will and engage in mission in their local context (Branson 2004, 23).¹⁰³

5.3.3 A South African framework for missional discernment

With the growth of Christianity outside the global West, much theological and missiological reflection is emerging from the church in Asia, Latin America, and Africa. Part of this growing theological contribution from the non-West is a probing critique of the West and its cultural syncretism, seen in its rationalism, individualism, spiritualism, and dualism (to name some of the more prominent areas of critique).

Jurgens Hendriks offers an important framework for doing missional theology in an African context. Hendriks highlights, first, the theocentric shift in mission that places God as the primary starting point in mission and subsumes the church's mission under that. Second, the faithful community plays a central place in discernment as the people of God in the local place seek to discover the shape of their mission. Third, he emphasizes the importance of context, understood as the intersection between the local and global realities influencing the congregation at its particular time and place. Fourth, understanding the local congregation as an interpretive community, seeking to interpret its context and its own congregational life and dynamics. Fifth, the normative influence of both Scripture and tradition. Sixth, the hermeneutical task of discernment is one that seeks to bring a fusion of horizons between the Scriptures and the context, understood in light of the local and global realities. Seventh, the

¹⁰² Van Gelder develops the following "seven aptitudes" necessary for congregations as they practice missional discernment: learning to read the local context in their desire to be contextual; anticipating new insights into the gospel through the process of contextualization; anticipating reciprocity as those who receive the gospel change those who share it; developing local, particular practices which resist importing models from elsewhere; directing specific practices for the particular context of the ministry, and not assuming there will be general practices common everywhere; embracing the implicit perspectival nature of all theologies and confessions; and embracing the provisional nature of congregational structures (2007, 63-66).

¹⁰³ From Quantum Theory, the notion of interconnectedness is crucial, forcing congregations to attend to the relationships between things and not isolate discrete parts of congregational life and practice (2004, 33). From Chaos Theory, congregations can appreciate the natural developments towards greater complexity and unpredictability of congregational life (2004, 34). For example, several forces within congregations work "simultaneously" and therefore simultaneous factors must always be considered in the discernment process (2004, 35). Further, the complexity tends toward self-organizing, where patterns emerge out of the chaos. Discernment processes will need to generate impulses within the congregation that allow this self-organizing tendency to emerge and flourish (2004, 35). From Complexity Theory, congregations can learn to live within the context of unpredictable, non-linear, discontinuous change, where life-giving forces are most likely to emerge (2004, 35).

ultimate horizon for theological practice and reflection is the present and yet to come kingdom of God, which is drawing history to its final goal. Finally, the importance of seeing missional praxis as the goal for the discernment process (2004, 24-33; cf. 2002). Hendriks' framework has much to contribute toward a framework of discernment for the church in the West today.

5.3.4 Methodology in practical theology

A fourth important source of missional ecclesiology comes from recent reflections on theological methodology in the discipline of practical theology. James Fowler argues that the split between Systematic Theology and Practical Theology – rooted in a positivist notion of pure reason – must be overcome with a renewed understanding of the nature of the theological task. Such a renewal will seek to understand all theology as local and contextual and as ultimately aimed at shaping the local church community for faithful missional witness. This will lead, Fowler argues, to a recovery of praxis as a primary category for Practical Theology, thus bringing together church practices and mission as well as ongoing critical reflection on these. A helpful framework to move Practical Theology in this direction is to develop a “correlational hermeneutic” for Practical Theological reflection on the local congregation, understanding the local congregation as a hermeneutic community. Such a hermeneutical framework will seek to equip the local congregation to interpret its present missional challenges and context in a way that is critically correlated with the normative sources of Scripture and tradition (1999, 75-83). This framework will seek as its goal to equip the church for its local witness and provide tools for greater discernment and ongoing reflection on its practices.

In a similar vein, Steuernagel argues for a theological process that takes its cues from the biblical texts that speak of Mary. Such a process will be one in which the dominant metaphor for doing theology is one of discernment as we learn to wait on God for him to come to us – a waiting that often means “theology comes at the second hour.” This posture will lead to greater humility and resist the attempt to control God or to seek to make God an object of our rational methodology for knowing. Such a theological process will be one in which we are comfortable with the reality of mystery and the limits of human knowing, where we are left with questions and stupefied by the presence of God. This will be a way of doing theology in community, one in which we are called to active and full-bodied commitment that points us to obedience and pulls us into action as part of the theological process. Steuernagel wants to see the theological process grounded in local communities seeking to discern God’s will for their missional engagement (2003, 103-106).

5.4 An Affirmative-Antithetical Framework for Discernment

As the survey of recent contributions highlights, there is a convergence of various disciplines within theology, from various countries and from various traditions, toward the development of a framework for discernment that will equip the missional church as it seeks to live out its role and identity in God’s mission. Building on some of these contributions, an affirmative-antithetical framework for discernment will now be humbly submitted, described along eight lines.

5.4.1 God as the starting point

The starting point for discernment is to acknowledge that in all of our thinking, planning, and activity with regards to mission, the starting point is God. This claim is grounded in the theocentric shift in mission theology to the being and activity of God himself. This shift has been captured under the rubric of the *missio Dei*.

As noted above, this shift has several implications, as we understand that mission of God through the unfolding of the biblical story. First, mission flows out of God’s very being.

The God that has revealed himself to us in Scripture is on a mission to redeem the creation which he has made and which he loves. God is like a fountain of overflowing love for the world in which he has made; love flows out of God's very nature. Thus, secondly, mission becomes a way of describing God's redemptive purpose for the world. God has a mission, a redemptive purpose to redeem the creation and reclaim it as his own. Third, the scope of God's mission is as wide as the creation itself. That is, God is acting to redeem and renew the entire cosmos which he has created. There is nothing outside of the scope of God's redemptive mission for the World. Fourth, central to God's redemptive mission is, and always has been, a community of people that God calls, gathers, nourishes and sends out into the world as witnesses to the mighty acts of redemption that God has accomplished.

This *missio Dei* reorientation of mission is essential in forming and shaping the role and identity of God's people. To follow this God is to participate with him in this redemptive mission for the world. The church in the West today is in critical need of this re-orientation of its role and identity in the world. This re-orientation is an essential starting point in the discernment process; nothing is more central in the theological and missiological task that is given to God's people than a recovery of their identity (Bediako 1992; cf. Castells 2004).

In addition to renewing the role and identity of God's people, a *missio Dei* starting point for discernment will also lead the church into a more humble posture of waiting and wondering in the process of discernment. Steuernagel captures this posture well by arguing that theological discernment often comes to God's people at the second hour as we learn to wait on God and his missional initiative in our midst (1993, 103). The discernment posture is one of seeking what God is doing in our midst and how God is inviting us to participate in his missional activity. We are not ultimately responsible for God's mission, but we are called to be the Spirit-led people who are called to committed participation in his mission, as we discern the Spirit's leading (Van Gelder 2007, 19).

The recovery and renewal of the spiritual disciplines will be important in the discernment process, as we develop our capacity to discern the Spirit's leading. We are reminded that we are caught up into the life of the Triune God moving in our communities, believing that God remains active in our midst today (Keifert 2006, 61-71). The recovery and renewal of ancient spiritual disciplines, which equip God's people to dwell in the word and develop the posture of listening for God, is crucial to this practice of discernment. *Lectio divina* can equip us to read the Bible in fresh ways that push us into a listening posture as we wait on the Spirit's leading (Peterson 2006). Recovery of the discipline of spiritual direction is vital to learning to discern God's presence and movements in the midst of our communities (Peterson 1987). Recovery of the discipline of solitude and silence invite us to experience God's transformative presence in the midst of our noisy and distracting daily lives (Barton 2004, 2008).

Committed participation in God's missional activity will be carried out by bearing witness to the redemptive reign of God's redemptive activity in the world; an instrument to carry the message of God's redemptive reign and to invite all people to be reconciled to God; and a foretaste of what God's redemptive reign looks like. God's people are called to discern and respond to the leading of the Holy Spirit in this redemptive mission of God (Van Gelder 2007, 18-19). In this discernment process, the posture of waiting and wondering will at times lead to profound mystery as God's people will never obtain a fully exhaustive understanding of God's missional activity in the world (Steuernagel 1993, 108-110). However, this embracing of the reality of mystery is not in tension with the revealed purposes of God's people and the mission of the church as it is understood in light of the biblical story.

5.4.2 Biblical story as authoritative

A missional hermeneutic for the church in the West provides a renewed understanding of how the biblical story functions as authoritative for the mission of the church. The

authority of the biblical story is the authority of God's own redemptive reign and sovereign power. God has revealed himself in Scripture in order to energize and equip the community of faith for its missional task within God's purposes for the world (N.T. Wright 2005, 21-25, 36). God's revealed word remains the authority for the mission of the church, and must guide and direct the church through God's missional trajectories in our present cultural and historical contexts.

This way of framing the authority of Scripture for the mission of the church builds on and advances the insights that Bosch makes. The crucial task of living out of the biblical story today is to seek to resolve the tension between the historical and cultural context of the biblical text and the historical and cultural context of the church today – a so-called “fusion of horizons” that opens up the meaning of the text for us today. The biblical story remains the point of orientation and the authoritative norm for the church’s missional activity, but understanding that story and its missional implications for the church today is a creative process of allowing the text and its horizon to open up the present horizon in a way that is “consonant with the intention of the text” (Bosch 1986, 74-76; cf. Goheen 2005a, 235-236).

The church must wrestle seriously and honestly with the historical logic of the text, living within its authority and its place within the overarching. This honours the authority of God’s word, and is a crucial element in the process of discernment. Moreover, this improvisation (as N.T. Wright calls it) allows the church in diverse cultural settings to discern the particularities of its missional calling in light of the biblical story. Such a framework makes the biblical story the “mainframe” into which different cultural stories and histories of the church around the world can find their unifying centre (Bediako 1995, 169).

5.4.3 Important role of local congregation

At the heart of the discernment process is the local congregation, a gathering of committed followers of Christ with a particular place and calling in God’s redemptive mission. God carries out his mission primarily through the local congregation of his people: called, gathered, and sent into the world to bear witness in life, word, and deed to the gospel.

It is important to acknowledge the missional potency that is latent in every follower of Christ; a power that has been unleashed throughout the history of the church and resulted in great movements of the gospel. From the study of “living systems” and quantum physics, we see that as environments for discernment are created, this missional potency can be unleashed and God’s people can cultivate their missional imaginations and begin to emerge into new ways of organizing for mission in their local place (Hirsch 2006, 15, 262-263).

Other missional voices concur with Hirsch’s assessment. We need to embrace the growing “open-source discernment” of our networked culture and create space for this type of discernment within the local congregation (Tickle 2009, 150-153). The missional congregation carries out its role and identity in the *missio Dei* by developing aptitudes to discern and respond to the leading of the Holy Spirit (Van Gelder 2007).

An important aside: it is often the case that the word of God comes to those who are on the fringes of the local congregation, and not only to those who are at the centre. God’s power comes to the powerless and to the ordinary people within the local congregation who dwell in the word of God and open themselves up to the Spirit’s leading. Thomas Friedman’s notion of “uploading” is important in this regard, as it reminds us to expectantly seek discernment not simply as a top-down movement from those in authority but also as a side-to-side and bottom-up movement of the Spirit’s leading in the local community (2007, 93-126).

While the central role of the local congregation in the process of discernment should be affirmed, it is important to not lose sight of the critical role of local leadership. The discernment process in the local congregation needs leadership that can guide and direct the Spirit’s leading into mission (Van Gelder 2007, 116-152; cf. Van Gelder 2004a). *Visionary leadership* plays a crucial role in creating strategic structures to facilitate discernment and

decision-making.

A critical task of visionary leadership in the discernment process is articulating a framework for the process. Both Keifert's model for congregational discernment and the Appreciative Inquiry process affirm the important role of leadership here. But more is needed than merely framing the process. A central task of leadership in this process of discernment comes through the teaching and proclamation of the gospel. It is through these acts that God's people are shaped in their missional role and identity, that the hearts of God's people are changed and empowered to respond to God's missional call on their personal and corporate lives. Only through regular encounter with God are followers nourished and equipped for their mission. The gifts of insight and wisdom are important to the church, and often embodied in those whom God sets apart for leadership in the local congregation.

5.4.4 Reading the cultural context

The study of contextualization has made us all aware of the importance understanding the cultural context within which we do theology and practice mission. In the process of discernment, the skill of reading the cultural context within which the people of God seek to fulfil their missional vocation is crucial. There are three dimensions to this framework that need to be developed.

Understanding of culture. How we understand "culture" is critical for developing a framework for discernment. As argued in the third chapter above, there are rich insights to be gained here from a missiological analysis of culture.

- Culture is an integrated whole. "Culture is a unified network of institutions, systems, symbols and customs that order human life in community," as Goheen articulates (2000, 341). Every aspect of culture serves a particular function, conveys meaning to the participants of that culture, and is ultimately dependent for its meaning and function on how it is encompassed within the larger cultural framework (Conn 1980, 148).
- Culture makes visible the fundamental religious beliefs and faith commitments that are at the centre of every culture and provide a framework of meaning for the culture and all of its aspects (Bavinck 1949).
- Culture is ultimately shaped by a worldview that integrates these religious beliefs with the various practices and institutions in the culture. Worldviews in a culture function as grand stories, providing direction and purpose to people's lives (Goheen and Bartholomew 2008, 23-24). While often unarticulated by those living within the culture, these worldview stories make sense of life, offer answers to the most basic human questions we can ask, and give a normative shape and direction to the totality of our communal lives.

Importance of institutions. The worldview stories that give shape to culture are embodied in and told through its institutions. This has profound implications for the mission of the church in the West. Reflecting on the power of institutions in the modern West, James Davison Hunter argues, "The ideas and values of the modern age are not only intellectualized but they are embedded in powerful institutions, arguably the most powerful institutions that have ever existed. . . . the key ideas, values, and characteristics of modernity are carried by specific institutions . . ." (1994, 20). Institutions, as embodiments of the cultural worldview, have a powerful shaping influence on those within the culture, whether they are aware of that influence or not. Ray Pennings writes:

It is not the truth of an idea which makes it influential in a culture-changing

way, but rather “the way (ideas) are embedded in very powerful institutions, networks, interests, and symbols.” Christian witness in our time has been compromised because we mistakenly have thought that changed individuals will change culture, when in fact it is “cultures that ultimately shape the hearts and minds and, thus, direct the lives of individuals” (Pennings 2010).¹⁰⁴

Given these realities of culture, Lesslie Newbigin’s insight into the power of plausibility structures is all the more important for us today (1989, 8-9). The religious beliefs of a culture are always embodied in communities and communal practices that make those beliefs plausible. Therefore the encounter with that culture will always have this embodied, communal dimension to it as the church seeks to live out of the gospel and create its own plausibility structures which make the gospel credible for them. An important task for the mission of the church today is to be itself an alternative society, an institution and community that plausibly embodies the life of the kingdom of God.

5.4.5 Learning from tradition

A framework for discernment will also need to have space for the importance of learning from tradition. We all live within the bounds of a tradition; being “traditioned” is part of what it means to be human and live within human community (Newbigin 1989, 52-57).

Tradition is part of the hermeneutical process of understanding (Muller 1996, 597, 645). Muller’s insight enlarges our understanding of the hermeneutical circle to include the important place of the community of interpretation of which we are a part. Reflection upon tradition also helps us understand how the gospel has been contextualized in the past. Our confessional traditions reflect the historical and contextual challenges that faced past generations, from which we have much to learn (Conn 1983, 17). Conn laments the way in which we often fail to frame our confessions as examples of contextual theologizing:

Our creedal formulations, structured to respond to a sixteenth-century cultural setting and its problems, lose their historical character as contextual confessions of faith and become cultural universals, having comprehensive validity in all times and settings. . . . The creed as a missionary document framed in the uniqueness of an historical moment has too often been remythologized . . . into a universal Essence for all times (1983, 17).

Tradition also carries with it a certain authority. In light of the contextual nature of our traditions, it is important to affirm the teachings and confessions of our tradition as attempts to grasp the gospel and its implications for the time in which the authors lived and for the issues that they faced. Creeds, confessions, and ecclesial forms are wonderful gifts given to us by our brothers and sisters in other times. They help us understand the gospel more fully and protect it from error. However, we need to remain clear that it is the gospel that carries binding authority.

Finally, tradition has a way of connecting our particular stories with the larger narrative of Scripture in which we all live. As Bediako argues, the question of tradition in the context of African theology focuses on the relationship between the community of faith and

¹⁰⁴ Pennings and Hunter build on the insights of T.S. Eliot, who captured this same missional challenge facing the church in the West in this way, “The problem of leading a Christian life in a non-Christian society is now very present to us. It is not merely the problem of a minority in a society of individuals holding an alien belief. It is the problem constituted by *our implication in a network of institutions from which we cannot dissociate ourselves*; institutions the operation of which appears no longer neutral, but non-Christian; and as for the Christian who is not conscious of his dilemma – and he is in the majority – he is becoming more and more de-Christianized by all sorts of unconscious pressures . . .” (Eliot 1940, 17-18).

its “pre-Christian” past (1995, 224-225). Wrestling with this, African theologians have learned to appreciate more fully their ancestors within the African worldview, functioning like a cloud of witnesses pointing toward the fulfilment that was to come in Christ, much like the way in which Israel’s faith is shaped throughout the OT story (Bediako 1995, 226). Tradition is a linkage with the past that embeds the community of faith into the universal story of God’s people. This linkage between the present, past, and biblical story is crucial for the discernment process.

5.4.6 Missional practices are the goal

In order to serve the mission of the church in the West today, a framework for discernment must ultimately lead the church into missional practices¹⁰⁵ as its goal. Indeed, the process of obedience leading to missional practices is part of the discernment process itself for the church. Participation in God’s mission is the focal point for missional discernment. The local congregation is called to embody practices flowing from the discovery of its missional vocation in its local context. Consider four dimensions of this argument:

1. *The missional church will need to overcome the theory/practice dichotomy* that has been part of the Western story for much of its development. The Enlightenment exalted the idea of finding pure reason to function as a foundation for public life and provide objectivity and certainty in a way that religious reason was not perceived to be able to (Keifert 2009, 18). Part of the legacy was a sharp wedge driven between so-called “pure reason” and “practical reason,” a divide that has crippled the church in the West by creating a divide between theory and practice (2009, 18). This legacy in the West is rooted in Aristotle’s distinction between *theoria* and *praxis*. Likewise, Musopole laments the way in which theology in the West was separated from mission and theory became separate from practice (1998, 11-14).¹⁰⁶ As a result, logical coherence became the goal of theological reflection and theology lost its grounding in the life and witness of God’s people. A framework for discernment will seek to overcome this divide, recovering the biblical wisdom tradition that can focus theological discernment on the missional vocation of God’s people in our cultural context today (Keifert 2009, 18-19).
2. *What is needed is the recovery of praxis*, understood as the discipline of reflective practices and reflection upon missional practices. As Gutierrez suggests, we need to recover a sense of theology as “critical reflection upon missional practices”:

Theology as critical reflection on Christian praxis in the light of the word does not replace the other functions of theology, such as wisdom and rational knowledge; rather it presupposes and needs them. But this is not all. We are not concerned here with a mere juxtaposition. This critical function of theology necessarily leads to redefinition of these other two tasks. Henceforth, wisdom and rational knowledge will more explicitly have ecclesial praxis as their point of departure and their context (1973, 13-14).

Discernment that leads to missional practices, and reflection upon those practices that

¹⁰⁵ “Missional practices” are not simply activities of the church, but is a broad category intended to include all of the rhythms of *being* and *doing* within the local congregation as it discerns and engages in its missional vocation.

¹⁰⁶ Musopole puts it this way, “when theology took after the Hellenistic critical spirit, and when in the eighteenth century, with the ascendancy of reason as the final epistemological court of appeal, it conformed to the spirit of the age, theology developed into an end in, and of itself. It became separated from its evangelical basis” (1998, 11).

leads to further discernment, is the necessary rhythm in which the church must seek its missional vocation. Fowler's correlational-hermeneutic dynamic in the local congregation is instructive: "interpretations of the situations of present challenges and their contexts are brought into mutually critical correlation with interpretations of the normative sources of Christian tradition and practices" (1999, 83). This dynamic is one in which the local community of faith continually reflects critically on its practices, drawing from their interpretations of Scripture and their local context, leading to greater awareness of their missional vocation and greater faithfulness in living out that vocation in their local place (Fowler 1999, 80-81).

3. *The reflective missional practices that will flow out of this dynamic will lead the local congregation in the path of wisdom and developing greater capacity for ongoing discernment.* Keifert rightly calls us to recover the Christian practice of wisdom as a crucial part of the discernment process for the local congregation (2009, 19). The "rationalism" of the Western tradition has highlighted the values of conceptual clarity and logical coherence, insights that are critical for the church today. However, what is desperately needed is a recovery of *wisdom* that seeks to highlight the importance of right action with the right means for the context in which we find ourselves (Musopole 1998, 39-46). The recovery of wisdom will equip the local congregation to address the pressing life issues that face its local community and arise out of its local context. This will lead to discernment and theological reflection that is in service of the mission of the church.
4. Finally, *the missional practices to which discernment will lead the local church are a kind of "transformative action" aligned with God's missional purposes for the world.* This is part of the *missio Dei* re-orientation in mission that was noted above. The church finds its role and identity within the mission of God. This must lead the church into missional practices as it discerns its vocation in its local place. Hendriks captures this dynamic well: "Theology tries to discern present and past realities hermeneutically in order to discern God's will, so as to participate, vocationally, in his ongoing praxis towards an anticipated future eschatological reality" (2004, 33). Hendriks argues that this "transformative action" will take place on multiple levels – the personal life that is conformed more into the likeness of Christ and his mission; the life of the local congregation as it seeks to bear witness in its life, word, and deed to the coming reign of God; the vocational life of individual Christians scattered throughout the world in their particular callings; the academic life as the church engages the issues that confront it theologically; and the ecological life as the church carries out its task as stewards of God's good creation (2004, 33).

5.4.7 Avoiding the dangers of syncretism and irrelevance

It is vital for a framework of discernment to reflect deeply on the relationship between the gospel and culture. The challenge bearing witness to the gospel within a particular cultural context can lead God's people into the problem of syncretism or irrelevance (Newbigin 1989, 141-154). On the one hand, the danger of syncretism is in the church allowing the gospel to be absorbed into the idolatrous forms, structures, or categories of the culture and, as a result, to be compromised. On the other hand, the danger of irrelevance is in the church attempting to be faithful to the gospel by holding onto foreign, or outdated, forms of it that become irrelevant to the contemporary cultural context. In both cases, the church's witness is hindered. It is vital that we carefully articulate the relationship between the gospel and culture.

First, the gospel must be distinguished from all human cultures. Human culture is an expression of the common way of life shared by a particular community of people living at a particular place and time. The gospel is the good news of God's redemptive work, and

concerns the meaning of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. The gospel is the renewing power of God at work in the world today through the Holy Spirit. We must not equate any particular cultural response to the gospel *with* the gospel.

Second, while distinguished *from* culture, the gospel is always expressed and embodied *in* cultural forms and *by* communities immersed in particular cultures. We cannot speak of the gospel without using the language, symbols, images, or practices of a particular culture. Goheen argues, “The gospel is not a timeless message quarantined from all cultural ‘contamination.’ Rather, the gospel is always embodied in the life and words of a particular culture” (2000, 339). There is no such thing as a culturally disembodied gospel.

Third, the gospel will inevitably call all cultures to change. All cultures are distorted responses to God and his creation because of the reality and extent of human sin. No culture remains neutral or immune from the effects of sin. At the same time, no culture is completely and utterly distorted by sin’s power. The gospel will both affirm the ways in which a culture manifests God’s glory, and critique the ways in which a culture’s response to God’s revelation is distorted by human sin and idolatry. Newbigin speaks here of the gospel’s “yes” and “no” to every culture, its word of grace and judgment (1989, 152).

Fourth, the gospel and culture are both communally embodied and dynamic in character. Newbigin laments, “The question of gospel and culture is sometimes discussed as though it were a matter of the meeting of two quite different things: a disembodied message and a historically conditioned pattern of social life” (1989, 188). But there is no disembodied gospel – the gospel is always encountered within a cultural context and as it is embodied by a particular community. The same is true with culture and cultural beliefs – they come to us embodied in particular cultures by particular communities.

Further, neither the gospel nor culture are static notions. The gospel, in all its embodied forms, is dynamic and moving. The implications of the gospel in technology, for example, are different than its implications five hundred years ago. Likewise, cultures are constantly developing and changing.

Fifth, and flowing out of the fourth dimension to this relationship, not only is the church relating to dynamic, ever-changing culture, but it is doing so in an environment of great tension. The church will always find itself facing a cultural story with its own religious faith commitments, embodied by its own institutions – to which the church brings to the gospel, an entirely different but equally comprehensive story with its own institutions and practices. This is a recipe for profound tension. Believers will seek to be shaped by the gospel while at the same time immersing themselves in a cultural story and all its commitments. Living with this tension and seeking to resolve it together in a community of faith is a vital dimension to the discernment process. Consider briefly how such discernment can take place.

At the heart of living within this tension is the challenge of discerning where the gospel speaks affirmation to culture and where the gospel speaks judgment to it. Newbigin developed a Christological model to help inform this discernment, with particular reflection upon the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ (1977, 118-119). The church is called to identify with and be “for” its particular place, yet in a posture rooted in Christ and his cross: the ultimate statement of radical judgment. God’s people are to be “for” the world *and* “against” the world. Newbigin explains:

A society which accepts the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus as its ultimate standard of reference will have to be a society whose whole style of life, and not only its words, conveys something of that radical dissent from the world which is manifested in the cross, and at the same time something of that affirmation of the world which is made possible by the resurrection (1970, 6).

To broaden and deepen Newbigin’s framework, it is important to recognize that such discernment must begin by seeking to affirm the goodness of God’s creational design and

order that is embodied in each culture. God continues to uphold his good creation and there remain reflections and signs of that goodness in each culture. As Bavinck argues, by God's common grace, he safeguards each culture from total deterioration. Signs of this can be seen both in the human conscience, which God continues to preserve, and in many cultural values that give expression to aspects of God's creational purposes (Bavinck 1960, 173). Affirming creational goodness is no easy task, but must begin by seeking to understand how each aspect of culture can reflect something of the goodness of God's intention.

On the other hand, all of creation has been deeply affected by the destructive power of sin, twisting and seeking to destroy God's good creation. Signs of the idolatrous power and effects of sin on culture must be critiqued and judged in light of the gospel. Bavinck calls culture a "structural totality in which everything hangs together and in which religion occupies a central position" (1960, 173). That "religious core" of culture will either be characterized by a faithful response to God or an idolatrous response. There will always remain signs of creational goodness, signs of the perversion and idolatry of sin, and signs of God's redemptive power to redeem and restore. These complexities deepen the tension that God's people must feel as they seek to discern a faithful and relevant witness to the gospel.

Work done in the field of missiology has provided some helpful examples of the type of discernment needed. Three models can be briefly highlighted. The first is A.G. Hogg's notion of challenging relevance, something he developed in the context of wrestling with the nature of the gospel witness to Hindus. Hogg suggests that in seeking to contextualize the gospel in a particular culture, one must look for cultural categories that open up the culture's desires and hopes that can be affirmed by the gospel (11-15). Hogg gives the example of the messianic expectations surrounding the kingdom of God that were employed by the Synoptic gospel writers. There is something of the cultural reality affirmed here – the hopes and desires of the people. At the same time, those cultural realities are not just affirmed, but the gospel is allowed to bring a challenging word to those realities. In the case of the Synoptic gospels, the expectations surrounding the kingdom of God are both affirmed through the coming of Jesus and yet radically challenged and re-shaped by Jesus himself (Hogg 1947, 11-17). Thus, the missional challenge facing the church in contextualizing the gospel can be seen as one of bringing the gospel to bear in a way that has a challenging relevance to the cultural context and realities.

A second example comes from Hendrik Kraemer's work. He spoke of the gospel as a "subversive fulfilment" of those human longings driving every human religion. These universal longings of the heart arise because of the way in which God upholds his creation and reveals himself through it. These longings should be affirmed in the gospel encounter with a human religion, as the longings are a good part of God's creational order and providential care for the creation. However, as these longings find their fulfilment only in the gospel of Christ, they will in turn become subverted by the gospel in the process (Kraemer 1939, 3-4). Wim Visser 't Hooft builds on this notion from Kraemer and utilizes it for his understanding of the challenges we face in cultural adaptation. Visser 't Hooft writes, "Kraemer uses the term 'subversive fulfilment' and in the same way we could speak of 'subversive accommodation.' Words from the traditional culture and religion must be used, but they must be converted in the way in which Paul and John converted Greek philosophical and religious concepts" (1967, 13).

A third example comes from J.H. Bavinck's notion of "possessio." As Bavinck argues, God powerfully reveals himself through the creation and its order, as encountered by every culture in the world. Human sin has affected all aspects of life, including cultural formation and development. However, by God's common grace, each culture is safeguarded from total deterioration from sin. The fruits of this common grace are seen in the human conscience that God preserves, as well as good cultural values that can be affirmed. The missional challenge facing the church is to affirm those good creational, cultural values and

insights and then at the same time to redirect them for Christ, so that they are made to serve his kingdom purposes and so are filled with new meaning as a result (Bavinck 1960, 173-179). This act of affirming and redirecting is what Bavinck means by the notion of “possessio.” In Bavinck’s important work on world religions, he offers what he terms five “magnetic points” to describe the specific religious consciousness that is rooted in our human existence as God’s creatures. These five areas of human longing found in all religions are the following: the human longing for a relationship with the cosmos; the human sense that there are certain rules that must be obeyed; the human longing for meaning and purpose in life; the sense that there is something wrong with the world; and the sense that there is some ultimate reality or power in the universe to which humanity is somehow related (1961, 32-33).

In order to be a faithful and relevant witness, God’s people will need to be drawn into both an internal and external dialogue (Goheen 2000, 353). The first of those dialogues will be within the community of faith as it seeks to faithfully embody the gospel and biblical story in its local place. Newbigin uses the imagery of “indwelling” to capture what is at stake here (1989, 34-38). God’s people are called to so indwell the biblical story that its story begins to shape the entire way they understand the world and their purpose in it. As argued above, a missional hermeneutic provides a powerful tool for the church to indwell the biblical story of God’s mission today. This communal dialogue will also be experienced in the life of the individual believer, building the discipline of continually scrutinizing the cultural story in light of the gospel.

Second, external dialogue must also engage those who are “other” than us, whether by culture, geography, ethnicity, or ecclesiastical traditions. Faithful and relevant witness will only be discerned within this tension as we develop the capacity to listen to those who are outside of our cultural frame of reference and able to help discern the dangers of syncretism and irrelevance that we face. We all experience our own cultural blind spots, of which we are often completely unaware and will remain so without serious dialogue with those outside our culture. Those within communities of faith who are seeking to indwell the gospel within their cultural reality also need us in order to discern their own faithful and relevant witness. It is the global and ecumenical dialogue between God’s people in both the local and global contexts of our world today that is critical for the faithful and relevant witness of the church today (Goheen 2000, 361-364). As Sanneh and others have demonstrated, there has been a legacy of Western syncretism which has hindered the fruitfulness of the church’s witness in Africa by Western missionaries; and, at the same time, has hindered the witness of the church in the West (1993, 15-22, 152-183).

5.4.8 Avoiding the dangers of ethnocentrism and relativism

There is a second set of issues involved in the process of discernment as it concerns the challenge of relating the gospel to culture. In discerning the relationship between the gospel and the growing diversity of cultures of the world, we must seek to avoid the dangers of both ethnocentrism and relativism. On the one hand, *ethnocentrism* is where one cultural expression of the gospel is considered normative for all cultures. Throughout the history of modern missions, this has been one of the preeminent dangers facing the church, as often the Western expression of the gospel was deemed normative for all cultures. On the other hand, *relativism* is where no cultural expression of the gospel will be judged by Scripture or by any other cultural form. All cultural expressions are simply accepted as equally valid and true, without any attempt at critique. When the church loses the ability to critique whether the gospel is being contextualized in a faithful or unfaithful manner, it is an easy slide into cultural relativism. Both ethnocentrism and relativism inhibit the faithful embodiment and communication of the gospel and so must be avoided.

For the church in the West to avoid these twin dangers, it is critically important for a framework of discernment to point, again, to the importance of global ecumenical dialogue.

Andrew Walls writes, “None of us can reach Christ’s completeness on our own. We need each other’s vision to correct, enlarge, and focus our own; only together are we complete in Christ” (2002, 79). Without the purposed invitation of those who are “other” than us into the process of discernment, we will be bound by our own cultural frames of reference and blinded to the ways in which we have come to equate our own cultural expressions of the gospel with the gospel itself.

This dialogue happens as we learn to listen deeply to those who are “other” than us. Given the growing global networks of our day, and part of the flattening of the world noted by Friedman, we must also learn to listen to the “other.” It is crucial in our discernment to allow those from other cultures, places, traditions, and times in history to expose the ways in which we can find ourselves captive to our own cultural limitations and myopic in our insights.

Moreover, there is something about the nature of this dialogue and posture of opening ourselves up to the mutual critique of our brothers and sisters around the globe that embodies something of the very character of our Christian faith. The translation of the faith into various cultures lies at the heart of Christianity from its birth (Sanneh 1989, 1). This hallmark of translation has had imbedded within it a dual-force in the development of Christianity. On the one hand, it has pushed to relativize each cultural expression of the faith in a way that prevents one cultural expression from becoming dominant, which often leads to ethnocentrism. On the other hand, it has pushed to de-stigmatize each culture, opening up that culture and the freedom for the gospel to extend into ever new cultural expressions (Sanneh 1989, 1; 1993, 135). It is precisely the particularism of Christianity that is necessary for its global spread, because inherent in the particularity of Christianity is the translation of the faith into the local context (Sanneh 1993, 120-138).

In order to demonstrate the importance of this type of dialogue, return again to the emergence of African Independent Churches (AICs). David Bosch’s assessment of the significance of the AICs for the development of Christianity as a whole is striking:

Few students of the African religious scene today would doubt the importance and significance – also for the future of Christianity on this continent – of the African Independent Churches. These churches, together with similar Christian movements among other primal societies . . . may indeed be seen as the fifth major Christian church type, after the Eastern Orthodox churches, the Roman Catholic Church, the Protestant Reformation, and the Pentecostal churches (1987, 9).

AICs have provided keen insight into the practice of contextualized missional practices for the church. As Oduro argues, AICs are at a most basic level “churches that were started in Africa, by Africans, and mostly for Africans” (6). The intentional desire to contextualize the Christian faith for the African culture lives deeply within the bones of the AICs. Oduro offers several examples of contextualization at work within the AICs and their practices of mission.¹⁰⁷

- A strong sense of *missio Dei*: this is seen in the way in which God is often experienced through dreams in which he takes the missional initiative, creating a posture in which the community becomes expectant for God to speak and in which they seek to discern their participation in God’s action (Oduro, 23-27).
- Emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit in the church’s mission activity: There is a strong belief in prophecy and visions, through which God speaks, heals, and leads the

¹⁰⁷ It should be noted that the AICs, like every network or denomination of churches in every cultural context, is marked by a diversity of expressions, some of which are more faithful to the gospel than others and some of which are more susceptible to cultural syncretism than others. The challenge of avoiding irrelevancy and syncretism faces every church in every cultural context.

church in its missional endeavours against the spiritual forces of darkness and evil.

- God's mission understood broadly: The community is expectant for God to address the real life issues facing the Africans' local context.

All of these are ways in which the AICs are practicing mission with an understanding that it is primarily the work of God.

In addition to this primal commitment to *missio Dei*, the AICs are developing a holistic approach to mission in which the Western dualisms between word and deed ministry are overcome (Oduro, 73-85). With a holistic understanding of human nature, the AICs seek to avoid the secularizing medical practices that were imported from the West and seek instead to find a place for healing as a central part of their faith and life as a community. Working with an African worldview, the AICs seek to address issues of protection from evil powers, healing rituals, the role of ancestors, and the place of prophetic diagnosis of problems troubling both individuals and communities. For the AICs, this is a key way in which they seek to live out the compassion of God in their mission practice, something vital to their understanding of God and his mission in the world.

A third example from Oduro is the important role given to practices of communal celebration by the AICs. The joy and freedom to celebrate is seen as an important sign of the work of the Holy Spirit among the people in the community and is a vital way in which the AICs seek to connect deeply with the African culture (Oduro, 92). Music, dance, and festivities are a vital part of the mission practice and, as Oduro comments, "this is a key part of the AICs' contribution to mission: joyful people who have been changed by a spiritual experience, sharing their hope with all those that they meet in ways they can understand" (103).

As Oduro concludes, the AICs are demonstrating in a comprehensive way the need to contextualize the gospel for their cultural context.¹⁰⁸ What we see in the AICs is the practice of contextualization as a central concern that guides them to discern suitable practices and means in which to carry out their sense of missional call. As Oduro summarizes, "In the AICs there is not much discussion of contextualisation; they just do it" (207). There is much for the church in the West to learn as we dialogue with our brothers and sisters in the AICs, and learn from their instinctive impulse toward seeking to develop contextual missional practices. The theologizing happening in the AICs provides a model for missional activity that serves the local congregation in its discernment and practice (Bediako 2004, 59).

A second area of insight from the AICs is the powerful critique of the Western theological and mission legacy that has been experienced from an African perspective. The AICs have exposed the ethnocentrism under which Western missionaries and churches have operated (Oduro 37-39). One of the implications of this ethnocentrism has been an implicitly negative outlook toward African culture, something to which the AICs have responded strongly by seeking to affirm the positive aspects of African cultures. Moreover, as part of this legacy, the AICs have exposed the ways in which the Western church has become captive to the Enlightenment worldview and, as a result, developed a syncretism of the Christian faith. Oduro identifies six key ways in which the Enlightenment worldview has shaped the Western church as that has come to expression in Africa (40-46):

1. The naturalism of the Enlightenment worldview has led to the denial of God speaking to his people directly through dreams and visions.

¹⁰⁸ "A proper contextualization includes everything: from the obvious things, like the difference between Western and African musical instruments, to the less obvious things, such as the way salvation in Christ is explained. It includes the way authority is defined in the church, the way pastoral decisions are made, the way rituals are performed, the way converts are trained as disciples, the way the church relates to the state, and many other things" (Oduro, 207).

2. The notion of cultural superiority that marked the Enlightenment has led to the loss of human dignity among the African people, something the AICs strongly seek to restore.
3. Western missionaries refused to engage experiences – rooted in the African worldview – that did not fit into the Enlightenment framework, such as the place of ancestors, or the practices of witchcraft or polygamy.
4. Models of education from the West were imposed which emphasized rational abstract knowledge that seemed disconnected from the African lived experience.
5. A secularizing scientific understanding of human health was adopted, and medical techniques from the West were imposed while traditional practices of healing were dismissed.
6. The Enlightenment dualism between the sacred and secular aspects of life led to the separation of faith and religious practices from the rest of life.

A central part of this legacy that garnered much critique from the AICs is the rationalism of Western theology. Musopole argues that Western theology has become fundamentally captive to the rationalist epistemology of the Enlightenment, which has caused much of the West's theological reflection to tend towards abstraction, the quest for coherent systems of knowledge that make bold claims of epistemic certainty, and a disconnection between theological activity and the missional practices of the church (11-15). He recognizes that the rationalism of the Enlightenment proved "fruitful in terms of physical research, technological development and the understanding of the material created order" (37). However, its bold claims to adjudicate all truth claims through the bar of reason has left a legacy of theologizing that is not well-suited to serve the missional challenges facing the church – both in Africa and in the West (40-45). Musopole offers this devastating critique of the particularly negative impact this epistemological model has had on the African experience:

In order for our thinking to be valid, it had to conform to Western standards. The African ways stood like a captive before the Supreme Court of European Enlightenment and constantly found guilty of not living up to the European standard (39).

Musopole offers an epistemological model developed within the biblical tradition of wisdom as a primary organizing category, leading to a much more humble epistemic posture that is in line with the framework of discernment we are seeking to develop for the church in the West (45-47).

We need each other. The non-Western church, particularly the AICs, can contribute to the Western church's renewal of theology as a discipline that serves the mission of the church and is rooted in the particularity of the local context. However, lest we fall into the trap of relativism, we must be reminded of the need for mutual critique. All contextual theology needs to be inter-contextual and trans-contextual, as a reflective action between the West and the non-West. What is needed is an inter-dependent mutuality of contextual theologies, where we learn by "eating theology with each other," in the words of John Mbiti (Bediako 1995, 167).

5.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, an affirmative-antithetical framework of discernment, as outlined above, is a critical tool that can equip the church in the West today to discern its missional vocation in its contemporary cultural context. Such a framework is needed in order for the church to avoid the dangers of syncretism and irrelevance on the one hand; and ethnocentrism and relativism on the other hand. Equipped with a framework of discernment, the church will also be better positioned to engage the issues identified throughout this study that are arising

from the local and global context in which this study emerges; from the place we find ourselves at in the unfolding of the Western cultural story; and from our brothers and sisters within both the missional and emergent church movements. The central research question has now been answered. And now, to an analysis of these issues, in light of this framework and building on the work of the previous chapters, we turn in the final chapter as we practice discernment of missional vocation in six key areas.

CHAPTER SIX – PRACTICING DISCERNMENT IN SIX KEY AREAS

5

6.1 Introduction

Discernment of missional vocation is a challenging task facing the church in the West today. It is also very important for the church to develop greater capacity in this discernment as the church seeks a renewed missional identity. The church needs to discern afresh its missional vocation, and what follows in this final chapter are six concrete areas in which the church must learn to practice missional discernment. These areas are highlighted as they embody the coalescence of themes that have emerged throughout the study. The framework of discernment will now be put on and used to practice missional discernment in the following six areas: the *missio Dei*, overcoming dangerous polarities, leadership and authority, preaching, the gospel, and cultural analysis.

6.2 Missio Dei

There is much to affirm in the notion of the *missio Dei*, as it has crucial implications for both our understanding and practice of a missional ecclesiology today. However, there remain some areas of concern as contemporary discussions and practices on the *missio Dei* are marked by a growing divergence of perspectives.

6.2.1 Affirming a good framework for mission

First, the *missio Dei* should, indeed, be the theocentric starting point for our thinking and practice of mission. It recovers an understanding of mission as the mission of God to redeem and renew the entire creation. Within this broad horizon of God's mission, we understand the mission of the church to be the committed participation of God's people in it. This theocentric starting point moves us past a narrow ecclesiocentric and anthropocentric understanding of mission, which reduces mission to just an activity of the church. This theocentric way of understanding mission is bringing a much-needed shift for the church in the West. Jan Jongeneel writes,

To understand this new development [of the *missio Dei*], it is necessary to go back to the age of the Enlightenment, which, for the first time in history, did not regard mission as God's very own work but as a purely human endeavour. Thereafter, a very anthropocentric theology emerged, which intentionally severed the . . . strong link between mission . . . and the doctrine of the Trinity (1997, 60).

With this theocentric shift, mission is no longer understood as simply one of the many tasks of the church (and optional at that) taking place “over there” in the non-West. Neither is it limited, in an activist understanding, to the diaconal work of a church in its local neighbourhood. Rather, mission provides the most important clue to recovering the role and identity of God's people today. God is missional in his very being. God's people are, too.

This theocentric starting point for mission keeps us humble, acknowledging that God is completely sovereign in mission. The fruit of all of our missional endeavours is ultimately dependent upon God's work, not our own. Furthermore, it introduces into our mission an element of mystery. God's missional activity in our midst is at times beyond our ability to calculate or program. This places us in the posture of discernment, in which our central question must continually be discerning what God is doing in our communities.

We must affirm how the *missio Dei* framework grounds our mission in the cosmic scope of God's redemptive purposes, as unfolded in the biblical story. This broader scope of

mission provides a biblical-theological framework within which a holistic understanding and practice of mission can emerge, and by which the church in the West can overcome past dichotomies between church and world and between word and deed. This is a helpful corrective to the crippling effect these dichotomies can have on the mission of the church today. Rather than drive a wedge between these issues, the *missio Dei* enlarges our understanding of mission. When the mission of the church is understood within the context of God's redemptive purposes for the creation, that mission involves the entirety of the church's life, deeds, and words. This approach can also go a long way in equipping and empowering the church to engage the global crises of our day.

Missio Dei provides a missional framework for the vocation of individual believers in their various callings, something that is a critical part of the church's missional role. If the scope of God's mission is as wide as creation, then the church's mission must reflect God's reign and rule in every area of life. The various callings of God's people become a primary place where the church's missional role and identity is expressed and where missional engagement takes place: "I do not believe that the role of the church in a secular society is primarily exercised in the corporate action of the churches as organized bodies in the political or cultural fields. . . . On the contrary, I believe that it is through the action of Christian lay people, playing their roles as citizens, workers, managers, legislators, etc., not wearing the label 'Christian' but deeply involved in the secular world in the faith that God is at work there . . ." (Newbigin 1977, 127).

The *missio Dei* understanding of mission has become an important hermeneutical key through which our understanding of the biblical story is renewed. It is important for the church in the West today to recover the biblical story as a sweeping metanarrative - the true meaning of the history of the world and our lives. As we indwell the biblical story, our identity becomes shaped and defined by the God of the Bible and his redemptive mission. In contrast to other popular biblical-theological starting points for thinking about mission today, the *missio Dei* is able to capture the biblical story as a whole. When the starting point for our thinking about mission is the incarnation of Jesus Christ or the practices of Jesus' earthly ministry, for example, much of the OT is neglected in our formulations of mission and a truncated understanding of the missional nature of the church and its mission follows. We recall the words of Johannes Blauw:

When we speak about the church as "the people of God in the world" and enquire into the real nature of this church, we cannot avoid speaking about the roots of the church which are to be found in the Old Testament idea of Israel as the people of the covenant. So the question of the missionary nature of the church, that is, the real relationship between the people of God and the world, cannot be solved until we have investigated the relation between Israel and the nations of the earth (1959, 91).

The *missio Dei* provides us with a way of reading the biblical story as a whole and recovering the centrality of mission in that story, thus helping us to be more faithful to Scripture in its entirety and more biblical in our formulations and practices of mission today.

Moreover, the *missio Dei* provides this hermeneutical key by recovering a redemptive-historical perspective on God's mission, which prevents the mission of God from being loosed from its biblical moorings. One of the ways this loosening can happen is when mission is formulated in systematic ways, in contrast to redemptive-historical formulations – for example, when the *missio Dei* is reduced to the metaphor of "sending" in the biblical story. Can the mission of God be identified almost entirely with the notion of the Father's sending activity: the Father sends the Son who sends the church and the Spirit? Two problems have emerged from this systematic articulation. On the one hand, it neglects much of the OT story, crucial for our understanding of the missional role and identity of the church.

On the other hand, as history has shown, when the *missio Dei* is formulated in largely systematic ways, it becomes very easy to pour in our own content – in this case, into the notion of “sending.” The *missio Dei* becomes more shaped by our own pre-understandings than by the narrative of the biblical story.

What we need is to understand the *missio Dei* in a narrative way within the context of the biblical story. The *missio Dei* describes God’s long-term intention to restore the whole creation and all of human life. The “sending” metaphor is certainly biblical, but not the only way of understanding God’s mission. The church’s mission of *participation* – in God’s mission – is broader than *sending*. The role of God’s people in God’s mission, as unfolded throughout the story of the Bible, is a central one indeed (Genesis 12:1-3, Exodus 19:3-6, Matthew 28:18-20, Luke 24:46-49, John 20:21-23, Acts 1:7-8).

6.2.2 Critique of some emerging emphases

While there is much to affirm in the *missio Dei* framework, it is important to critique some emphases emerging among those who share the *missio Dei* framework.

The first area of critique concerns a growing *instrumental* view of the church. As demonstrated in chapter four, there are a growing number of voices within the Emergent and Missional Church movements using a *missio Dei* framework in such a way that the institutional church is increasingly marginalized. In particular, there is a growing tendency to locate the focus of God’s mission outside of the church and in the world. Focus is being given to God’s work outside the institutional church, and the task of the church is being identified as finding where God is at work and seeking to join God in that work. It is claimed that if the church does not join God in that work, the church will be bypassed, and God will continue his work in the world without the church.

This instrumental view of the church is narrow-minded. It is difficult, if not impossible, to read the narrative of the biblical story and not be confronted with the central role that the people of God play in the mission of God. As noted above, a narrative redemptive-historical understanding of the mission of God will keep us grounded firmly in the biblical story and allow that story to define what is meant by the mission of God. When the entire biblical story is read with a missional hermeneutic, the people of God take up a central role as the primary means by which God accomplishes his redemptive purposes for the world. Any notion of the *missio Dei* which eclipses the central role of the church is simply not consonant with the centrality of God’s people to his mission.

This instrumental view of the church highlights the need for a cosmic pneumatology that can help us understand the work of the Holy Spirit within the world. A cosmic pneumatology will help us in the West rediscover the genuine catholicity of the church, as well as its socio-political task in the world (Bolt 1998, 262; see also Bolt 1989 and 1995). It will also help to put before us the cosmic scope of God’s redemptive purposes, which are nothing less than the renewal of all things. Bolt writes, “Redemption in Christ . . . does not negate but restores and is thus the affirmation and fulfilment of our true humanity including legitimate human quests for truth, freedom, unity, justice, and peace. In this sense it is correct to say that salvation is ‘humanization’” (1998, 263). However, we are profoundly limited in our ability to discern in various socio-political movements the work of the Holy Spirit. Bolt captures this limitation well:

The problem here is that the provisionality and ambiguity of human experience calls for extreme caution in the process of discernment. Scientific knowledge, expressions of solidarity, and movements for political liberation, justice, and peace, *can* be expressions of the Spirit of truth, unity, liberation, and hope, *can* be a blessing to humanity; *but* they can also lead (and *have led!*) to idolatry and incredible human barbarism (1998, 263).

Much work remains to be done that can renew our understanding of the Spirit's work in redemption and in creation, allowing us to discern and participate in the Spirit's work in the world without compromising our distinct Christian identity and witness in the world. This is becoming an exceedingly important missional task for the church in the West today.

The second area of critique concerns the way in which the relationship between the church and the kingdom of God is construed. The mission of the church is more than its diaconal work. And, *contra* the instrumental view of the church noted above, there can be no wedge between the kingdom of God and the church. Newbigin's critique of Hoekendijk's instrumental view of the church in relationship to the kingdom of God is instructive here. As Newbigin argues, the church's relationship to the kingdom of God must always be seen to be three-fold. The church is a sign, instrument, *and* foretaste of the kingdom of God. Particular emphasis needs to be placed upon the last image Newbigin uses. While Hoekendijk believed the church could be sufficiently defined by its function – its participation in God's work in liberation, seeking justice, and peacemaking in the world – Newbigin argued the church is as much about being a distinct community (Exodus 19:3-6, 1 Peter 2:9-12) in which the kingdom of God is embodied as a foretaste of redemption as it is about being an agent of witness in its local neighbourhood. Rather than drive a wedge, we must hold together these different angles on the relationship between the church and the kingdom.

On the other hand, let us not go the other way and conflate the kingdom of God with the church. Ridderbos writes, "The church is the innermost circle, in which the kingdom reveals itself in the present world. The church and the kingdom of God do not coincide. The kingdom is broader than the church. Christ is not only head of the church, but he is also the head of all things in heaven and on earth" (1966, 6). As McKnight writes, while lamenting the need for more clarity within the Emergent movement about the relationship between the kingdom and the church, "There is no kingdom without faith and attachment to Jesus Christ, and there is no kingdom without attachment to Jesus' followers. In other words, Jesus' kingdom vision is not that far from Paul's church vision" (2008b, 3).

A biblical understanding of the relationship between the kingdom of God and the church will hold before us conversion and repentance as the central call of the coming of the kingdom of God into the world (Mark 1:15, Matthew 25:31-46, Luke 13:1-9). Gilbert captures this dynamic of the kingdom of God well: "Being a citizen of Christ's kingdom is not a matter of just 'living a kingdom life' or 'following Jesus' example' . . . You can live like Jesus lived all you want, but unless you've come to the crucified king in repentance and faith, relying on him alone as the perfect sacrifice for your sin and your only hope for salvation, you're neither a Christian nor a citizen of his kingdom" (Gilbert 2010, 94-96).

Finally, a missional hermeneutic provides the church in the West with a framework for understanding the mission of the church as one in which we are called to continue the kingdom mission of Jesus in the world (John 20:21-23). Following the logic of Jesus' mission, the church is called to announce the arrival of the kingdom of God; to demonstrate the restorative nature of the kingdom of God through its life, deeds, and words; to teach about the kingdom of God and form kingdom disciples; to gather and embody kingdom communities that become a foretaste of life renewed; and to suffer for the sake of the kingdom as the church bears witness to God's reign in the face of the idols of our culture. With this biblical vision, the church today is able to overcome the false dichotomy often presented between orthodoxy and orthopraxy. With this biblical vision, the church today is also able to move beyond a narrowing of Jesus' mission to his incarnational practices that we are being called to emulate. We are called to nothing less than continuing the logic of Jesus' kingdom mission on earth until he returns.

6.3 Church as gathered and scattered

A second important issue for discernment is the need to reflect deeply on the church in

both its gathered, institutional expression as the people of God and in its scattered, organic expression as the body of Christ in the world. The church in the West today needs to discern how it might continue to hold in creative tension the church's gathered and scattered witness.

6.3.1 Common polarities

To begin, it is important to frame this issue by noting some polarities that are becoming increasingly prevalent in both the Missional and Emergent church movements in the West. Three polarities in particular have bearing on the task of discerning a missional ecclesiology in the West today.

The first is the polarity and tension that is seen to exist between the church as incarnational and the church as attractional. Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch argue that a missional church must be characterized by an incarnational ecclesiology and not an attractional ecclesiology (2003, 12-18). They explain, "By incarnational we mean it does not create sanctified spaces into which unbelievers must come to encounter the gospel (2003, 12)." What is striking is their sharp contrast between incarnational and attractional. Attractional for them is the posture of doing ministry with the expectation and even focus on becoming the type of church that will attract people to come to a specified program, building, or service. They suggest in fact that "The 'Come-To-Us' stance taken by the attractional church is unbiblical (2003, 19)." The missional church must have a sending impulse, not one that seeks to extract people from the community into a particular program or service.

Hugh Halter and Matt Smay have made a similar contribution in *The Tangible Kingdom: Creating Incarnational Community*, where they call Christians in the West to a pre-institutional form of Christian community that seeks to recover the incarnational practices of Jesus (2008, 51-56). Such incarnational communities will seek to form themselves around shared missional practices that move them out into the local community, leaving behind the comfort of the institutional church to live among, listen to, and love unconditionally those in their local context (2008, 127-144). What is needed, they argue, is to allow "church" to emerge out of this missional and incarnational way of life, so that its practices, structures, and leadership will be defined by this incarnational posture in its local community (2008, 38-41).

A second polarity, related to this first, is between the institutional church and the fostering of missional communities. Frost and Hirsch suggest that the church in the West today needs to orient itself toward a missional understanding, which they explicitly contrast with an institutional understanding of the church. Frost builds on the work of Peter Ward's "liquid church" notion to urge those who have given up on the institutional church in the West to find ways of forming liquid, missional communities, that stand in sharp contrast to solid, institutional churches (2002, 130-135). Gibbs and Bolger, along with Jones, argue that the Emergent church movement in many regards can be seen as a movement seeking a post-institutional expression of the church, a movement which sees the institutional church as inherently problematic for a missional expression today (Gibbs and Bolger 2005, 18-23, 28-29; Jones 2008, 4-7). Many of the leaders in this movement are similarly shaped by the notions of "liquid church" in contrast to solid institutional forms of church.

A third polarity comes in the argument found often within the Emergent church movement that a dichotomy between the "sacred" and "secular" spheres of life is necessarily expressed and embodied whenever the church places an emphasis on gathering corporately for worship. This concern to overcome the modernist dichotomy of life – which relegated religion into the private, sacred sphere of life – is important. However, it remains to be seen if this dichotomy is in fact only overcome by relativizing the importance of the gathered community for corporate worship and seeking to broaden the notion of "worship" and "sacred" to include all forms of Christian service and activity in the world and all spaces in God's creation (Gibbs and Bolger 2005, 66-69).

The implications of these common polarities for the church in the West are manifold

and important. Advocates of “incarnational church” decry what is perceived to be an over-emphasis on Sunday morning worship gatherings – through which so-called “attractional churches” hope to persuade people to come and consume their religious services. We must wrestle deeply with the implications of this polarity on established institutional churches throughout the ecclesiastical landscape of the West. In my own denomination, the Christian Reformed Church in North America, there continues to be a pattern of de-emphasizing the Sunday morning gathering and, in some cases, cancelling it on a monthly basis and putting in its place a corporate expression of service in the local neighbourhood. Discernment is needed as to whether having a focus on Sunday morning worship necessarily means an attractional model is being embraced, as well as whether or not an “attractional model” is to be avoided altogether.

The church in the West must reflect on the different ways a church community can do “incarnational” ministry in its local context. Can an incarnational approach to ministry inform and shape the 9-5 vocational life of God’s people as they are scattered throughout the public square? How can we truly break free from the sacred/secular divide in the West that relegates faith to a Sunday worship service and the private inner life of the Christian?

One final polarity, as an aside: part of the challenge I have encountered in an urban context in Hamilton, Ontario is the need to find a rhythm between breathing in and breathing out the mission of God. Sustaining missional engagement in our urban contexts is critical and the unbalanced life, whether expressed corporately or personally, leads inevitably to burnout and diminished capacity.

6.3.2 Affirming good insights latent in polarities

This reflection begins by affirming the good insights that are latent in the ethos of these distinctions. There is a danger in the West for church to become a “Sunday only” affair, cut off from the rest of life. This danger has been persistent in the West through both the modern and postmodern periods. Moreover, there is the contemporary threat of allowing our experience of church as an institution to become absorbed into the consumerist culture of the West. When combined, these dangers pose a tremendous threat to the gospel, and run the risk of leaving us with an experience of church that centres around an event on Sunday morning in which we consume religious goods and services to meet our spiritual needs. Such a truncated vision for the church and its mission in our culture must be strongly challenged, as those critical of the institutional and attractional expressions of church are doing.

Further, given the new missional realities facing the church in the West in light of the global and local realities outlined above, it is essential for the church to discover afresh the missional rhythms of incarnational life in our local communities. The work that is being done by Frost and Hirsch in this area is crucial for the church in the West to incarnate fresh expressions of the gospel in the local cultural contexts to which we are called.

Finally, the longing to learn from the pre-Christendom church needs to be affirmed. There is much to recover from the practices of the early church, as Hirsch in particular highlights (2006). The missional DNA latent within God’s people was released in powerful ways during the pre-Christendom expressions of the church. Moreover, there is much for the church in the West to learn from non-Western expressions of the church that are seeking to contextualize the gospel for their own place and culture.

Particular attention has been drawn in this study to the church in Africa and the way the African church can help us in the West become more aware of the ways in which we have fallen into syncretism with Western culture. Under the modern story, there was the movement toward a rationalization of the church’s structures and bureaucracy that is rightly being challenged by the postmodern story today. Fresh ways forward will need to be discerned in dialogue with those from other cultures.

While these insights can be affirmed, we still need a framework that can move us

beyond these polarizations. The Reformed tradition of ecclesiological reflection gives us a crucial starting point, distinguishing between the church as a gathered community and the church as a scattered community. There are five areas of critical reflection that will demonstrate the fruitfulness of this distinction.

6.3.3 Critical reflection needed to move beyond polarities

First, it is critical to see the importance of the gathering of the people of God. The church as a gathered community encompasses its variety of meetings and activities. We must affirm the multi-faceted gatherings of the local congregation, and see within these gatherings a powerful missional witness in the local community. In particular, some of those activities and gatherings will involve the classical Reformed three marks of the church (preaching of the gospel, administration of sacraments, and exercise of church discipline), each of which is critical for nourishing the life of Christ within the local congregation as well as being itself a witness to the coming kingdom of God in the midst of the congregation's communal life. There are many other activities that the local congregation engages in at its various gatherings. The local congregation is gathered corporately for weekly worship, gathered in homes for fellowship and study of the word of God, gathered at various times throughout the week in demonstrating the coming kingdom through deeds of mercy and justice, and gathered corporately at different times and in different sizes for prayer and discernment, to name just a few. To reduce the "gathering" of the local congregation to just the Sunday worship gathering, and then disparage this gathering for its disconnect from the life of the congregation and its missional witness, is simplistic and does not take full account of the multifaceted gatherings and activities.

Further, while we want to distinguish the Sunday gathering and activities from other activities and gatherings, at the same time, the importance of celebrating and nourishing our new life in Christ in the Sunday gatherings must be seen as a vitally powerful way in which the local congregation functions as a foretaste of the kingdom of God (Acts 2:42-27, Hebrews 10:19-25). Following the mission of Israel, the church today continues to bear a powerful witness to the gospel through its communal life together, in which the life of Christ is celebrated and nourished so that the community might function as an alternative community in the midst of its cultural context (1 Peter 2:9-12). The mission of God's people includes her "being" just as much as her "doing."

Moreover, in contrast to the radical individualism of the West, the corporate missional vocation of the local church through its various gatherings must be highlighted. The gathered community has a corporate and communal vocation in its local community. Given the unique gifts that God gives each local congregation, the gathered community will discern its missional vocation for its time and place.

A final way in which we can see the importance of the gathered church is to remind ourselves of the missional dimension of worship. The missional framework for worship in the Psalms, as noted above, offers a helpful perspective much needed for the church in the West today: the worshipping community gathers to both be nourished by its communal worship and at the same time publically declare through its worship gatherings the coming kingdom of God before a watching world. Worship is to nourish the missional identity of God's people, equipping them for their missional task and role in the world. As worship is also a public act, it becomes itself a powerful witness to the rule and reign of Christ as the gospel is proclaimed and demonstrated in the local congregation.

Second, there is a missional dimension to public life and the vocation of individual followers of Christ that is captured with the notion of the church as a scattered community in the world. The church as a scattered community embodies a powerful witness to the gospel in all areas of life. An emphasis on the communal dimension of the church's mission does not need to lead to a neglect of the individual Christian's missional vocation in the world (Goheen

2000, 435). Newbigin stresses both the communal mission of the church and the calling of individual believers. For him, the mission of individual believers in culture is the primary place where the church's missionary engagement takes place. The "entire membership of the church in their secular occupations are called to be signs of his lordship in every area of life" (1993, 203). A missional church as a scattered community is called to bear witness to the gracious and loving reign of God in every area of life. All cultural activity has a missional dimension. In light of the cosmic scope of God's redemptive mission and the central role of God's people in that story, the church is called to bear witness in all areas of life to Christ.

Third, it is vitally important today for the church in the West to hold together both the gathered and scattered dimensions of its witness while at the same time to see both infused with a missional dimension. An important contribution has been made in this regard by the noted theologian Hendrikus Berkhof. Berkhof provides an analysis of the church in terms of a threefold character:

1. *The institutional character of the church.* As a particular societal institution, the church organizes itself in a number of activities through which it ministers Christ to the people. Berkhof includes nine different activities of the church: instruction, baptism, preaching, discussion of the sermon, the Lord's Supper, the diaconate, the meeting, office, and church order.
2. *The character of the church as a community.* The church is the people of God, a community of believers who collectively *are* the church.
3. While the above two characteristics of the church are crucial, a third character is needed today, argues Berkhof: *the character of the church's orientation to the world* (1979, 344-345). This third aspect is not simply to be tacked onto the other two; rather, Berkhof describes the connection between these three as a chain that runs from Christ to the world. Christ himself is mediated to God's people through the institutional life of the church, and the church in turn mediates Christ to the world. Berkhof argues, "In this chain the world comes last, yet it is the goal that gives meaning and purpose to the preceding links. Everything that has come before serves this goal, even when it is not deliberately stated" (1979, 410). In fact we can say that the church is not properly understood if this aspect of ecclesiology is neglected.

A more recent contribution by Halter and Smay argues for the importance of finding the "*and*" between the church as a gathered *and* scattered community (2010). This provides a helpful corrective to their earlier work, where they tended toward creating a polarity between these two dynamics. With keen insight, they argue for the importance of seeing both the gathered and scattered flows of the missional church as mutually enriching, moving us beyond an "either/or" way of thinking. The gathering must nourish God's people for their missional witness as a scattered body. Further, the scattered witness must shape the way in which the gathering is contextualized.

There is an important rhythm between the gathered and scattered gatherings. Both movements are understood under the broader framework of mission and both are ways that God's people are participating in his mission. God's people are gathered to be nourished in the gospel, through worship, fellowship, and service, as well as equipped to be sent out as the scattered community throughout the week living out kingdom vocations in every sphere of life.

Finally, while the aversion to institutionalism needs to be affirmed, it is vital to appreciate the crucial role that institutions play in the missional witness of the church today. As argued above, institutions embody the beliefs and worldview of a particular culture, and have a powerful shaping influence as a result. Institutions are part of the plausibility structures of worldviews. For the church in the West, institutional expressions are necessary

if a credible alternative of the gospel is to be offered. As Ludwig Rütti argues, “Christianity completely devoid of an institutional nature cannot offer any true alternative (343).”¹⁰⁹ What is needed today are institutional structures that are flexible and conducive to the missional calling of the institutional church.

6.4 Leadership in the missional church

A third issue for discernment concerns the role and responsibilities of leadership in the missional church. In order to engage in discernment around this issue, it will be necessary to first affirm several important insights emerging from both the Missional and Emergent church movements, as well as from the local and global realities in which this study is situated. Building on this affirmation, critique of potential abuses and over-reactions will be noted, as well as additional perspectives to offer a helpful way forward.

6.4.1 Affirming important insights on leadership

First, following the “return of the congregation,” as Keifert calls it, there is a growing importance being placed upon consensus building in the communal task of congregational discernment. A crucial part of discernment is the role of the local congregation’s voices, particularly those of the ordinary members. Leaders must increasingly develop the skills and capacity to lead communities in discernment and to build consensus in the process.

The second insight to affirm is the belief in the missional capacity latent within the people of God, which leaders must become adept at drawing out. The Appreciative Inquiry model in particular, as noted above, is built around this key assumption. Moreover, it can be argued that this is a missional implication of the body of Christ imagery found in the NT, as well as the biblical theme of the Holy Spirit’s leading among God’s people through the equipping of the body of Christ with diverse gifts (Ephesians 4:1-16, Romans 12:1-8, 1 Corinthians 12). In light of Andrew Walls’ insight into the global “Ephesians moment” of our day, it will be important to expand on this notion to incorporate the insights from the body of Christ around the world, something without which we remain incomplete as the local expression of Christ’s body.

A third insight to affirm is the recovery of the place given to imagination and intuition as important capacities for missional leadership. The postmodern critique of the rationalist anthropology of the modern story has opened up these non-rational aspects of being human, for which we can be grateful. There is much more to “knowing” than rational methods and capacities, and the opening up of the non-rational aspects of our humanity create much needed space for these aspects of knowing to contribute to the discernment process.

Fourth, the critique of the abuse of power and authority in the modern story is something that needs to be affirmed. Power and authority are God-given parts of the good creation which have often been twisted and abused, causing great damage to the church and the rest of creation. The postmodern critique of the modern story has heightened our awareness of these abuses, and for that we can be grateful. Abuse of power and authority is anti-creational.

The fifth insight to affirm is the critique of modern forms of hierarchy and bureaucracy that have hindered the mission of the church in the West. As Castells has demonstrated, we are moving into a networked society that has taken us past the modern forms of bureaucratic hierarchy (2000). McLaren has also demonstrated how this “modern virus” has affected the church in the West, creating barriers to the missional calling of the church along the way. Given Castells’ insight, we see global reaction to the Enlightenment worldview and how the rational organization of societal structures has made its inroads into the church. What is needed are fresh organizational structures that tap into the networked

¹⁰⁹ Translated by and quoted in Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 384.

societal structures in which we increasingly find ourselves. The Enlightenment idolatry of rationalism is rightly being critiqued by the growth and movement of networks.

Building on this development, another important insight comes from Friedman's work on the flatteners at work in our world today. In particular, Friedman's insight into "uploading" bears particular implications for missional leadership. There is a global movement that is making us all producers of information and meaning, subverting institutions and modernist forms of hierarchy (Friedman 2007, 94-126). This flattener is tapping into the human longing to participate and create, and has the potential to radically disrupt and shift our experiences of institutions and hierarchical structures. What is emerging already is a growing "architecture of participation" in which systems and spaces are designed for users to produce and not simply consume. This has great potential to empower the local congregation and all of its ordinary members to become a community of theologizing and not simply passive consumers of theology. Leadership models will need to adapt accordingly to respond to this growing global phenomenon.

The seventh insight to affirm is the importance of modelling and pacesetting for missional leaders. The missional leader must be personally engaged in the mission and model the missional practices which the church community is pursuing. The local congregation will not be able to go places that the leader is unwilling or unable to go. The missional leader must also engage in sustainable missional rhythms that avoid burnout and so model a healthy missional engagement of breathing in and breathing out the mission of God.

Finally, the insights into leadership models and styles that are emerging from developments in the so-called "quantum age" of physics can be affirmed for the way in which they are moving us beyond Newtonian, atomistic models of leadership. Developments in quantum physics are giving us rich insights into the complexity of organic systems that are part of creation, and these insights have great potential to bear fruit in re-thinking our leadership and organizational models.

6.4.2 Critique of potential abuses and directions forward

Paired with these affirmations, there are five perspectives on leadership requiring critique if we are to move forward in this critical area mission.

The first critique is of those *over-reacting to the abuses of modernity*, as they relate to leadership models and structures in the church. It is easy to create a "straw man" critique of modernity and dismiss all models of leadership and authority structures that bear any resemblance to the hierarchical models of the modernist period. Yes, modern forms of authority that placed the autonomist rational individual at the centre must be rejected. However, it is important to avoid painting with too broad a brush here. We must not disregard all leadership structures that place authority in the hands of those who are called and ordained to lead. Power and authority are good parts of creation that can be sinfully twisted but can also be used in their rightful place.

The second caution regards the need to *recover the biblical images used to portray leadership*. Two specific examples can be mentioned. First, in Reformed theology, biblical and systematic reflection has been given to the biblical roles of prophet, priest, and king and how those offices are both fulfilled in Christ, who is believed to have fulfilled all three offices; and now, through Christ, are taken up by all followers of Christ both in their so-called "general office" of believer and in the special offices of pastor, elder, and deacon. Ongoing reflection is needed as to how a renewal of this three-fold office may help us recover holistic thinking and practices about leadership, and avoid a reductionist view of leadership that may try to absolutize one of these biblical categories over the others. Renewing these biblical categories can also help to recognize the diversity of leadership gifts and leadership types needed to empower God's people.

Also consider the biblical image of the leader as shepherd – which, referring to God and

to humanity in a variety of leadership spheres, is the most widely used image in the Bible for leadership.¹¹⁰ Recovering the biblical category of shepherding for leadership in the church will root our missional ecclesiology in a more holistic biblical framework, where as we have noted above, the church's mission is as much about "being" a certain kind of community as it is about "doing" certain things in our communities.

In both of these examples, what is needed to move us forward is the recovery and renewal of biblical categories and images for leadership in the church today. It is striking how often, in both the Missional and Emergent church movements, one set of cultural categories for leadership (e.g. those made popular during the period of modernity like "professional" and "CEO") is exchanged for another set of cultural categories (e.g. those shaped by the quantum age of physics and those being shaped by postmodernity, like "poet" and "facilitator") without a clear or direct engagement with biblical categories. We must avoid a simplistic biblicism that looks to the Bible as a leadership manual, which it is not. At the same time, serious engagement with biblical models of leadership will renew contemporary discussions of the challenge of leadership for the missional church.

A third caution: *believers must see authority as a good part of the creational norms for leadership.* Authority in the church belongs ultimately to God, Lord of his church and the head of Christ's body. Those who exercise leadership roles among God's people have a derived authority that comes from God, as he equips and calls people with the gifts of leadership. While authority can and has been terribly misused and misdirected within the context of the church, what is needed in our day is a vigorous recovery and renewal of authority that takes up its rightful place of service among the people of God. Abuses of authority must be rejected, and we can and should be grateful in particular for the postmodern critiques of authority that have helped us to see how authority was abused during the modern period.

We need to recover authority in the way of the cross. As Christ himself has demonstrated, the authority given to leadership is given for the sake of cruciform service to God's people (Matthew 20:24-28, Mark 9:33-37, John 13:1-17). The call is to follow Christ and to lay down our lives for those whom we are called to serve. And what the cross has demonstrated is that true and lasting power comes through weakness and service. Those who wield it over others have no place in Christ's kingdom and service.

One of the healthy ways authority can be exercised is by leading the discernment process of local congregations, as they seek to discern missional vocation for their time and place. While we can affirm the "return of the congregation" and the important role that communal discernment needs to play among God's people, we must be wary of embracing an *idolatry of dialogue* that pushes aside the place and responsibility of leadership to frame the discernment process and make critical decisions about the way forward. There are going to be important waypoints in the discernment process where the God-given gifts of leaders with insight and knowledge into the complexities of cultural context and theological traditions will be crucial. Insights into worldview, ever-changing global realities, diverse theological traditions, and the religious beliefs shaping our cultural practices and institutions all demand intellectual rigour and reflection on the part of those called to lead. Gifted leaders with insight into these and other issues play an important role in the discernment process.

All of this was driven home through reflection on the author's own experience in the local context of Hamilton, Ontario. In this church setting, there was such a strong aversion to the potential abuses of authority that little space, if any, was given to the responsibility of the called and ordained leadership in the local congregation. Communal processes of dialogue and discernment had spread so much authority into the community, only a democratic process was embraced for decision-making, with consensus as the goal. While consensus-building

¹¹⁰ See Timothy Laniak, *Shepherds After My Own Heart: Pastoral Traditions and Leadership in the Bible*, for a detailed exposition of this central biblical metaphor for leadership. See also Witmer, *The Shepherd Leader*.

has an important place in the leadership process, this local experience has underscored the need to affirm the rightful place of authority for those called to a leadership role in missional communities. The move toward “leader-less” communities among some streams of the Missional and Emergent church movements, experienced also in the local context of Hamilton, is at risk of over-reacting so strongly to the abuses of the modern period that the rightful place of authority in leadership is lost.¹¹¹

Following on the heels of this third area of critique is a fourth. In the contemporary context in the West today, the missional church *needs to avoid becoming polarized by the autonomy of the dialogical process*. The postmodern aversion to the modernist tendency to defer all authority to the rational autonomous individual is opening up the tendency to embrace in its place the postmodern autonomy of the communal dialogical process (Goheen 2001b). Yes, the postmodernist desire for power bases to be broad, and lines of authority and hierarchy to be short, can be affirmed today (Hollaar 2001). There must be higher degrees of accountability that allow whole communities to become more fully involved as participants in the discernment and decision-making process. Leaders need to develop skills for building a common vision that is embedded within the local community. However, what must be avoided is the tendency to polarize any form of hierarchy that involves power and authority being delegated to one or a few from the importance of consensus-building within the community among which one is being called to lead. This is not a case of “either/or” but rather of “both/and.”

Fifth and finally, it is important in this discernment of leadership frameworks to listen *deeply to those who are “other” than us*. Listening to the “other” can go a long way in protecting us from the natural tendency toward cultural influence that leads to syncretism. The above two areas of critique highlight the way in which we can tend to overreact to one form of cultural syncretism (e.g. modern hierarchies) by pursuing instead another form of cultural syncretism (e.g. autonomy of the dialogical process). One of the critical ways to find the pitfalls of cultural syncretism is to engage in discernment with those who are “other” in cultural, socio-economic, and theological terms. Without the open invitation of the “other” in the process of discernment, cultural blindspots are hard to overcome, and it becomes easier to miss the ways in which your community is becoming absorbed by cultural idols.

To illustrate again from the local context in Hamilton will be helpful. In the process of discernment, a missed opportunity was the dialogue that could have ensued between the diverse members of the missional community of New Hope. Within the church community, a majority of people identified strongly with the postmodern aversion to authority structures and leaned in the direction of the dialogical process. But, strikingly, most of these members were much more affluent and educated compared to the area of the city in which New Hope was planted. At the same time, there were less educated and less affluent members of the local community more readily identifying with hierarchy and forms of leadership that led them to expect a more central role to be played by the ordained leadership. Furthermore, within the community were some recent refugees from Africa who were growing increasingly frustrated with the Western postmodern ethos emerging in the community, and expected a much stronger and directive role to be taken by the ordained leader of the community. An opportunity for deeper cultural engagement and communal discernment was missed by avoiding the dialogue and interaction between these three perspectives that is critical for discernment to happen. The dominant culture of the community prevailed (the postmodern) without a serious or deep engagement with the voices of the “others” represented by these two

¹¹¹ Strikingly, as the story in Hamilton unfolded, over the course of the eight months following the transition to a leader-less community, there were almost twenty congregational meetings held to facilitate communal dialogue and discernment. The fatigue that settled into the community after such lengthy processes of decision-making and discernment has led the community to re-affirm the importance of delegating authority and power in a few who are appointed to take a leadership role in the community.

contrasting perspectives on leadership.

6.5 Preaching in the Missional Church

A fourth area in which discernment is needed today for the church in the West has to do with the issue of preaching in the missional church. It would take us well beyond the scope of this study to engage in a comprehensive analysis of preaching, with its accompanying discipline of homiletics. The focus here will be on using the affirmative-antithetical framework for discernment to reflect on the issues being raised about preaching that are emerging from the local and global realities shaping this study.

Some key insights on the practice of preaching are arising from within the Missional and Emergent church movements.¹¹² Seven specific insights are worth affirming here. First, it is important that we recognize and affirm the missional capacity, latent within the people of God, for both *reading* and *hearing* God's word in Scripture. There is a diversity of gifts and insights into God's word that the people of God are able to offer and contribute. Pagitt has been a leading voice in this regard, calling us back to the "priesthood of all believers" and leading us to affirm the truth that lives in the hearts and minds of all of God's people as they gather (2005, 41-42). Preaching needs to find a way to engage that truth and give it a voice in the community.

Secondly, we should affirm that discernment is a communal task. It ought to include actively discerning what God is saying to the people of God gathered in a local place through God's word. As Pagitt writes, this affirmation offers the possibility of renewing the relationship between the preacher and the congregation by moving beyond the notion that the professional preacher is the only one with the answers for the community (2005, 44-45).

Thirdly, we share the critique of how the rationalistic individualism of the Enlightenment has shaped our Christian communities as it relates to preaching. It has contributed both to the professionalization of ministry and pastoral roles within the community, as well as the notion of the pastor as the sole depositor of truth (Pagitt 2005, 106-107).

Fourth, we affirm the critique of power, particularly the abuses of power that can be fed by the preaching ministry when it contributes to an unhealthy imbalance of power within the community. Pagitt has helped us see some of the subtle and not-so-subtle ways that power imbalances can be perpetuated by our practices of preaching, or what he has coined "speaching" (2005, 140-143, 200, 210, 214).

The fifth insight we affirm comes from the missional reflection on leadership and the renewed importance placed upon the need for leadership in the missional church to be pace-setters in missional living. The integrity of the preacher's message will be measured in many ways by the intentional practices of modelling a missional lifestyle, living out in their own lives what they are calling the community of God's people into. Missional pacesetting is a crucial way in which preaching authority must be established within a missional church.

Sixth, we should affirm the growing global phenomenon of "uploading," as Friedman calls it. We live in a culture in which people are increasingly finding a voice and shaping the content that is formed by communities. Related to this notion of "uploading" is the notion of churches as "open-source" networks, where communal participation and dialogue plays a vital role. Pagitt has helped us see how these types of practices can find their ways into the church community as well, as his notion of "progressional dialogue" creates space for others in the community to give shape to the proclamation and understanding of the word of God (2005,

¹¹² The only book-length treatment of this within these movements is Pagitt (2005). Pagitt's argument is used widely by many within these movements who are critical of contemporary models of preaching in the Western church, particularly within the Emergent church movement. Therefore, while Pagitt's argument does not represent all perspectives within these movements, it is taken as representative of many of the critical voices within these movements.

52, 152-154).

Finally, it is important to affirm that truth is always embodied, contextual, communal, and historical. The postmodern critique of rationalism, with the accompanying suspicion of modern notions of truth, can be affirmed for how it has impacted our understanding of truth. We are beginning to recognize the important role played by local congregations as local theological communities that are not simply consumers of theology but active producers of local theologies (Jones 2008, 112). These insights can help us shape the ways in which preaching can become a place where the community comes together to engage in communal theologizing around the text of Scripture.

While affirming these insights, discernment in this critical area should also lead to some important areas of critique. Working with the model of discernment articulated in the previous chapter, five such areas of critique arise. The first is a historical critique. Pagitt has a way of representing the Western preaching tradition that tends toward a straw-man argument. He often disparages preaching as “speech making” that relies on one-way communication as the primary means of talking about the gospel and that has the inherent tendency to do relational violence to those in our communities (2005, 25-27). Such “speaching” embodies necessarily an imbalance of control, an assumption that godly authority resides in one person only, and that the congregation is necessarily led into a relationship with the pastor that is distant and estranged (2005, 29-32).¹¹³ Belcher’s summary of Pagitt’s line of critique is particularly insightful here:

He calls traditional preaching ‘speaching,’ a word he coined. . . . it is the creation of the Enlightenment and depends on foundationalism . . . he makes the case that speaching tends to be arrogant, manipulates emotions and controls outcomes of belief, dehumanizes people and makes them passive, hurts the development of healthy community, and removes the pastor from the congregation in his preparation and sets him up as the only expert (2009, 146).

DeYoung and Kluck have offered a healthy counter argument to Pagitt’s historical argument of preaching, demonstrating the long tradition of discursive, expository preaching that is rooted in practices of the early church and did not simply emerge with the Enlightenment (2008, 155-159).¹¹⁴

A second area of critique is the “relational hermeneutic” that Pagitt has offered as an alternative to “speaching.” Belcher offers a helpful summary of the hermeneutic at the heart of Pagitt’s progression dialogue model for preaching: “. . . nothing is privileged, not even the Bible, over the community in discovering and living out truth. The Bible is just one of the conversation partners . . . Progressive dialogue then comes out of this hermeneutic” (2009, 145). Following Belcher, it is important to recognize that privileging community over Scripture and tradition runs the risk of driving an unhealthy wedge between these important realities for the church in its task of discernment, and relativizes the intrinsic authority of the Bible and its primacy in discernment (2009, 149-150).

The framework of discernment developed above seeks to move us beyond the tendency to drive a wedge between the Bible, tradition, and community. We should seek to place all of these in proper interrelationship with each other. We should not privilege community over

¹¹³ There are other examples that could be given. Throughout Pagitt’s argument, there is this tendency to present preaching in its worst possible light and then offer scathing critiques of it. It is much more charitable in offering critique to present an opposing view in the best possible light and then offer a critique.

¹¹⁴ Hughes Oliphant Old has provided a magisterial treatment of this topic in his now seven volume series on the history of the reading and preaching of Scripture (Eerdmans 1998-2010). Pagitt’s simplistic reading of the history of preaching cannot be sustained in the light of Old’s important research in this area.

the Bible or over tradition. Rather, it is important that we recognize the communal nature of all biblical understanding and authority, as well as traditional understanding and authority. At the heart of the discernment process is the local community, wrestling with the biblical story and the tradition of the church as it seeks to carry out its role and identity in God's mission in its local place. A missional hermeneutic offers us a way forward that affirms the concerns of Pagitt's relational hermeneutic, by emphasizing the importance of the missional community, while at the same time maintaining the intrinsic authority of the biblical story of God's mission, as well as the communal tradition in which we find our place in that story today.

A third area of critique is the need to move *beyond* critique of preaching, and affirm the gift of preaching to the church as it can and should play an important role in sustaining and nurturing God's people in their missional identity and role. As noted above, we see already in the OT the important role that the leadership of Israel played in sustaining and nurturing the missional identity of God's people through the reading and teaching of the word. In the NT church, this pattern continued as the early community was nourished and strengthened in their missional identity through their devotion to the teaching of the apostles and the power of God's word as it was proclaimed in their communities (Acts 2:42-47; 8:49; 15:35-36; 16:32; 19:10-20). A missional hermeneutic plays a vital role in preaching in the missional church; it helps recover the centrality of mission to the biblical story and the centrality of God's people in that story. As Guder argues so powerfully,

The ministry of the Word disciplines God's people so that they can move out into the apostolate for which God's Spirit calls and empowers them. Gospel preaching is, therefore, always ultimately ethical in its orientation, because it addresses the shape and behaviour of Christian witness in the particular place in which each community is God's sent people. Gospel preaching is the public testimony of the Lordship of Jesus Christ over all the contending idols and powers which lure the church away from faithful and obedient witness (1998, 9).

Rather than disparage the act of preaching, what is needed is a recovery and renewal of preaching that is shaped by a missional hermeneutic, so that preaching may nurture the missional role of God's people today.

A fourth area in which we can find a way forward is in recognizing how preaching is itself a public witness to the gospel as public truth. A recovery of confidence in the biblical story as the true story of the world is crucial for the missional witness of the church (Newbigin 1989, 15). The importance of recovering this metanarrative perspective on the biblical story should not be underestimated, as argued at length above. Christian preaching proclaims the gospel as the true story of the world in a culture that not only is averse to such claims, but is increasingly marked by spiritual confusion and hunger (Mohler 2008, 118-128). The public announcement and declaration of the coming of the kingdom of God is a central theme both in Jesus' mission and the mission of the church as we continue the kingdom mission of Jesus (Matthew 28, Acts 1-2).

A final area in which we need to find a way forward is in recovering gospel preaching that empowers God's people for mission. There is a growing threat to the gospel within both the Missional and Emergent church movements: the subtle danger of moralism and legalistic activism expressed in missional ways. One way this is seen today is in the growing interest in establishing "missional rules" that define the values holding together a missional community and distinguish it from a non-missional community. On the one hand, it can be healthy to have boundaries that help provide a sense of purpose and rhythm for a community. However, what must be recognized is the very subtle and yet powerful way in which these "missional rules" can lapse into a type of legalistic activism that is devoid of grace and gospel-motivation for mission. If gospel preaching does not root a community in the transforming power of the

grace of God that is encountered in the gospel, it will fail at this critical point to provide the gospel-motivation that is crucial for missional engagement, without which there is no power for God's people to take up their mission.

The default mode of the human heart is its tendency toward a religious moralism that resists the radical nature of grace and moves in the direction of self-salvation in its various forms (Keller 2004a, 1).¹¹⁵ Added to this is the wide ranging perception in the West that Christianity is simply another religion that demands moral obedience as one of its organizing principles. The church in the West must carefully and clearly distinguish the gospel of God's grace from the moralism that so dominates religious discussion *and* perception (Keller 2004b, 2). On the other hand, the church in the West must also distinguish the gospel of grace from the growing relativism that dominates the postmodern story. gospel-centred preaching will be careful to hold out the gospel of grace so that God's power for missional living and engagement can be experienced.

Recovering and renewing gospel proclamation that centres on the power of God's transforming grace encountered in the gospel is vital both for the dynamic of personal transformation in our communities and gospel-empowered motivation for mission. The gospel is the fundamental dynamic that empowers the Christian life and the organizing centre out of which everything else flows (Keller 2004a, 1). Belcher writes:

The order is important. As we are affected by the gospel, we are empowered to move into community to care for one another. And as we care for one another, we begin to reach outside of our community with acts of mercy – mission. And as we move into our community with acts of service and mercy, we begin to look for ways to make and renew culture and its institutions so that they honor God's original design for creation. This is shalom. The more we live in community, are merciful and transform culture, the more we need the gospel to empower and transform us . . ." (2010, 121).

Gospel proclamation that roots a missional community in this empowering and transforming grace of God encountered in the gospel is vital for the church in the West today. All of this leads us to consider the next important issue for discernment that is facing the church in the West today: the nature of the gospel itself.

6.6 The gospel

For the church in the West today to discern and recover its missional vocation in the world, it will need a renewed relationship with the gospel. As many have pointed out, we find ourselves in a place where there is no longer a consensus on how to best articulate the gospel, nor even on exactly what the nature of the gospel is.

6.6.1 Affirming Missional and Emergent emphases

First, we must begin by affirming the renewed emphasis being placed on the gospel of the kingdom of God. As many demonstrate, there has been a recovery of the kingdom of God in recent years, moving many traditions in the West nearly toward a consensus on the centrality of the kingdom of God for our understanding of Jesus' message and ministry. The emphasis on understanding the gospel primarily as the gospel of the kingdom of God, and seeing the kingdom of God as vital to understanding both Jesus' proclamation and his practices, is shared among those in the Emergent church movement. Following Lesslie

¹¹⁵ As Keller argues, "The gospel is 'I am accepted through Christ, therefore I obey' while every other religion operates on the principle of 'I obey, therefore I am accepted.' Martin Luther's fundamental insight was that this latter principle, the principle of 'religion,' is the deep default mode of the human heart" (2004a, 1).

Newbigin, the Missional Church movement also understands the gospel primarily to be good news about the coming of the kingdom of God. The church badly needs to recover this understanding of the gospel of the kingdom of God, the message so central to Jesus' ministry that in many ways had been lost in the West (McLaren 2006). This recovery is crucial for the missional church today in the West and this growing consensus needs to be affirmed.

Second, it is important to also affirm the consensus of the Emergent and Missional movements against the reductionist gospel understanding in the West, which has been to the detriment of the church and its mission. These reductions of the gospel must be overcome for the church to be renewed in its missional role and identity. On the one hand, it is common to find the gospel reduced to doctrinal formulations or theological abstractions. We must lament the tendency to reduce the gospel to specific formulations of the doctrine of the atonement, with particular emphasis being placed on the doctrine of justification by faith. As Jones writes, the gospel is like "lava" that will burst through attempts to domesticate it to simply doctrinal formulations (2008, 36-37). As argued above, the gospel must always be understood within the larger narrative context of the biblical story and cannot be reduced to doctrinal formulations, whether they be ethical or soteriological in nature. When understood within this larger narrative context, the gospel comes alive in its breadth and depth and cannot be captured fully by doctrinalist reductions. On the other hand, we must overcome as well the Western privatization of the gospel. This privatization reduces the gospel to private and personal values with no bearing on public life. In contrast to such a reduction, the church in the West must recover the claim that the gospel is public truth and unfolds the true story of the world. In so doing, we will also offer the exclusive claims of the gospel as the true story of the world in an increasingly relativist culture. Overcoming this privatized reduction is vital for the church in the West to recover its missional role and identity.

Third, it is also important for the church in the West today to recognize that the gospel must always be embodied by a local community. The gospel is not a human culture, but it will always be expressed and embodied in cultural forms and by communities immersed in a particular culture. There is no such thing as a culturally disembodied gospel. This reality creates an inevitable tension of seeking to express and embody the gospel in a particular culture in such a way that avoids the twin dangers of irrelevance and cultural syncretism.

6.6.2 Areas for critique and ways to move forward

While affirming these emphases on the gospel, there are four areas of both critique and ways to move forward in recovering the centrality of the gospel for the church in the West. First, we need to move beyond the polarizing reductions of the gospel that are becoming commonplace in the West. On the one hand, critics of the Emergent church claim that Emergent and Missional Church movements risk reducing the gospel to social action. On the other hand, proponents of the Emergent and Missional Church movements claim that their critics have reduced the gospel to a message of individual salvation and are unable to see the broader kingdom of God perspective on the gospel (Belcher 2009, 112).

While affirming the need to overcome the privatization and the doctrinalist reductions of the gospel, we need at the same time to overcome the potential reductions of the gospel found within the Emergent and Missional Church movements. Some voices in the Emergent conversation are at risk of leaving us with a truncated view of the kingdom of God by having both an over-realized eschatology and leaving out the substitutionary nature of God's redemptive work on our behalf (DeYoung and Kluck 2008, 186). Moreover, there are some voices which, in reaction to an over-emphasis on the doctrine of the atonement, have become weak on the same doctrine, and have in fact missed crucial aspects of a more robust theology of the kingdom of God, including the following: the call to conversion, the future "not yet" reality of the kingdom, the importance of repentance from sin to enter the kingdom, and the centrality of the death and resurrection of Jesus (DeYoung and Kluck 2008, 187-193). We

need a way forward that affirms both the kingdom of God perspective on the gospel and the importance of the atonement and the doctrine of justification by faith.

A second way forward, which helps to move us beyond the polarizing of perspectives on the gospel, can be found in recent work done by Tim Keller. Keller asks whether the “Pauline Gospel” of justification by faith is radically different than the gospel of the kingdom found in the synoptic gospels (2008, 18). Rather than see these as two radically different gospels, Keller argues that what we have is one gospel that can be expressed in many different forms (2008, 18).

Simon Gathercole addresses the question directly in a recent essay, where he argues for a strong unity between Paul and the Synoptics on the content of the gospel (2006). Based on his exegetical work, Gathercole argues that the “one gospel” found in both Paul and the synoptics shares a broad outline that can be summarized by, first, an emphasis on Jesus’ identity as the royal messiah and the son of God; second, a central place given to Jesus’ redemptive work as the atoning sacrifice for our sin and the justification that flows from that sacrifice; and third, Jesus’ inauguration of a new reign and the beginning of a new creation (2006, 154).

Building on Gathercole’s work, Keller argues that what is needed in the West is a recovery not only of this one central gospel outline, but a bringing together of the various forms of the gospel that each emphasize either the individual or the corporate aspects of the gospel and its implications. Keller writes:

A church that truly *dwells* in the biblical gospel will look quite unusual. Because of the . . . substitutionary atonement aspect, the church will put great emphasis on personal conversion, experiential grace renewal, evangelism, outreach, and church planting. . . . Because of the . . . incarnation aspect, the church will put great emphasis on deep community, cell groups or house churches, and will emphasize radical giving and sharing of resources, spiritual disciplines, racial reconciliation, and living with the poor. . . . Because of the . . . restoration aspect, the church will put great emphasis on seeking the welfare of the city, neighbourhood, and civic involvement, cultural engagement, and training people to work in ‘secular’ vocations out of a Christian world-view. . . . Very few church movements are able to integrate and inter-relate these ministries and emphases because of a comprehensive view of the biblical gospel (2008, 23).

What will be needed in discernment is learning how to contextualize each of these different forms or aspects of the gospel for the particular contexts in which the church finds itself (2008, 24).

A third way forward that can also integrate our thinking and practice is to recover the narrative context in which we must understand the gospel. Above there were six compass points to keep this perspective before us:

- the gospel tells us the true story of the world;
- the gospel discloses the central theme of this story, namely, the purpose and acts of God to redeem the entire creation and all of human life;
- the kingdom of God theme is a central theme to this story and opens up important dimensions of the gospel;
- God carries out his redemptive mission in this story by working through a people;
- the church is that community of Christ followers that must understand its role and identity in the context of this story; and
- the climax of this story is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and all that God accomplished through these events).

When the gospel is framed by these compass points, we begin to realize how artificial it would be to drive a wedge between the kingdom of God and the atoning work of Christ on the cross. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the climax of the biblical story, and the very heart of the gospel is what God accomplished through these events. However, because the gospel should be understood first and foremost as the biblical report of these events and their significance, we must realize that these events and all that God has accomplished through them cannot be exhausted in their full meaning by only one image. That is the case whether the image is the kingdom of God or the atonement. We have many images to help us understand the significance of these events (Driver 1986). The significance of these events cannot be grasped apart from the ways in which they are understood within the context of the entire biblical story. This narrative context and the need to remind ourselves of the *event* character of the gospel will go a long way in helping the church in the West to overcome the false polarizing views that are emerging around the gospel today. We remind ourselves again of Newbigin's prophetic and helpful insight:

We are speaking about a happening, an event that can never be fully grasped by our intellectual powers and translated into a theory or doctrine. We are in the presence of a reality full of mystery, which challenges but exceeds our grasp. . . . Down the centuries, from the first witness until today, the church has sought and used innumerable symbols to express the inexpressible mystery of the event that is the center, the crisis of all cosmic history, the hinge upon which all happenings turn. Christ the sacrifice offered for our sin, Christ the substitute standing in our place, Christ the ransom paid for our redemption, Christ the conqueror casting out the prince of the world – these and other symbols have been used to point to the heart of the mystery. None can fully express it. It is that happening in which the reign of God is present (Newbigin 1995, 49-50).

6.7 Culture

A sixth and final issue that is crucial for discernment today is that of culture. How the church thinks about culture and how it learns to discern and embody its missional vocation in the context of cultures is incredibly important to how faithful the church in the West will be in its missional role today.

6.7.1 Affirming insights from Missional and Emergent movements

Beginning discernment on this issue, as always it is important to affirm several insights within both the Missional and Emergent church movements on this issue. First, because it is crucial for the church in the West to overcome the false dichotomy between the so-called “sacred” and “secular” areas of human life, many in the Emergent church movement are focusing on fostering practices which implicitly deconstruct this dichotomy. For many, this has led to an emphasis being placed upon all of life as sacred space, which breaks down traditional distinctions about where we locate the church as an institution. For some, the very notion of the church as an institution implicitly perpetuates this dichotomy. In addition, many in the Missional Church movement are building on Newbigin’s insight that this dichotomy is rooted in the Enlightenment faith, complicit in the fact/value dichotomy of the Enlightenment, and crippling to the witness of the church in the West.

This dichotomy must be overcome because of the way in which it leads to the privatization of the gospel and the hindering of the church’s gospel witness in public life. Relegated to the private sphere of “sacred” life, the gospel witness of the church loses its power and the gospel itself is captive to a deadly syncretism with the Enlightenment story of

Western culture. Rather than see the gospel held captive in this way, the church in the West must recover a strong and firm conviction that the gospel bears witness to the true story of the world and is the power of God to transform all areas of life.

Second, it is important to affirm the deep appreciation that is found within the Emergent church movement in particular for the creational goodness of the various types of artistic and creative cultural expression. The deep engagement with the arts and with the creative gifts that God has given to his creatures is something that the Emergent church movement has developed with much benefit for the church in the West. The affirmation of the arts and the various creative gifts is rooted in the goodness of God's creation, and rooted also in the postmodern recovery and renewal of the non-rational aspects of human life.

Third, within both of these movements is a rightful concern that the church in the West wrestle with the growing global crises of our time as a matter of importance for its life and witness. Not only are there a number of significant global crises today, but each of these crises has a local face, and is increasingly becoming a part of both the local and global cultural context in which the church in the West finds itself. Addressing these is a crucial part of what it means for God's people to join in his mission today. God's mission is as wide as the creation itself, and God has called us to be a witness in every cultural context to his restorative and redemptive reign in Christ. The voices within both of these movements that continue to hold before us today this broad scope need to be affirmed.

Fourth, it is important to affirm the good insights of the postmodern shifts in epistemology that have been highlighted by many within these two movements. As argued above, the Emergent church movement in particular is exposing the ways in which the rationalist and foundationalist epistemology of the Enlightenment has affected the church in the West. The modernist epistemology is rooted in the idolatrous faith of the modern story, and this idolatry must be uprooted from the church. The postmodern story, as noted earlier, is moving us beyond the rationalism of the modern story and the rationalist understanding of human nature that was such a large part of that story. For this we should be grateful. The remaining vestiges of rationalism need to be identified, and we can affirm the important work of Brian McLaren and others in helping us to see the "modern viruses" that have weakened the church's witness in the West. As demonstrated above, the church in the West can be greatly helped by the prophetic critique emerging from the church in Africa as it seeks to disentangle itself from the Enlightenment syncretism inherited from the West.

Finally, it is important to affirm the way in which both of these movements are creating a greater sensitivity within the Western church to the cultural transitions and shifts we are currently experiencing. Vital to the framework of discernment developed above is engaging in cultural analysis to understand the complex relationship between the gospel and both the particular culture in which we find ourselves and the many diverse cultures of the world. Further, understanding the intersection between the global and local realities that shape our contexts is vital for our missional engagement. Discernment happens in the crossroads between the biblical story and the global and local realities shaping our cultures. The work of many in both of these movements to raise these issues is something for which we are deeply grateful.

6.7.2 Areas of critique and ways forward

Having affirmed these important insights on culture, it is just as vital that we offer areas of critique and suggest ways forward. Three broad areas can be highlighted here. First, there is a growing and critical need for a missiological analysis of culture that can equip the church in the West for its missional encounter with culture. The elements of such a missiological analysis of culture have been developed at length above: an integrated and holistic understanding of culture; a recognition of the central role that religious faith plays in providing integrating shape to culture; an appreciation for the comprehensive and basic

character of the religious beliefs that shape this religious faith; understanding the characteristics and function of a worldview; appreciating the interconnections between religious beliefs, worldview, and culture; and affirming a Christian understanding of human nature that affirms the central place of religious faith in shaping the direction of human life.

Building on these elements of a missiological analysis of culture, a missional encounter will be shaped by a model of contextualization that helps the church understand the dynamic relationship between the gospel and culture. As noted above, noticeably absent in both the Missional and Emergent church movements is a well-articulated model of contextualization to develop the rich insights of the field of missiology. Given this weakness, there is a tendency in both movements toward cultural syncretism at critical points, as well as a failure to appreciate the shifts from the modern story to the postmodern story at a foundational level. Moreover, there is a failure in both movements to see the incredible threat to the gospel and the mission of the church represented by the power of economic idolatry in globalization and the rampant individualism of the consumerist ideology that is gripping the West. Failure of cultural analysis at this critical point threatens dire consequences for the mission of the church, making it susceptible to syncretism, as well as ongoing apathy toward the global crises of unchecked greed, poverty, and environmental destruction.

Second, it will be vital for the church in the West to develop capacity and deftness in reading the cultural context in which God's people find themselves. As argued above, this skill is a critical part of the process of discernment, as the church seeks to recover and renew its missional role and identity. This involves the holistic understanding of culture so critical to missiological analysis, as well as capacity to understand the growing interface between the global and local realities facing our communities and the capacity to understand the powerful plausibility structures represented by cultural institutions.

One aspect of the growing intersection of global and local realities that deserves particular mention is the importance of learning to listen deeply to those who are culturally "other" than us. Without the capacity to listen to the "other," the church in the West will continue to find itself prone to cultural syncretism, if not in fact in the midst of deep cultural captivity.

The importance of this can be illustrated through one last example from the local experience in Hamilton, Ontario. One of the questions facing the community in Hamilton was the format that would be used for the preaching of God's word in the worship gatherings. There were many in the community who believed that a dialogical model, akin in many aspects to the perspectives of Pagitt developed above, would be critical for contextualizing the gospel and our worship gatherings for the local community. Such a model could, they argued, open up greater participation by the community, wrestling together with the meaning and implications of God's word. This was met initially with some resistance by two broad groups of people who were culturally "other" than the dominant culture that was arguing for this perspective. Those two groups of the "other" represented some members who were recent immigrants from Africa (from the Congo and Liberia) and some members who were shaped by the modern institutional forms of the church they had experienced or come to expect. Both groups felt strongly that an ordained minister should be the primary preacher, and that a sermon should be prepared and delivered by the minister.

The three groups were quite distinct. First, a group of people from the dominant culture who were Canadian, highly educated, and keen on postmodern challenges to how the Western church practices preaching. Second, a group of people from the local community who had been shaped largely by the modern story as well as experiences with the institutional church that had led them to expect the more traditional practices of preaching with which the dominant culture had grown uneasy. Third, a group of new immigrants from different African cultures who had been shaped by their own church experiences in Africa, experiences that were themselves a mixture of traditional African cultures and modern expressions of

Christianity brought to Africa through the modern missionary movement. In hindsight, rich indeed was the opportunity for deep dialogue and discernment between all of these various cultural understandings. Unfortunately, most of that opportunity was missed as the discernment on this issue was mired by conflict that had come to reside in the community and the lack of communication that accompanied the conflict.

Viewing this story as an illustration, we must recognize the great challenge facing the local congregation to discern the interface of global and local realities, as well as the growing tensions and shifts from the modern to the postmodern story. The skill of learning to listen deeply to those who are “other” than us is crucial for this discernment to move forward and for the church to avoid cultural syncretism.

A third and final way forward is for the church in the West to recover the importance of worldview thinking for its missional role and identity. It is important to locate the importance of worldview thinking between the biblical story and the mission of the church so central to that story. As argued above, the biblical story makes an ontological claim in that it claims to reveal to us universal history, encompassing the true story of the world (Goheen and Wolters 2005, 126). At the centre of that story is the gospel, which is both restorative in nature and comprehensive in scope. The mission of God, through his people, for the sake of his world is a central clue to reading the whole story and its truth claims.

A central aspect of the church’s calling within this story is to bear witness through its life, words, and deeds to the gospel of Jesus Christ and all of its implications for life. Within this context is the important role that worldview thinking can play for the church. Worldview thinking equips the church to continue to uphold these comprehensive, ontological claims. In so doing, worldview thinking on the one hand guards the gospel by continually drawing God’s people back to its comprehensive scope and its restorative nature (particularly resisting the sacred/secular dichotomy) and it becomes an important means through which we can mediate the gospel to all areas of life. As Goheen and Wolters argue, “Worldview is not the gospel: The gospel is the power of God unto salvation while worldview is a human attempt to elucidate certain basic structural features of the gospel to equip the church for its missionary task. . . . Worldview articulation can play a mediating role between the gospel and the missionary calling of God’s people” (2005, 142-143).

Worldview thinking will not only mediate the gospel and all of its implications for the church in its missional role and identity, but will also equip the church to articulate a biblical worldview story in relationship to its cultural worldview. Understanding and seeking to live within this tension is an important aspect of the church’s missional role. Such worldview thinking can equip the church in the West to recognize the power of economic globalization and consumerism, the two dominant powers shaping the Western worldview today.

In seeking to articulate a biblical worldview in the context of the cultural worldview, the church will also be equipped to understand more deeply the cultural shift from modernity to postmodernity. The weakness within the Emergent church movement in this area has been noted already. This cultural shift, when seen from the lens of worldview thinking, has some profound discontinuities from modernity, but one theme continues right into modernity: basic beliefs in human autonomy continues to shape the Western world. Worldview thinking will equip the church to understand this as more than simply a challenge to the rationalist epistemologies of the modern period. Indeed there are significant epistemological shifts taking place as key aspects of the epistemological assumptions of modernity are being challenged by postmodernity. However, to reduce postmodernity to issues of epistemology is a serious distortion and failure to appreciate the broader cultural challenges at stake.

Worldview thinking is also a very helpful tool in equipping the church in the West to discern the cultural idolatry at work around us, and the ways in which those idolatrous beliefs are contributing to global crises. By opening up the cultural idolatries of today, the church is equipped to offer the gospel as a credible alternative to those idols. This type of cultural

critique is able to unleash the power of the gospel for the transformation of the human heart, which is where the battle for idolatry is ultimately fought, as well as the transformation of human society, where the implications of idolatrous beliefs are lived out and felt by all. The church needs to recover confidence in gospel proclamation that engages the reigning idols of our day and offers the gospel as a genuine alternative in all of its power and in its full comprehensive scope.

6.8 Conclusion

Throughout this study, themes have emerged from reflection and analysis of the global and local context in which this study emerges that have critical significance for the church in the West as it seeks to discern its missional vocation. Themes emerged as well from theoretical analysis and literature review of both the Emergent and Missional church movements as many within those movements seek as well to discern the missional vocation of the church in the contemporary cultural context of the West. These themes have coalesced into the six areas for discernment highlighted in this chapter. Discernment is needed in each of these six areas. The framework for discernment articulated in the previous chapter has been brought to bear on these six issues. In so doing, ways of moving forward for the church in the West to discern its missional vocation in these critical areas have been identified. Such discernment will provide both a helpful framework for engaging these issues today as well as offering good insights for the church to be equipped and strengthened to carry out its missional identity and role in the contemporary cultural context of Western culture as it seeks to bear witness to the Gospel in all of its power and breadth.

6.9 Final Conclusions

The central problem that has been addressed in this study is the need for increased capacity in missional discernment for the church in Western culture. This study has contributed to the work on missional ecclesiology by focusing on the need for the church in the West today to grow in its capacity to discern its missional vocation. This study's central research question has been "**how** can the church in the West discern its missional vocation as it seeks to recover its missional identity?"

The question of discernment of missional vocation is urgent. Global and local realities are pressing in on the church, contributing to its identity crisis and demanding discernment as it seeks to renew that identity and discern its missional vocation. Historical developments in the emergence of a missional hermeneutic invite the church in the West to return to Scripture for renewal of its missional role and identity.

The answer to the central research question has been given. The church can discern its missional vocation by dwelling in the biblical story with the use of a missional hermeneutic. Such dwelling in the biblical story will open up the broadest horizons on the missional thrust to the biblical story and equip the church to recover and renew its missional role and identity. Such renewal of its identity is essential and will shape discernment of its missional vocation.

The church can discern its missional vocation by knowing the broad contours and shape of the cultural story that we find ourselves in within Western culture. Our place in the story is an exceedingly complex one in which we see the story of modernity continue in, especially in its economic expression through the growth of economic globalization and consumerism. At the same time, the story of modernity is being challenged in fundamental ways by the emergence of postmodernism. This complexity requires a depth of cultural analysis that can be done through the tool of a missiological analysis of culture. Several themes emerge from this depth analysis that are faced by the church in the West and are crucial for the church to engage as it seeks to discern its missional vocation.

The church can discern its missional vocation by engaging in dialogue with our brothers and sisters within both the emergent and missional church movements. This

dialogue must engage these movements with careful historical analysis, as well as appreciation and critique of practices, theological and philosophical emphases, and a growing diversity marking both movements. Discernment cannot happen in a vacuum and it cannot happen alone. Through engagement with these movements, we discover themes crying out for discernment that find roots in the cultural story of the West and are bearing fruit in both the global and local realities identified in the opening chapter. The task of discernment will be a complex one, but one that is vital for the church in the West today.

Finally, the church can discern its missional vocation by developing and employing a framework of discernment. This framework will aid the church in the West in contextualizing the gospel for the contemporary context as it seeks to discover and live out its missional vocation in fresh and new ways. Further, this framework of discernment has accomplished the research goal of finding a way through the epistemological crisis of the West. Practicing discernment is an ongoing task for the church in the West and is aided by the framework that is developed in this study.

Having provided an answer to the central research question, the study has concluded by seeking to aid the church in the West in the practice of discernment of missional vocation by putting on the framework developed here and practicing discernment in six key areas. The practicing of missional discernment demonstrated in this study has provided an important contribution to the work on missional ecclesiology. This study has provided insights that aid the church in the West as to grow in its capacity to discern its missional vocation. As God continues his mission of redeeming and renewing the entirety of his good creation, may the church in the West take up its role and renew its identity in God's mission with greater confidence and wiser discernment as it seeks to discern and live out its God-given missional vocation.

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