

**TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE IMPLICATION AND CHALLENGE OF THE EMERGING  
CHURCH MOVEMENT FOR ECCLESIOLOGY IN POST-COLONIAL AFRICA—  
AN EVANGELICAL PERSPECTIVE**

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By

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### **Declaration**

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## DEDICATION

To Ramona, my best friend & loving wife

To Floretta Oluwatoyin, my dear mother

To Ronke, my late sister

To the Church of God in Christ

To the Glory of God, Christ our Lord and the Holy Spirit

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**GENERAL INTRODUCTION****Ecclesiology: The Nature, Mission and Structure of the Church**

The nature, mission and structure of the Church have become a very popular area of discourse in contemporary theology. Understood socially, the Church can be seen as a shared form of life shaped by profound theological self-understanding. Seen institutionally, the Church has subsisted in a variety of forms and structures of leadership and governance. From a theological perspective, the Church has been described using varying images, terminologies and concepts often in response to questions and crises at different times in history. The systematic study of the Church in all of the above interacting dimensions constitutes the field of ecclesiology (Mannion & Mudge 2008: 3). Further, ecclesiology relates to other themes of systematic theology (like the Doctrine of God, Christology, Pneumatology, Soteriology, Theological Anthropology and Theological Ethics).

Ecclesiology brings to life the significance of community birth by the narrative of the cross. It looks at the forms of the Church's governance, liturgical life and corporate witness as primary instruments by which the gospel of the cross is lived and communicated. As Mannion & Mudge explain, "ecclesiology becomes the normative study of communities which make social and symbolic space in the world for the working of grace. Thus, the Church becomes far more than an institutional setting for the protection and promulgation of truths reached in other ways" (2008:3). In essence, ecclesiology is fundamental to any theological reflection and formulation because it "concerns the nature of the social space which makes language about God, and therefore faith itself possible" (Mannion & Mudge 2008:3).

Until the time of the Reformation, ecclesiology was not given much attention, and even then, as some theological scholars suggest, the leaders of the Reformation did not really give ecclesiology its own established standing in their theological formulations. Indeed as Karkkainen (2002:10) notes, the Church fathers had many things to say about the Church. Irenaeus, for instance made clear the ecclesial conviction about the integral relationship between the Spirit and the Church stating, "where the Church is, there is also the Spirit, and where the Spirit is, there is also the Church and all grace; for the Spirit is Truth"(Karkkainen 2002:10). The description of the Church as *one, holy, catholic and apostolic* became a theme in the Catechetical lectures of Cyril of Jerusalem in the fourteenth century (Karkkainen 2002:10). While medieval scholarship produced numerous collections and comparative studies of canon law, no treaties solely focused on the theology of the Church emerged until the fifteenth century (Prusak 2004:229). As Prusak (2004:229) observes, "neither the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard, nor the *Summa theologiae* of Thomas Aquinas, with its classical theological divisions, had a section dedicated specifically to a discussion on ecclesiology." Thomas Aquinas integrated his discussion on the Church into his Christological formulation and his treatment of the

Eucharist. Aquinas' teaching on the mystical body of the Church emphasized the role of Christ as head and Irenaeus acknowledged the role of the Spirit as the life-giving heart of the Church and source of her unity. The absence of a detailed ecclesiology should however not be seen to mean that the questions and crisis that later came to bring ecclesiological discourse into focus had not yet arisen. On the contrary, all events that led to the Protestant Reformation (with its critique of the Roman Catholic Church and its call for a free Christian council in German lands) provided much impetus for developing a theology of the Church in the context of crisis.

As Karkkainen (2002:28) aptly observes, one of the most significant documents in ecclesiology is the *Lumen Gentium* of Vatican II. It marked a watershed moment not only in Catholic theology and ecclesiology, but also in ecumenical theology of the Church. Karkkainen (2002:28) further notes a significant development in Vatican II was perhaps the replacement of the old *societas perfecta*- institutional-hierarchic ecclesiology, with the dynamic people of God, in which the Church is seen primarily in eschatological dimension. Indeed the *Lumen Gentium* brought a fresh perspective to ecclesiological discourse with a lot of ecumenical potential. This sense is aptly captured in the Roman Catholic Church's understanding that the Church,

is one because of the indwelling of the one Holy Spirit in all the baptised; it is holy because it is set apart by God's graciousness for the reception of a mysterious love of predilection; it is catholic in the original sense of the word, meaning that it is whole and entire, possessing all the parts needed to make it integral; and it is apostolic because it remains in continuity in essentials with the original witnessing of the first century apostles.(Fahey 1991:43).

Today more than ever, theologians are agreed that we need to reflect more intentionally on the Doctrine of the Church, her nature, mission and structure. We can no longer afford to place ecclesiology as an appendix in our systematic theological formulations. Globally, the Church faces new challenges today that make a vital systematic study of the Church inspired by the Holy Spirit and faithful to the Scripture essential. In addition, as our discourse will suggest, this ecclesiological vision should be informed by intentional historical study. It must respond meaningfully to ecumenical concerns and more important, to contextual sensitivities. This is important if the Church is to remain faithful, in a continued sense to Christ as Lord and Saviour, to minister (faithfully, dynamically, relevantly and sensitively) God's message of reconciliation in the power of the Holy Spirit in contemporary times. There are a number of reasons for this renewed call for intense discourse on ecclesiology and these reasons partly inform our quest in this thesis. First, theological scholars are agreed that Christianity is increasingly growing southward. The once evangelised continents of Asia, South America and Africa have now come to maturity. The table is set for the former evangelising nations and the evangelised nations to dine together as brothers and sisters. In fact, the former evangelising nations are now themselves (in a sense) a mission field for the former evangelised nations. It appears that this development is redefining the forms and expressions of Church with significant implications for



theological ecclesiological vision. If we accept this perspective, we could argue that the expansive growth of the Church outside the traditional Euro-American context now demands of us in a renewed sense to reflect again on how we account not only theologically, but also culturally for our existence as gathered people of God in various contexts.

In Africa for instance, we no longer speak of a self-governing, self-supporting, self-propagating Church, but also of a self-theologising church. African theological scholars (past and emerging) have written extensively with the vision of deriving a framework for theology in Africa that reflects the beauty of God's creation and the gospel within African cultures and to articulate in a more relevant sense what it means to be the people of God in Christ by the Spirit in Africa. Whatever the shape ecclesiology (both intellectual discourse and practical expression) has taken in Africa, one key challenge today is that the church in post-colonial Africa seeks to establish her self-identity with perhaps nuanced perspective. This is very evident in the recent controversy that plagued the worldwide Anglican Communion. In a precise sense therefore, evangelicalism within post-colonial Africa seems to be entering a promising phase. The enormous challenge and call is for an afro-centric evangelical theology with an ecclesia identity and expression that relevantly serves the people of the Triune God in Africa. However, there remain core questions, what form, nature and structure should such ecclesiological understanding take and what theological framework should inform such ecclesial identity and expression?

Second, the increasing secularisation and the ongoing shift in culture from modern paradigms to postmodern paradigms presents the church in the West with new challenges. In many ways, this further strengthens the argument for a context-informed ecclesiological understanding in contemporary times. In some way, this brings to fore the culture versus Scripture debate. (How we in our proclamation of the cross remain relevant to changing culture/context is of immense importance. However, keeping the counter-cultural truth claims of Scripture in its transcendent perspective cannot be over-emphasised). As such, the emerging paradigm shift from the modern to the postmodern in Euro-American context may have significant implications for contemporary evangelical theology and ecclesiology. This is because the emerging postmodern culture as proponents posit, defines itself in terms of incoherence, indeterminism, contextuality, hybridity and a lack of a single organising principle (i.e. relative, subjective and pluralistic) (Mabiala 2001:334). A total rejection, as it seems, of modern cultural paradigms and Enlightenment rationalism that as most scholars argue informed the evangelical theological tradition thus far.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, it becomes expedient that we enquire as to the implications these developments may have for ecclesiology and in particular, evangelical ecclesiology. Put differently, what implications do these developments have for evangelical theological and ecclesiological

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<sup>1</sup> See Greer, Robert 2003. *Mapping Postmodernism*. Downers Grove: IVP

discourse? What theological method/framework can assist evangelicals in the task of better defining in a more context-sensitive way, our nature as the ecclesia of God in Christ by the Spirit in increasingly changing and challenging contemporary times? As for the question of context, are we indeed moving into a modern to postmodern paradigm shift? How exactly should we understand this paradigm shift? How do we in fact be the Church in context? How should we respond theologically and ecclesiologicaly to emerging postmodern, post-colonial contexts? These amongst others are precisely the questions we seek to engage directly and indirectly in our discourse.

As noted above, the renewed sense in which the Roman Catholic Church captured the ancient formula (One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church) after Vatican II brings a fresh perspective to ecclesiological discourse. While some evangelical scholars (both Westerners and Africans) have argued and analysed the sufficiency of these marks for our understanding of the nature and character of Church, others have argued that the marks are limited. These scholars suggest that there is a need to broaden their meaning if we are to better acknowledge the social context of theological reflection and ecclesia expression. Akin to this perspective is the call for an evangelical articulation of the ontology of the Church that stretches beyond an ecclesial understanding of the Church as people gathered around Word and Sacrament.

To be sure, many evangelical scholars have argued that evangelicals do not have the need or see the need for clearly articulated ecclesiology or for allowing the wisdom of culture/context to take the Church to greater maturity. This has resulted in a renewed call for an intentional evangelical ecclesiology that will enable evangelicals to better respond relevantly and sensitively to the realities of contemporary times under the inspiration of the Spirit. To this end in recent times, there have been several vigorous attempts (implicitly and explicitly) by groups within evangelical circles directed at developing a reformational, evangelical ecclesiology. Two such movements are the Missional Church Movement and the Emerging Church Movement. These movements continue to make significant contributions to the evangelical ecclesiological discourse. Therefore, they require our specific attention.

While we shall engage the Missional Church Movement, our research is mainly inspired by the proposals and critique of the Emerging Church Movement (ECM). Key vocal voices within the ECM include Brian McLaren, Tony Jones, and Dan Kimball (amongst others). They are instructive for our understanding of the Emerging Church Movement in this research. These leaders maintain that a radical response to the postmodern paradigm is necessary. They posit a generous orthodoxy and ecclesiology that is Incarnational, Sacramental, Contextual and Missional and Communal. Their positive affirmation of postmodern paradigms seems to set the ECM apart from other expressions of evangelical ecclesiology. While the ecclesiological terms they use may be

similar, the ways they employ the terms are somewhat different to mainstream evangelicals. The Emerging Church Movement has been extensively criticised by mainstream evangelicals and the wider theological community. Irrespective of the criticism the movement has received, theological scholars seem to agree that the questions and issues the ECM are raising and seeking to address have implications for our understanding of the nature and mission of the Church in the light of the postmodern contexts. Some even suggest that the ECM conversation may help the quest for an innovative, dynamic, context relevant, scripturally faithful and Spirit inspired ecclesial identity and expression in contemporary times. (This could be seen as an ecclesiological understanding that reflects the reality of the Kingdom of God in its 'already' and 'not yet' dimension). Furthermore, if we accept postmodernism to be an ally of post-colonialism, we could also argue that the ECM conversation may even create spaces for a more robust ecclesiological discourse in post-colonial Africa. These are also some of the theological contentions we shall engage in our discourse.

For the purpose of labels, which really does not appeal to us much in this research, we can place the ECM proponents within what some scholars (Justin Taylor; co-editor of *Reclaiming the Centre*-2004), would refer to as post-fundamentalists, post-foundationalist, post-propositionalist or post-evangelical. Whatever the terminologies employed, these terms only further establish that there is a significant change happening within the evangelical family. Taylor for the purpose of his critique and at the risk of oversimplification refers to Brian McLaren as the pastor of the so-called post-foundationalist movement and Stanley Grenz as its professor. Indeed, both McLaren and Grenz have been very influential in the current debate both practically and theoretically and their proposals continue to gain wider acceptance globally. It is for this reason that the late Stanley Grenz is the systematic theologian we find instructive for our present task.

In our present understanding, Grenz's proposal for a nuanced evangelical theological formulation and ecclesiological vision is very fascinating. Grenz has received ample criticism for his proposed paradigmatic approach to evangelical theology and ecclesiology. Nevertheless, we find his proposal appropriately significant. Grenz's proposal provides a helpful framework for shaping evangelical theological ecclesiology in the emerging postmodern culture in Euro-American contexts. In our developing understanding, if we place Grenz in dialogue with contemporary African theological reflections, his proposals may provide an innovative space for an articulating Afrocentric ecclesial identity and expressions. We shall engage Grenz critically and attempt to place his proposal under the critical lens and pens of Millard Erickson, D.A. Carson and a host of other leading evangelical scholars who are responding instructively and constructively to the ongoing conversation. Furthermore, we shall also engage with African theological scholars who have written with a specific Afrocentric vision and continues to contribute to the current theological and ecclesiological dialogue. These include, Kenzo Mabiata, a leading African

evangelical who is currently engaging both theoretically and practically in the debate for a truly contextual theology, and who provides tremendous insight. The works of Emmanuel Katongole, Kwame Bediako, John Parratt and R.S. Sugirtharajah amongst others, also contribute greatly to our ecclesiological quest. In the end, the quest is for an evangelical ecclesiology (that is biblically faithful, socio-culturally sensitive and theologically coherent), rooted within a nuanced theological framework that create spaces for and broadens the scope of evangelical ecclesiological discourse in general and post-colonial African contexts in particular.

### Use of Terms

- **ECM-** emerging church movement
- **Emergent-** a proponent of the emerging church movement
- **Africa-** In our use of Africa, we are mindful of Africa's diversity, multi-cultural and multi-ethnic reality. We acknowledge the complexity of referring to Africa in general terms. Our modest quest in this thesis is to highlight a possible theological framework that will give space for this diversity and enable a context informed Afrocentric ecclesial expressions.

## Chapter One

### Evangelical Tradition— Identity, Theology and Ecclesiology

#### 1. The Evangelical Movement— Historical Roots and Identity

The nature of our research requires that we begin by clarifying the evangelical identity. In doing so, we note the complexity of using the term ‘evangelical’ as most evangelical scholars have admitted. To help our enquiry therefore, it is important that we look back and do a very brief survey of the historical development of the evangelical tradition. We do this with the understanding that the past not only helps shape and illuminate the present, but also help us to anticipate the future. In the light of this, we note that an understanding of the origins of the evangelical movement is essential for any attempt to make sense of its subsequent development and identity. We however acknowledge that our approach here is a selective reading that aids our analytical and interpretative intent, as opposed to a chronicle of the evangelical history. Further, we hope a brief survey of the historical roots of evangelicalism will help clarify the contours of evangelical ecclesiological vision in the light of the emerging changing paradigms of both the Euro-American and the African contexts.

##### 1.1 The Protestant Reformation

Beginning in the sixteenth century, the word evangelical took on a meaning associated specifically with the Protestant Reformation. The churches that emerged from the German reformation adopted the name *evangelisch* (evangelical) as a means of highlighting Luther's emphasis on the gospel and to set them apart from the Roman Catholic Church (Noll 2004:14). As Grenz (1993:22) observes, “the self-conscious evangelical movement enjoys a special affinity to the sixteenth century.” They often claim to be the sole true heirs of the Reformation because they have remained faithful to the gospel of the grace of God in Christ as Luther emphasized. Taking after the theology of the Reformation era, evangelicals emphasize the great *solas* – *sola scriptura*, *sola Christus*, *sola gratia*, and *sola fide*. While evangelicalism is not simply the contemporary embodiment of the Reformation, the theological trajectory that gave it birth may have begun in the Reformation. Irrespective of their differences, the leaders of the Reformation were in general agreement on these theological positions. Their perspective of Scripture and the vision of reforming the Church became a recurring theme within the broader evangelical movement. Except for minor exceptions, these theological positions form the basic element and framework of the evangelical theological reflection and formulation.

### 1.1.2 Legacy of Puritans and Pietist Movement

As Grenz (1993:22) observes, ecclesiology as such was not central to Luther's theological formulations; his primary concern was to restore the gospel to the Church. Consequently as Avis (1981:13) notes, "his engagement with the question of the nature of the Church emerged out of this restorative desire. By contending for the gospel, Luther hoped to bring into being a truly gospel Church (i.e. to establish the Church once again upon the foundation of the gospel)." Thus, the Puritans did not necessarily give much attention to the nature of the gospel (i.e. soteriology), because they believed that Luther and Calvin had settled this concern. Rather, the Puritans focused their attention on ecclesiology. Indeed, Luther, in his debate with the Roman Catholic Church raised the initial question as to what constitutes a gospel church, declaring that Word and Sacrament constitute the true Church. Yet, Luther's pronouncement on the nature of the Church did not really rise out of an interest in ecclesiological matters. Luther and other Reformers, as Avis (1981:14) notes, merely maintained that the true Church is one that proclaims and celebrates the true biblical gospel as they had rediscovered it, namely, the good news of justification by grace through faith alone.

The Puritans were somewhat motivated by ecclesiological concerns. This concern as Grenz (2000: 33) notes arose out of their desire to rid the Church of what they perceived to be the residue of papistry that remained after the break with Rome. The Puritans, (after Calvin, Bucer and Beza) identified three essentials for the requirement of the true church, namely, doctrine, discipline and sacrament.<sup>2</sup> The debate on the exact extent of the invisible Church, the status of the elect, (i.e. their quest for a method by which one could determine whether or not one is part of the saved), soon moved the discussion away from ecclesiology back to soteriology. Hence, as Grenz (2000:291) notes, the kind of Puritanism that most directly fed into the rise of the evangelical movement had traded its earlier ecclesiological orientation for a concern for the kind of experiential religion that would readily transcend confessional distinctives. As many evangelical scholars hold, the Puritan's perspective became a key influence on the ethos and theology of the evangelical movement (Grenz 2000:33 - 40).

Alongside Puritan influence are also pietistic tendencies that are observable within some streams of evangelicalism. These developed in response to what Philipp Jakob Spener (1635-1705) saw as the deplorable state of the church in Germany. He proposed a church that involves and ministers to the laity, whom he termed the spiritual or universal priesthood. Spener was instrumental in establishing lay people within the parish churches who met weekly for worship, Bible study, prayer, fellowship and mutual edification. This gathering came to be known as

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<sup>2</sup> It is not our intention to develop the Puritan position in detail here. For further studies see Stoeffler, Ernest 1971. *The Rise of Evangelical Pietism*. Leiden: Brill.

Pietism (Stoeffler 1971: 44). Unlike the Puritans' institutional purity, Pietists sought for personal piety. To this end as Stoeffler (1971:237) writes, they were content to establish (through the *collegia pietatis*) what they termed *ecclesiolae in ecclesia* (i.e. churches within the Church). The goal of these churches within the Church was not to separate the true Christians from non-Christians. These churches were to be agencies for bringing the Church to reflect once again on the image of the early Christian community. For Pietists therefore, ecclesiological reform was closely linked to the question of real or false Christianity. Whereas the Reformation was seen as the origin of faith, in Pietism the focus shifted to the outcome of faith (i.e. elevating the new birth as the crux of Christianity). The objectivity of justification as argued by Luther and to a lesser extent by Calvin, was replaced by the concern for the work of regeneration, which was understood as the transformation of the heart. The completion of this transition within the context of the budding revivals in Europe and North America marked the genesis of the evangelical movement with a conscious focus on the gospel of the new birth (Stoeffler 1971:237; Grenz 2000:42-43). Grenz (2000:291) observes that the emphasis on the personal experience of the new birth occasioned the development of benign neglect of the Church, if not a certain anti-church bias among many evangelicals.

### 1.1.3 Evangelicalism - Coming to Being

In the light of the above historical sketch, it is probably right to say that evangelicalism finds expression in both Puritanism and Pietism. The context for this development lay in a revival inspired largely by a renewal in preaching of the doctrine of justification by faith (i.e. a call for the lost to trust Christ for salvation and be part of the Christian community) (Noll 2004 70f). The vision of personal regeneration, rather than outward rituals as key to a changed life continues to dominate evangelical theology to the present. The regeneration of the believer by the Spirit evangelicals proclaim, renews the heart and life (Noll 2004: 129ff). It would probably be true to say that the Methodist Church as established by John Wesley, epitomises this conviction. Some evangelical scholars have even suggested that Wesley epitomised the point where Puritanism and Pietism meet in evangelical theology.<sup>3</sup>

Following the Pietists, Wesley's central theology was soteriological emphasis on conversion and regeneration. This he understood as being born again by the Holy Spirit through conscious faith in Christ Jesus, an event that also includes Justification (Noll 2004:130). The theology of new birth as developed at this time was however not only limited to Methodism as an evangelical expression. It also became a key part of the evangelical movement in varied content and forms, each of which included elements such as agony, guilt and finally relief (Noll 2004:132). Thus, as the evangelical movement grew, significant emphasis was placed on the conscious personal

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<sup>3</sup> See Kisker, Scott 1999. "John Wesley's Puritan and Pietist Heritage Re-examined" *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 34, 2.



experience of God's grace in conversion. This emphatic conviction according to Grenz (2000:47) is called "Convertive Piety". That is, "the vision of the faith that proclaims that true Christian piety (devotion, discipline, sanctification) begins with a distinct conversion experience not identical with infant Baptism." The focus on convertive piety as Grenz (2000:47) contends, marked the climax shift away from the interest in what constitutes a gospel Church that had initially marked the Puritan movement. As the evangelical movement came to maturity in the early eighteenth century, the quest for a truly reformed Church in which the gospel is truly preached gave way to the interest in the proclamation of the gospel of conversion and new birth within and beyond ecclesiastical structures (Grenz 2000:47).

Grenz (2000:47) argues that convertive piety now seen as the central hallmark of evangelicalism gives evangelical theology its shape. Since the early eighteenth century, as Grenz contends, the theological formulation of many evangelical theologians was focused on holding on to the heritage of the Reformation doctrine, as was the case in Protestant scholasticism. Equally important for them also was reflection on the nature of the conversion encounter, which contemporary evangelicals still share. Following John Wesley, evangelical theologians maintain that the gospel assures that all who have given their life to Christ (i.e. are born again) are children of God. Born again Christians are empowered, assured of their status and hope by the Holy Spirit. As evangelicals, we see this as normal experience; a dimension as Grenz (2000:49) observes, of the focus on personal, experiential piety that has characterised the evangelical movement from its inception.<sup>4</sup>

In some sense, this understanding seems to be a shift from the Puritans' quest for assurance of elect status. This shift in understanding led some evangelical scholars to conclude that the evangelical movement is a child of early modernity. For instance, Grenz (2000:49) contends that evangelicals have drawn from the empiricist, inductive, scientific method that included the elevation of experimentation, mediated to them largely through John Locke. In keeping with the newly found ethos therefore, eighteenth century evangelicals repeatedly referred to their approach as experimental religion. By this, they meant a religion that has been tried and proven by observable growth (Grenz 2000:9). In their view, as Grenz (2003:50) further explains, "to be Christian requires that religious affiliation be experienced in life and its truth confirmed through personal experience, (i.e. through experiment)." Bebbington (2005:122) notes that Jonathan Edwards typified the evangelical use of Enlightenment in an attempt to develop an empirical religion. As Bebbington notes, many evangelicals hold Jonathan Edwards in high esteem as the thinker who successfully combined the essentials of Puritan theology with a wise endorsement of

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<sup>4</sup> For instance, the classical evangelical understanding suggests that genuine assurance arises from such evidences as the believer's perseverance in faith, evidence of the Spirit in the believer's heart and a long-term pattern of growth in the believer's life (Grudem 1994:803-804).



revival. Grenz (2000:50) concurs with Bebbington in noting that Jonathan Edwards was more confident than his Puritan forebears about the powers of human knowledge. Similarly, Smith (1959:205) explains that Edwards believed that the assured knowledge of God is possible because at conversion the Holy Spirit “authors a new inward perception in the believer’s mind.” For Edwards, the experimental knowledge of God mediated by the Holy Spirit is indubitable. Like Edwards, John Wesley also draws a correlation between a person’s natural senses and the believer’s spiritual senses. Wesley holds that faith is a spiritual sense that is able to discern spiritual things, just as natural senses can discern natural things. In all, as Bebbington (2005:110) contends, “Wesley commended what he noted as a religion founded upon reason and every way agreeable thereto.”

Based on this understanding, as Grenz (2000:49) argues, Edwards set a framework for the evangelical approach to Christian faith. Grenz (2000:49) notes that evangelicals replaced the older Puritan practice of waiting for assurance. Instead, evangelicals linked assurance with the experience of faith that occurs in conversion (a greater confidence as it were in the possibility of human knowledge). To make this claim as Grenz (2000:50) argues, is to succumb to the realm of religion, or Enlightenment epistemology, which focuses on reason as the sole source of all knowledge. Bebbington agrees with Grenz in noting that the “ideas of the evangelicals of the later nineteenth century were deeply moulded by the assumptions of the earlier phase of Western thought known as the Enlightenment” (Bebbington 2005:109). The present challenge, however, is that the emerging postmodern paradigm, as we shall discuss below and in the chapters that follow, is very critical of and rejects Enlightenment rationalism. In our developing understanding, this presents the key contemporary challenge to evangelical theological formulations and ecclesiological visions.

#### **1.1.4 The New-Evangelicals**

The modernist-fundamentalist controversy in the twentieth century brought about the collapse of the evangelical movement that boomed in the nineteenth century. This controversy led to the emergence of new evangelicals that seek to stand between liberalism and fundamentalism (Grenz 2000:53ff). According to Marsden (1987:3), the new coalition began as a protest by several younger evangelical thinkers against the internal division, anti-intellectualism, departmentalisation of life and social irrelevance of fundamentalism. The new evangelicalism drew together people from diverse backgrounds and denominations (i.e. Presbyterian and Baptist, dispensationalist, Pentecostal, Charismatic and holiness movements). The new evangelicals that emerged in the twentieth century, Grenz contends, became a movement of conservative Christians that grew out of earlier fundamentalism (Grenz 1993:25). Following the fundamentalists before them, the new evangelicals committed themselves to the basic doctrines of Christian orthodoxy in the face of the challenge of liberal theology. Unlike the earlier

fundamentalists however, the new evangelicals were post-fundamentalist and were more open to engage the world and other viewpoints. Aside from holding onto the theological heritage of the Reformation, the post-fundamental evangelical movement is also oriented around the practical task of understanding the nature of the conversion experience, the marks of salvation, the relationship of conversion and sanctification and the certainty of a believer's saved status (Grenz 1993:26).

### 1.1.5 Defining the Evangelical Identity

The brief evangelical historical trajectory we attempted to trace above enables the context within which we can define the evangelical identity. It allows us to better describe the essence of the Evangelical movement in contemporary times as a movement rooted in the Protestant Reformation, strengthened by its Puritanism and Pietistic heritage and birthed anew from the fundamentalism before it (Grenz 2000:81). What seems obvious from our selective historical survey above is that defining evangelicalism is a somewhat difficult task. Some evangelical scholars (e.g Carson 2006:444) have even suggested that the term evangelical will eventually so lack definition that it will be theologically useless. Having said that, it is worth noting that even if the term 'evangelical' were to go out of use, in our present understanding, it will most likely not happen in the near future. It is therefore still helpful and useful to use the term evangelical as a broad umbrella that covers a people that hold dearly to the Reformation heritage as described above.

Indeed, while the term evangelical has carried several different senses throughout history, yet almost all definitions relate to its etymological meaning of good news. The term evangelical is a transliteration of the Greek noun "*evangelion*", which was regularly employed by the authors of the New Testament to signify good tidings (Bloesch 1978:7). Quebedeaux (1978:6) defines an evangelical as "a person who is devoted to the good news that God has sent us a Saviour and that we can be partakers of God's redemptive grace in Jesus Christ." Thus, evangelical faith is seen as a gospel religion (a faith tradition focusing on the good news of salvation brought to sinners by Jesus Christ). As Grenz (1993:22) notes, the "connection between the designation of the movement and *evangelion* has led many apologists to begin description of evangelicalism with an appeal to this biblical word." Indeed, as we gather from Church history, evangelicals have been at the forefront of evangelistic activity (i.e. unity in common commitment to evangelism). This evangelistic commitment however is not necessarily exclusive to evangelicals.

Another common approach is to define *evangelicalism* by listing the essentials or fundamental doctrines that are seen as the essence of the evangelical tradition in connection with its historical heritage. McGrath (1995:55-56) for example offers a list of six fundamental evangelical distinctives most evangelicals adhere to:

- The authority of Scripture
- The lordship of Christ (as both incarnate God and Saviour)
- The deity of the Holy Spirit
- The need for personal conversion
- The priority of evangelism
- The importance of the Church (for spiritual nourishment, fellowship and growth)

In our present understanding, we agree with Knight III (1997:17) observation that while the above list is helpful, it may be limiting because such lists tend to be formal statements abstracted from a particular evangelical theological tradition. In some ways, it fails to take into consideration the intense debate within the evangelical tradition, (i.e. how best to develop and explain the core beliefs practically in the light of the many denominations that make up the evangelical movement). As Knight III (1997: 18) further observes, to know more exactly the content of these evangelical doctrinal distinctives, one will have to root them in a Reformed, Wesleyan, Anabaptist, Pentecostal, Charismatic or similar tradition. They would have to be correlated with other doctrines omitted from these lists, (e.g. theological anthropology or eschatology, or a more exact description of God's saving activity). Similarly, Lints (1993:30) argues that defining evangelicalism in mere doctrinal terms fails on three grounds:

- a) "It does not adequately account for the diversity of the movement"
- b) "The conceptual definitions often fail to differentiate evangelicals sufficiently from non-evangelicals"
- c) "The doctrinal criterion is in fact tangential rather than central to the essence of the movement."

Lints (1993:30) argues that while doctrine is important, the evangelical movement is not held together by mere confessional or doctrinal distinctives. "While certain theological beliefs are important to all evangelicals, we perhaps cannot suppose that these itemised theological convictions adequately define the evangelical movement in its varied forms." Thus, Lints (1993:54) defines evangelicalism as a "theological patchwork quilt in which the various constituent parts have repressed aspects distinctive to their particular traditions." Lints (1993:55) suggests a pluralistic evangelical outlook that could "accommodate both a commitment to essentials and recognition of the theological diversity of the movement." In our present understanding and as our discourse shall suggest, the insights of Lints and Knight III suggest that evangelical identity within the emerging postmodern context may not necessarily be found in detailed unified and itemised theological convictions. If the emerging postmodern paradigm that we shall discuss in the following chapters affirms the contextual and relative rather than modern universalism, perhaps we should acknowledge in a more precise sense the unity in diversity that seem intrinsic to the movement when defining the evangelical identity.

For instance, Carson (1996:456) sees the shift in Lints' understanding of the evangelical identity as a doctrinal decline bound up with the postmodern era. Yet, even Carson (1996:456) would agree that Lints rightly perceives that evangelicalism has in "recent decades squandered so much of its theological heritage that it is becoming harder and harder to define it primarily in theological terms." In part, this difficulty has been made more intense by the increasingly cultural and contextual pressures that now befall evangelicals in the global South (and for our purposes Africa in her cherished diversity). In our developing understanding, any description of evangelical identity should put in proper perspective the emerging contextual postmodern and post-colonial challenges. Viewed from the selective historical survey above and in the light of the instructive insights of Lints as well as other evangelical scholars, we note that evangelicalism is a wider reality. While evangelicals have historically cherished certain common doctrinal affirmations and continue to do so, describing the movement in merely doctrinal terms may no longer be adequate for contemporary times. We shall build on this understanding in chapter four.

Grenz (1993:27ff) agrees with Lints' position in his assertion that we need to move beyond our fixation with mere doctrinal descriptions and our seeming over emphasis on the personal cognitive dimension of faith. Grenz finds Donald Bloesch's characterisation of evangelicalism as doctrine plus experience a step in the right direction (1993:30). Bloesch (1973:48-79) posits a paradigm that is broader than the strict focus on doctrinal affirmations. While Bloesch remains committed to a doctrinal oriented understanding of evangelicalism, nevertheless, he goes beyond a purely doctrinal description of the essence of evangelicalism. Bloesch (1973:IX) notes, "My contention is that to be evangelical means to hold to a definite doctrine as well as to participate in a special kind of experience." Hence, while the evangelical identity is connected to shared beliefs and convictions, it is perhaps not exhausted by these mental convictions. As Carson (1996:567) aptly warns, we should be suspicious of forms of theology that place all the emphasis on coherent systems of thought that demand faith, allegiance and obedience, but do not entail spirituality (i.e. engage the emotions and affections), let alone foster an active sense of the presence of God.

#### **1.1.6 Evangelicalism as a vision of the Faith**

To this end, Grenz (1993:30) in our present understanding offers an alternative and insightful description of the evangelicalism that allows for the dynamic nature that seems intrinsic to the evangelical tradition. Grenz argues that we ought to place Bloesch's doctrine plus experience understanding of the evangelical identity in reverse order. Grenz posits, "Evangelicalism refers to a specific vision of what it means to be Christian. He notes that because evangelicalism is not primarily constituted by a body of beliefs, the evangelical ethos is more readily sensed than merely described theologically." Grenz (1993:31) states, "as participants in the wider

evangelical movement, we may not all be able to define exactly what theological beliefs constitute us as evangelicals, but we sense it when we find ourselves in an evangelical atmosphere” . “Evangelicals share a sense of belonging (i.e. these are my people) and this sense of belonging testifies to evangelical expression of a specific vision of what it means to be Christian in the midst of differences and diversity” (Grenz 1993:31). This common vision may be expressed through diverse ecclesial expressions from one context to another.

As Grenz (1993:31) further argues, this common evangelical vision of what it means to be a Christian focuses on a distinctive spirituality (i.e. a shared desire to make the Bible come alive in personal and community life). Grenz (1993:31) further argues, “regardless of differences over formulations of the doctrine of Scripture, evangelicals are Bible centred people.” We confess Christ as Lord and as partner in the journey of life (a dynamic relationship of transcendent God with us, the One who is an active participant in our lives). “When true to what we espouse as evangelicals, we seek to bring our commitment to Christ into every dimension of existence” (Grenz 1993:32). Thus, he describes evangelicalism as:

A specific way of being Christian. This vision includes a fervent desire to make the Bible alive in personal and community life, a sense that faith is to be vibrant and central to life, a way of praying, an understanding of the Church as fellowship of believers and a desire to express our joy and praise through vehicles of worship and testimony. (Grenz 1993:33)

Beneath the specific evangelical approach to being Christian there is Grenz (1993:33) adds, “our common understanding of ourselves (evangelicals) in terms of a life narrative, a vision that focuses on shared stories.” Seen from this perspective (i.e. a vision of shared stories), evangelicals can be said to share a common religious experience. We confess that we have encountered God in Christ (be it in an instant or by series of events and processes). This encounter was and is an experience of and with the Triune God. We are a people saved by grace in Christ. We now enjoy communion with God, which is made possible by the indwelling Holy Spirit. Hence, our personal relationship (individual spiritual journey) with the Triune God, finds meaning within the community of faith, which itself participates in the Trinity.

It is indeed this context of making sense of life by means of our narrative transforming experience that, as Grenz (1993:34) notes, the Bible and our theological commitment find their significance. “No experience occurs in vacuum; no transformation comes to us apart from an interpretation facilitated by the concepts we bring to it” (Grenz 1993:34). Grenz (1993:34) holds that our experience determines the interpretative concepts we use in speaking about it. Equally so, our concepts facilitate the experiences we have in life (i.e. understanding experience and interpretative concepts as being reciprocal). For Evangelicals, therefore, the narrative of our encounter with the Triune God is both facilitated by and is expressed in categories that are of a theological nature as testified to in the Bible. Central to evangelicalism as Grenz (1993:34)

posits, is a “common vision of the faith that arises out of a common religious experience couched within a common interpretative framework consisting in theological beliefs and categories we derive from the Scriptures. These categories, which form the cradle for this experience, in turn, constitute the grid by which we now interpret all of life.” We must emphatically note that Grenz’s description of the evangelical identity is an emerging description. While it is receiving increased acceptance amongst contemporary evangelicals, it is however not without criticism. In our present understanding however, seeing evangelical identity as a specific vision of the faith, an ethos (like that of the sixteenth century or even the Great Awakening) of experiential piety cradled in theology, may help us to better explain our doctrinal confession (seen as intellectual commitment) and the life-transforming experience we have in God through Christ by the Holy Spirit.

Further, the historical context of evangelicalism traced above highlights the understanding that both our doctrinal confession and transformative experience form an intrinsic part of the evangelical historical heritage and tradition. Our cherished theological commitment should serve and facilitate our experience of the Triune God. As Bloesch (1983:108) aptly states, “we cannot inwardly know the truth of the gospel apart from the evangelical experience, but this experience always points beyond itself to the reconciling and redeeming work of God in Jesus in the history attested by the Holy Scripture.” Similarly, as Carson (1996:568) notes, “if the life-transforming knowledge of God lies at the heart of what is meant by spirituality, which stands over and against a merely traditional adherence to a creed, no matter how orthodox that creed, then let us stress spirituality.”

In our present understanding Grenz’s description of the evangelical identity amongst other things draws an intrinsic link between theology and spirituality. Grenz seeks to keep the creative tension between our propositional proclamation of the Scripture and our narrative experience of the Triune God. Put differently, Grenz posits a description that shows how both propositional truth claims and historical and contemporary narratives enable a better, more holistic evangelical understanding of our being the ecclesial community of God. This as will be discussed in the following chapters has far reaching implications for the evangelical theological enterprise. Amongst other things as Grenz (1993:57) notes, the integration of theology with spirituality fosters a renewed emphasis on the practical understanding of theology and signifies a move not only beyond the earlier Pietism but also, in a sense, a move beyond modernity into the emerging postmodern era. As Grenz (1993:58) further explains, while theology ought never to lose as its central goal the intellectual pursuit of truth, “this pursuit however, does not require the severing of intellectual pursuit from spirituality.” Having said that, we should also acknowledge that keeping the creative balance between doctrinal creed (theological formulations) and experiential knowledge of the Triune God is not an easy task. Yet, in our present understanding,

articulating the evangelical identity strictly on doctrinal affirmations seem somewhat deficient. Perhaps McGrath's testimony helps clarify our understanding here. McGrath (2003:12) writes:

In my first period as a Christian, I found my attention focusing on understanding my faith. I continue to regard this as being of the utmost importance. There is a marvellous coherence to Christian doctrine, and wrestling with the great truths of our faith provided me with both spiritual encouragement and intellectual challenge. Yet it seems to me that my knowledge of the Christian faith was rather dry and cerebral. Part of the difficulty was that I was, like most people of my generation deeply influenced by the Enlightenment. Christianity was all about ideas- and It was important to set those ideas right. As a result, theological correctness had become something of an obsession with me. I had failed to realize that the gospel affects every level of our existence- not just the way we think but also the way we feel and live. The Enlightenment had championed the role of reason and vetoed any engagement with emotions or imagination....

McGrath here does not seek to displace the importance and significance of evangelical emphasis on right doctrine (he continues to maintain the fundamentals of evangelical orthodoxy). Rather, he seeks to stress that there is a serious danger of the "emergence of an arid evangelical rationalism, which will erode the God given appeal of the gospel to our hearts, imagination and emotion by demanding that we limit our knowledge of God to the mind" (McGrath 2003:15). To do this, is to destroy the vital power of faith. Invariably, our theological enterprise must be directed toward the goal of fostering the spirituality of the believing community (Grenz 1993: 58). As Grenz observes, a theology rooted in spirituality takes seriously the life of the spiritual community. Grenz (1993:58) submits, "Above all the theology rooted in spirituality will be cognisant of the centrality of the doctrine of the Trinity." This is because ultimately believers live from their acceptance of being members in the ecclesial community of the Triune God.

## **1.2 The Church in Evangelical Perspective**

Our selective historical survey above and the description of the evangelical Identity embody an ecclesiological orientation. Integrating evangelical doctrinal affirmation and our life-transforming experience of the Spirit (i.e. life narratives) as necessary themes in defining the evangelical identity suggest amongst other things that our theological reflection and formulation must arise out of the life of the ecclesial community of God (i.e. allowing for a renewed insight into the practical dimension of Christian faith). Even more so, this understanding of the evangelical identity may in fact enables us to better make the narrative of the Cross a contextual reality in contemporary times. For evangelicals then, Grenz's description of our identity above, suggest the need for renewed reflection on being the people of God in Christ by the Holy Spirit and the theological motifs that inform our ecclesial visions. As hinted above, ecclesiology it would seem is not an explicit part of the evangelical Identity. As Hindmarsh (2003:15) observes, "one will be forgiven for not immediately thinking of the Church when one thinks about the evangelical movement." As Carson (1990:355) aptly notes:

The doctrinal and ethical concerns that tie together the diverse branches of evangelicalism have little to do with ecclesiology per se. Many evangelicals have written



usefully and provocatively on the Church, but by and large it is not their evangelicalism that has prompted them to do so. In short, evangelicalism as a movement is much more defined by Christology, soteriology, bibliology than by ecclesiology.

From our selective historical survey of the evangelical movement above as Grenz (2000:90) and other evangelical scholars observe, evangelical inattention to developing a comprehensive ecclesiology may in part lie in the theological trajectory that formed the movement. As our historical survey above suggests, evangelicals amongst other themes have focused on issues such as the relationship between the divine and human in conversion, the marks of the new birth, the relationship of conversion to sanctification and the assuredness of a believer's salvation. These issues as Grenz (2000:290-291) notes, "left no place for reflection on other critical dogma like ecclesiology that initially played a key role in the beginnings of the Puritan movement." Grenz (2000:291) notes that the evident fixation with conversion and the new birth, (which may have further contributed to the devaluing of ecclesiology) is because, for "evangelicals the conversion experience that unites them takes precedence over the various particularities of doctrine, polity, and ecclesiastical practice that have increasingly divided the church into competing denominations since the seventeenth century."<sup>5</sup>

According to Shelley (1967:124), evangelicals should be concerned about the fact that while "professing faith in an infallible Bible, they have produced so few worthy books on the biblical doctrine of the Church." Similarly, Van Dyk (2007:128) observes that noticeably absent in Bebbington's four key characteristic marks of evangelicalism (i.e. crucicentrism, Biblicism, conversionism and activism) is the lack of reference to the Church. She notes that when issues of ecclesiology are discussed in evangelical theology, the focus is often on "controversies of women's ordination, crises of leadership abuse or innovation in worship style. In other words, ecclesiology "has tended to be marginalized to matters of polity, governance, finances and leadership" (Van Dyk 2007:129). Other evangelicals argue to the contrary. These evangelical scholars observe that the issue is not whether the evangelical movement has an ecclesiology or not. These scholars contend that the movement has too many to count. Our ecclesiology is so flexible they argue that it is difficult at times to identify an effective one. The issue then is whether we can develop an ecclesiology that best identifies us as the people of God in an ever-changing world (Carson 2006:357). In whatever way we want to view evangelical ecclesiology or the lack of it, evangelical scholars seem agreed that in light of emerging changing context/paradigm, evangelicals need to recapture a credible ecclesiology. Generally, evangelicals elevate the etymology of the Greek word *ekklesia* (taken to mean "*the called-out-*

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<sup>5</sup> Hindmarsh also made a similar observation. He also notes that "early modern evangelicals displayed an unprecedented trans-denominational and international ecclesial consciousness that was characterised by an unparalleled subordination of church order to evangelical piety" See Hindmarsh Bruce 2003. "Is Evangelical Ecclesiology an Oxymoron" In *Evangelical Ecclesiology: Reality or Illusion*. Stackhouse, John (ed). Grand Rapids: Baker. Also see Hart, D. G 2005. "The Church in Evangelical Theologies, Past and Future" In *The Community of the Word: Toward an Evangelical Ecclesiology*. Husbands, Mark and Treier, Daniel (eds). Downers Grove: IVP.



ones”), as the foundation for evangelical ecclesiology. Early Christians used the term *ekklesia* when they spoke of the Church. The word *ekklesia* relates to the Septuagint word (*Qahal*), which means, “to summon as assembly.” The word *Qahal* when used with Yahweh was used in the Old Testament to refer to the people of God (Deut 23: 1-8; 1Chro 28:8). Thus, the New Testament authors can speak of the Old Testament people of Israel as the Church (*ekklesia*) (Grudem 1999:363).

Other evangelicals employ other New Testament metaphors for describing the Church. The biblical writers speak of the Church as the people of God (2 Cor 6:16); the holy priesthood (1Pe 2:9); the Body of Christ (Christ being the head and believers forming a unity in diversity) (Eph 1:22, Col 1:18, 1Cor 12:27); and the temple of the Holy Spirit (signifying the call of the *ekklesia* of the Triune God to ethical holy living. As Grudem (1999:367) observes, “the wide range of metaphors used for the Church in the New Testament should remind us not to focus exclusively on any one. An undue emphasis on one metaphor to the exclusion of others will likely result in an unbalanced view of the Church.”

Further, the Greek term *ekklesia* (understood as the called-out community living in communion with God through Christ in the power Holy Spirit) and the biblical metaphors of the Church have important implication and remain instructive for any evangelical understanding of the Church. Informed by Grenz’s proposal, our discourse will suggest a possible starting point for articulating nuanced evangelical ecclesiological visions in the light of the emerging postmodern paradigm. In anticipation of the chapters to follow, however, we shall below attempt briefly to highlight key aspects of evangelical understanding of the Church. Developing some of the indications given in our historical survey above, we shall also attempt to highlight possible reasons for evangelical inattention to ecclesiology as argued by some evangelical scholars.

### **1.2.1 I am converted therefore we are transformed**

The convergence of evangelicalism with modernity as Hunsberger (2003:118) contends, “leaves it vulnerable to a radically individuated form of relationship with God.” As the evangelical history narrated above suggests, evangelical forbears like Jonathan Edwards, Charles Finney, John Wesley, and Charles Hodge informed by the Puritan and Pietists vision, in many respect, set the tone for evangelical understanding of the Church. For these men as contemporary evangelical scholars such as David Hall, Bruce Hindmarsh and others argue, the marks of the true believer were emphasized over the marks of the Church. As a result, church membership was restricted only to those who could give an adequate narrative of their conversion. Some evangelical scholars have argued that this longing for genuine Christian purity (i.e. the identification of true faith and evangelical piety cradled in some form of mystical unity) seems

to have led to a low view of the nature of the Church or even a disregard for the defining the Church in a sense that is more concrete. It is important to note as Hall (1994:50) observes, an implicit point for these evangelical forbears in their quest for true Christianity was the blemish that hypocrites foisted on the Church. They were in their religious affection not simply trying to defend the revivals from their religious despisers but also attempting to establish more generally a base line for discerning true faith and genuine conversion, whether in the lives of those awakened through revivals or in those quickened by less dramatic ways. Yet, the evangelical focus on the signs of genuine believers did not simply influence their understanding of the Church as the pure assembly of the saints, but also discounted the role of corporate communal life as evidence of true faith (Hall 1994:50).

Furthermore, there is a sense that evangelicals have generally emphasised the individual and have privatised salvation. In a sense, it seems that the interest is in the justification of individuals and not in sanctification or the institution of the Church. As Shelley (1967:124) observes, evangelicals have “traditionally stressed those doctrines that relate directly to the experience of the new birth. By rejecting the sacramental view of salvation, they have found it natural to neglect the doctrine of the church.” Hunsberger (2003:125) observes that evangelicals have tended to see conversion too narrowly as the conversion of an individual person with the hope and conviction that when individuals are changed, society is changed. This provides the rationale for evangelicals to see mission almost exclusively in terms of seeking personal conversions rather than of working for peace or justice. The difficulty as Hunsberger (2003:125) further notes is that after all this time, one wonder where the promised payoff is. If it really worked out easily, why haven’t societies in which numerous personal conversions have taken place been transformed?

The problematic nature of this view also relates to how communities (including Christian communities) are transformed. As Hunsberger notes, communities are not automatically changed just because they are made up of converted, transformed people. The New Testament writers wrote of churches full of converted people who needed to better understand life in communion with God. As Hunsberger further affirms, this is what the Church needs today in the light of contemporary realities. Hunsberger (2003:125) notes that despite the assumption that Churches knows full well how to be the Church, it has “become painfully clear that we are in new territory that calls for learning all over again what we are and what we are for. There are no ready-made precedents, no off-the-shelf blueprints, and no full-blown models. The times we are in puts the Church in a steep learning curve and it is a communally shared one.” Indeed, the evangelical emphasis on the individual affirms the biblical teaching that the Spirit is at work in the life of each believer. It also preserves the biblical emphasis on the priesthood of all believers. However, the individuated form of relationship with God has the “tendency to

obliterate the communal or at least to overwhelm it so that it is not fundamental to the notion of church that shapes Christian practice” (Hunsberger 2003:118). Furthermore, as Hunsberger (2003:125) writes, while each person at conversion is transformed, it is not enough to say that when each has been transformed, the community will also be transformed. Thus, Hunsberger (2003:125) contends, “the commitment to change and conversion in evangelicalism will serve the Church well if its own conversion can widen to include the conversion of the communities.

As Hunsberger (2003:18) submits, with an individuated ecclesial leaning, “the Church tends to take on the modern social form of voluntary organisation grounded in the collective exercise of rationale choice by its members rather than the form of a communion of saints that is made such by the will of the Spirit of God.” Hunsberger’s (2003:126) challenge for evangelicalism (a challenge echoed by most evangelicals to which our discourse shall attempt a response) is therefore to embrace a wider range of formative biblical vision and to embody a corporate lifestyle beyond personal morality. Evangelicals in seeking to be a converting community should enable an ecclesiological understanding that is not only converting others, but also continuing to undergo its own conversion, deeply and daily. The Reformation dictum maybe a helpful reminder of this reality; “Reformed, always being reformed by the Word of God.”

### 1.2.2 The True Church is the Invisible Church

A more systematic theological approach speaks of the Church as mystical, invisible and visible Church. As Grenz (2000:297) observes, the “operative principle of evangelical ecclesiology has been the distinction between the invisible Church of the truly converted and the church as a visible institution, whose members include both true believers and nominal Christians.” For evangelicals as Grenz (2000:296) notes, Augustine provided the basis for understanding the invisible Church. This understanding was however reformulated by the Puritans slightly, yet crucially, under the influence of Calvinism’s focus on predestination. According to Grenz (2000:297), the “Puritans employed the concept of the invisible Church understood as the full number of the elect known only to God, but who can be made visible at least in part, through the preaching of the gospel.” Evangelicals with the focus on convertive piety gave a twist to this earlier understanding of the invisible Church. According to Grenz (2000:297), Litton Edward’s better captures the evangelical understanding when he declared that the true Church cannot be confused with any earthly ecclesiastical institution. As Grenz observes, Litton sees the “true Church is so far invisible as that it is not yet manifested in its corporate capacity. In other words, there is no one society or visible corporation here on earth, of which it can be said that it is the mystical Body of Christ.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, as Grenz (2000:297) argues, “evangelicals came to view

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<sup>6</sup> Litton, Edward 1851. *The Church of Christ*. Quoted in Grenz, Stanley 2000. *Renewing the Centre*. Grand Rapids: Baker.

the invisible Church not as the elect know only to God, but as the fellowship of the truly converted, a fellowship that transcends the visible church in its various institutional forms.” Grenz contends that the tendency to elevate the invisible Church over the visible church is a slight shift from the Reformation understanding. According to Grenz (2000:297), the Reformers appealed to the concept of the invisible Church as a way of correcting the Roman Catholic tendency to equate the true church with the visible organization headed by the Pope and church hierarchy (thereby invoking a mediatorial priesthood between believers and God). Luther’s argument as Grenz (2000:297) notes was that the spiritual character of the Church while connected to the visible church is ultimately in Christ and therefore not identical to any empirical reality. Ironically, as Berkouwer (1976:35) writes, while the Reformers’ used the invisible Church to expose the tensions and responsibility of the visible church, some evangelicals now use the concept to solve those tensions.

Grenz (2000:299) contends that if we hold that the true Church is the invisible Church, “the fellowship of all genuine believers understood as those who are truly born again, participation in the visible Church ultimately becomes soteriologically irrelevant.” If the “visible church is soteriologically irrelevant Grenz further notes, “participation in it can quickly become, at best, motivated more by pragmatic concerns than by a sense of necessity, and at worst, merely a matter of personal preference.”<sup>7</sup> In this sense as Grenz (2000:314) argues, “the visible church (which is by necessity concertized in separate congregations), becomes an aggregate of the individual Christian in contract with each other to form the society of Christians.” Further, many theologians traditionally use the creedal marks of the Church (i.e. one, holy, catholic and apostolic) to delineate the nature of the Church. In their conflict with Rome, the Reformers did not focus on the creedal marks in their response to the question, what is the Church? Rather, in describing the nature of the Church they appealed to the Word and Sacrament, which they found better suited determinative characteristics of the Church in her visible form (Avis 1981:8).

However, as Grenz (2000:310) observes, the Reformers did not reject outright the four adjectives as appropriate descriptors of the Church. For instance as Grenz notes, Luther understood the marks as the link between the invisible Church and the visible church (i.e. the invisible Church always becomes visible in physical manifestation). For Luther, as Grenz (2000:310) notes, the marks provide vital links between the invisible and the visible. Luther’s followers however lost this nuanced understanding of the marks as the linchpin connecting the two aspect of the church. The Protestant temptation as Grenz (2000:310) observes, was to link the “creedal marks, seen as the essential characteristic of the true Church, solely with the

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<sup>7</sup> Grenz notes that the dispensational thinking among some evangelicals added to the undermining of the visible Church, as these dispensationalists see the visible church as of negligible importance. See Williams, Michael 1989. “Where is the Church?” *Grace Theological Journal* 10, 2.

invisible church, (which is understood as the number of the elect, or in the case of evangelicalism, as the company of the truly converted, known only to God).”<sup>8</sup> Recently however, Grenz (1993:175-176) notes that there are promising signs that the inordinate emphasis on the invisible church with its depreciation of the visible expression is beginning to wane in evangelical circles. Grenz contends that evangelicals are heeding Bloesch’s call for a passionate concern for church unity understood as not only spiritual but also visible unity. Grenz (1993:176) contends that this concern can only “lead beyond that former ecclesiology toward a goal of restoring the Church to its rightful place in the world” (1993:176). Grenz affirms Allan Janssen’s bold assertion that all church is local. Building from the Reformation understanding of the character of the Church, Janssen “chastises evangelicals for what he sees as docetic flight from the local.” Grenz (1993:173) suggests that we hold to an ecclesiological understanding that “takes more seriously both the people who meet together in the local congregation and the local setting in which they are called to serve.”<sup>9</sup>

As our discourse will suggest, the evangelical emphasis on Word and Sacrament appropriately linked with the creedal marks and if rightly understood within the context of community and narrated in eschatological perspective, may offer a promising perspective for articulating evangelical ecclesiology for contemporary times. Furthermore, the expression “I shall be your God and you will be my people” has led some within the evangelical movement to develop a covenant ecclesiology. The covenant understanding led to the concept of congregationalism (especially within Baptist evangelicals) with renewed emphasis on local congregations. There is also promise in the Congregationalist assertion that, “If the church is constituted by the covenant, where there is no covenanting community (i.e. no body of believers uniting together into a local congregation), there is no church” (Grenz 1993:178).<sup>10</sup>

### 1.2.3 We are the voluntary associated congregations of the truly saved

Grenz (2000:289) contends that the focus on the invisible Church of the truly converted, together with the seeming undermining of the visible church, provided the ecclesiological basis for the parachurch ethos of the evangelical movement and this as Grenz notes freed evangelicals from complex issues of Church order. According to Grenz (2000:290), “evangelicalism’s

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<sup>8</sup> For an in-depth understanding of the evangelical perspective see McNeile, Hugh 1846. *The Church and the Churches*. London: Hatchard. Also see Tinker, Marvin 1991. “Towards Evangelical Ecclesiology” (Part One) *Churchman* 105, 1 (25).

<sup>9</sup> See Janssen, Allen 1991. “The Local Church”. *Perspectives* (14-16).

<sup>10</sup> See also Hanson, Paul 1986. *The People of God*. San Francisco: Harper & Row. Grenz also here notes that we must not confuse the NT understanding that the individual members constitute the church with the individualism that gained strength in Baptist circles with the teachings of Francis Wayland, who see the church as the aggregate of saved individuals. The NT ecclesial community held a healthy balance between the individual and the group and understood themselves as individual members of the corporate whole.

parachurch ethos works against the ability of the movement to develop a deeply rooted ecclesiological base from which to understand its own identity and upon which to ground its mission.” Grenz (2000:293) argues that the sense of spiritual unity among evangelicals of differing ecclesiastical and doctrinal loyalties that emerged in the eighteenth century took on quasi-institutional form in the nineteenth century. Leaders within this ecclesiastical union understood their union as an independent voluntary association of believers standing in covenant with God (i.e. voluntary society). For Grenz (2000:293), this societal model was in part a natural extension of the congregational polity of a certain stream of Puritanism in England, which was taken to America.

This independent associational understanding as Grenz (2000:293) observes, led Robert Browne to conclude that the “church is by its very nature solely congregational, it consist of the local bodies of the people of God and not hierarchy of officers, as in episcopal polity.” Therefore, “God’s will for the Church is to be discerned by the local congregation as a whole as guided by their leaders” (Grenz 2000:293). As Grenz (2000:294) posits, “Insofar as the association was a fellowship of congregations, it retained an ecclesiastical nature and an ecclesiological grounding.” The voluntary association paved the way for a new type of voluntarism that later emerged and developed into the parachurch approaches that became characteristic of evangelicalism. Initially as Grenz (2000:294) further explains, the Congregationalists like other Puritans were concerned almost exclusively with proper church order (i.e. determining the nature of the constituted Church). However, with the dawn of the nineteenth century, evangelical in their quest for discerning how to broaden the evangelistic task of the Church in commission and supporting missionaries in newly found mission fields and the conversion of the world, concluded that the task required concerted action on the part of the clusters of churches across confessional lines. “The method that emerged for engaging in this greater work became that of the voluntary society, which in turn blazed the trail for the parachurch aspect of the evangelical movement” (Grenz 2000:294).

Grenz (2000:295) sees the societal model of cooperation of the evangelical movement as a stroke of genius because it “set the ecclesiological form for the visible or institutional functioning of the budding evangelical movement.” Through the voluntary societies, evangelicals from various denominations were set for evangelism and mission. Thus, as Grenz (2000:295) asserts, “the stage was set for the dawn of the era of the parachurch organisation, which in the twentieth century became the incarnation of the evangelical ethos.” As such, the emergence of evangelicalism as a trans-confessional movement was facilitated by a far-reaching ecclesiological compromise (i.e. denomination) (Grenz 2000:296).<sup>11</sup> While denominationalism has

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<sup>11</sup> See Tinder, D.G. 1984. “Denominationalism” In *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*. Elwell, Walter A. (ed). Grand Rapids: Baker.

been instrumental in the advancement of the evangelical movement, sadly as Grenz (2000:299) observes, the parachurch nature of the evangelical movement resulted in an unmistakable minimizing of ecclesiology. Further, elevating the invisible Church enabled evangelicals to unite across trans-denominational boundaries with others among the truly converted (those viewed as co-members of the true church i.e. the invisible church). In this sense, as Grenz submits, the parachurch displaces the confessional church. Though seeking to profess unity with the parachurch association, ironically however, all is not rosy within the evangelical associated congregations. While “evangelicals celebrate the spiritual union of all the truly regenerated, the movement itself is dogged by separatism” (Hindmarsh 2003:34).

As Hindmarsh asserts, while evangelicals represent a new ecclesia consciousness in the modern world and partially realised the underlying unity of the Children of God expressed in various extra-ecclesiastical settings, yet, evangelicals are often guilty of schism and evangelicalism was always a restless movement iconoclastic of all forms of order. Viewed from the perspective of the history of schism within evangelical movement’s supposed unity, Hindmarsh (2003:15) contends that evangelical ecclesiology is an oxymoron. In many ways, our observation above serves to echo Fitch’s (2005:18) assertion that “we must pursue the task of being the church again. We must receive back from Christ the practices of being the people of God that we are called to be.” As Fitch (2005:13) further adds, “it is our own modernism that has allowed us to individualise, commodify and package Christianity so much that the evangelical church is often barely distinguishable from other goods and services providers, self-help groups and social organisations that make up the landscape of modern American life.” Therefore, we note Van Dyk’s (2007:27) arguments that if a keen and coherent ecclesiology has not been part of evangelicalism’s past, there is a growing conviction that it is desperately needed for evangelicalism’s future.”

### **1.3 Theology in Evangelical Tradition**

On the road to a nuanced evangelical ecclesiological vision for contemporary times, we must stop to have a critical look at our evangelical theological enterprise especially as it informs our ecclesiological understanding. As noted above, Grenz’s description of the evangelical identity has far-reaching implications for evangelical theological enterprise. In our present understanding, describing the evangelical movement in terms of family resemblance (i.e. a specific vision of what it means to be a Christian as Grenz posits) may provide a unity that allows us not only to identify evangelicals within the broader Christian community but also allows for the diverse and creative expressions of the Christian faith. It may better enable us to live and proclaim the narrative of the cross and the kingdom of God as a contextual reality in the power of the Holy Spirit. To assert that our theological reflection and formulation must arise out of the life of the ecclesial community of God in some ways suggests a need for careful and responsible



re-evaluation of not only our ecclesiological vision, but also of the theological motifs and the categories that inform such motifs. Put differently, we perhaps need to derive a dynamic theological motif/framework that could better inform our evangelical ecclesiological vision in the light of the emerging postmodern and post-colonial paradigm. In our present understanding, both the postmodern context and post-colonial context are emerging contexts in which we now do theology and we should take these contexts seriously.

Therefore, in anticipation of the chapters to follow, we shall briefly attempt to highlight in very general terms the evangelical theological reflection within the modern Enlightenment informed era. As Carson (2005:92) observes, the fundamental issue in the emerging paradigm shift from modernism to postmodernism, is epistemology (how we know things or think we know things). According to Groothuis, the foundations of the modern era were laid during the Renaissance after the middle ages and the Sixteenth Century Reformation; but the modern era only blossomed in the late Eighteenth Century Enlightenment (i.e. the Age of Reason). It blossomed as a kind of Western philosophical project to account for all of life from within the bounds of independent rational experience over divine revelation and knowledge (i.e. presupposing the power of rationality to discover objective truth (Groothuis 2000:35).

At the risk of oversimplification, Carson (2005:92) observes, “Modern epistemology is often for convenience connected with the thoughts of René Descartes”<sup>12</sup> Descartes in searching for absolute truth began his search by endeavouring to doubt absolutely everything. Descartes’ intention as Carson (2005:92) notes was to find a basis on which to convince his intellectual friends of the truth of Catholicism. He was seeking to find a foundation he and his intellectual friends could share. Thus, Descartes settled on the popular formula *cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am). The human person for Descartes is a thinking substance and can be defined as an autonomous rational subject. As Grenz (1995:90ff) adds, Isaac Newton provided the scientific framework for modernity by picturing the physical world as a machine with laws and a regularity that could be discovered by the human mind, thereby helping Descartes along in elevating human reason as the means of discovering the systematic truth present in the orderly world.

For Grenz (1995:91), the modern human therefore, is “Descartes’ autonomous rational substance encountering Newton’s mechanistic world”. On evaluating Grenz’s argument, Erickson (1998:84) concurs in noting that, the intellectual endeavour became a matter of the rational individual examining the universe to unlock its secrets for the purpose of organising life rationally and seeking to improve the quality of life through technological advancement. Knowledge then was seen as certain and truth as universal, objective and inherently good. This optimism, together

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<sup>12</sup> Carson (2005:92) notes here that historical movements are invariably messy and culture does not carefully walk along circumscribed paths.



with the elevation of human reason led to a high value being placed on individual freedom. Instead of beginning with God as pre-modern epistemology did, modern thinkers began with the finite. God is then not the given, but at best the conclusion of the argument (Carson 2005:93). While major figures of the Enlightenment were Theist or Deist, over centuries as Carson (2005:93) observes, a rising number of modern thinkers adopted philosophical naturalism (i.e. the view that matter, energy, and the space are all that is).

“This stance makes a close universe inescapable and an ostensible knowledge about a personal transcendent God outside or beyond the universe as nothing but a childish myth” (Carson 2005:95). Central to Enlightenment modernism then is two epistemological shifts from the pre-modern. The first is the notion of distanciation (which results in a subject-object split where the inquirer assumes the role of an impartial spectator). The second is the notion of radical doubt, (the inquirer initiates the process of knowing by doubting all things, except for the fact the she or he is indeed doubting). The human mind was thus elevated; the inquirer observed with precision an altruistic impartial God, herself or himself (Greer 2003:222). Knight III (1997:38) provides a helpful summation of the key conclusions of modern thinkers:

- I. **Individualism:** the autonomous individual is free to think and reach conclusions for him/herself and is free from community or tradition
- II. **Rationalism:** Reason is a universal human capacity; what is reasonable for one is reasonable for all
- III. **Methodological doubt:** instead of Augustine’s faith, seeking, understanding, modernism opted for critical reflection
- IV. **Dualism:** reality is explained in terms of object-subject split (mind and matter)
- V. **Optimism:** through human reason humans will be set free and will attain true knowledge

According to Knight III (1997:41), “because the Enlightenment provided new criteria for assessing truth claims, theology was faced with a decision of whether to resist the new epistemology or adopt it and rethink theology accordingly.” While evangelicalism had an ambiguous response to modernity, largely they focused on rationalism (common sense reason) by establishing a determined, absolute and universal truth from cognitive orientation (Greer 2003:222). In their quest to base theology on the authority of revelation and scripture as Knight III (1997:41) further notes, “many evangelicals sought to re-establish that authority through appeal to reason, understood as universal capacity exercised by each individual. That is, they argued for scriptural authority and historic Christian doctrine on terms set by Enlightenment modernity” (Knight III 1997:41). Largely informed by this Enlightenment modernity, as Grenz (1993:65) notes, many evangelical theologians elevate biblical summarisation as the central if not sole task of theological formulations. Grenz (1993:65-67) asserts, “Just as the natural world is amendable to

the scientist probing, they argued, so also the teaching of Scripture is objectively understandable. Consequently, the correct theology is a crystallization of biblical truth into a set of universally true and applicable propositions.” This according to Grenz (1993:67) led to the elevation of the propositional approach to truth and epistemology. Truth was thus “characterised as a stable entity, not historically relative and best expressed in written language that conveys one message in all times and places.”

Rather than anchoring theology contextually, Grenz (1993:68) notes that many evangelical theologians sought to emancipate theology from cultures. Evangelicals, Grenz (1993:68) notes, were “intent on discovering and bequeathing to the Church the timeless systematised doctrinal theology that is objective, conceptual, intelligible, and coherent for all times and places.”<sup>13</sup> For evangelicals, it would seem that the task of theology was mainly to collect and arrange the factual propositional statements of the Bible in such a way that bring their “underlying unity into relief and reveal the eternal system of timeless truths to which they point” (Grenz 2001:13). As Grenz (2001:14) contends, “by limiting the scope of theological reflection to the exposition of the biblical text, evangelicals have been able to sidestep the thorny issues surrounding the roles of tradition and culture in theology.” As Grenz further argues, the postmodern turn with its heightened emphasis on the local and contextual, suggests that evangelicals would have to respond adequately to the challenge of theological method and the questions it raises in contemporary times.<sup>14</sup>

The emergence of the postmodern paradigm and the resulting increased emphasis on community over individualism, local and contextual narratives over modern emphasis on meta-narratives and universalism, seem to suggest that the modern paradigm is fast losing its grip. For instance, Davis (1984:67) as well as many evangelicals faults the older evangelical approach for not taking into adequate consideration the social context of the theological task and the historicity of all theological reflection. Davis (1984:67) asserts that the Enlightenment informed evangelical approach “tends to promote a repetition of traditional formulations of biblical doctrine, rather than appropriate re-contextualisation of the doctrine in response to changing cultural and historical conditions.” While acknowledging the possible dangers of culture sensitive theological formulation, Grenz & Franke (2001:151) argue that the evangelical quest to construct a culture free theology is misguided. Grenz & Franke (2001:151) note:

We simply cannot escape from our particular context into some transcultural intellectual vantage point. On the contrary, all theology is by its very nature as a human enterprise

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<sup>13</sup> This evangelical understanding is reflected in the works of evangelicals like Henry, Carl (1976). *God, Revelation and Authority*. Waco Tex: Word Books and Hodge, Charles (1952). *Systematic Theology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

<sup>14</sup> Grenz (2001) here notes that the quest for proper method to guide the theological enterprise is an age-old question. Howbeit, “the contemporary context is characterised by both a heightened interest in method as well as by a broad disinterest regarding the question it raises.” As such, we have to engage the challenge of method in contemporary theological thought.

influenced by its cultural context. In fact, when we look back to the supposedly grand, culture-free, timeless theological systems of past eras, we can see how culturally conditioned they actually were.

In the light of these considerations and informed by their biblical conviction, many evangelicals have voiced the urgent need for a theological doctrinal formulation that takes seriously the social context of our theological enterprise and the historicity of all theological reflections. As Grenz (1993:71) observes, this is evident in the contextualisation efforts of some evangelicals such as Erickson Millard and Gehman Richard amongst others.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, other evangelicals (e.g. Clark Pinnock) as Grenz notes, sees contextualisation as mere adjustment in terminology and therefore not sufficient. For Pinnock, according to Grenz (1993:71), biblical revelation is primarily narrative and the task of theology is to expound the story and explicate meaning. Hence, we should be looking for truth in the biblical story and not in doctrine. According to Grenz (1993:72), this understanding suggests that we must view theology in terms of its proper context within the narrative of God's action in history (i.e. theological reflection must be from the vantage point of the faith community in which the theologian stands). We shall develop on this understanding in the chapters to follow.

Despite its shortcoming as Grenz (1993:72) notes, evangelical propositionalism captures a fundamental insight. That is, "our faith is tied to the truth content of a divine revelation that has been objectively disclosed. God has communicated truth to us." Thus, Grenz (1993:72) argues, "The problem with evangelical propositionalism is not its emphasis on the cognitive dimension of revelation and doctrinal statements." Rather, as Grenz (1993:72) posits, the problem with evangelical propositionalism is with the "often underdevelopment of how the cognitive dimension functions within the larger whole of revelations." As such, "evangelical theologians tend to misunderstand the social nature of theological discourse and have been captive of modern enlightenment's emphasis on the individual knower" (Grenz 1993:72). If our theology as Grenz (1993:73) submits, "is to speak the biblical message in emerging postmodern context, we may shed the aspect of modernism and reclaim the more profound community outlook in which the biblical people of God were rooted." Grenz notes that through the re-reading of the biblical narrative of God's salvific action in Israel and pre-eminently in Christ, the Christian community fulfils a mediating function in the lives of its members. "The biblical narratives build the conceptual framework by which the community views itself and its experience of the world. Theology in turn, functions within the context of the Christian

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<sup>15</sup> Erickson, Millard (1983) defines theology as "that disciplines which strives to give coherent statement of doctrines of the Christian faith, based primarily upon the Scriptures, placed in the context of culture in general, worded in a contemporary idiom, and related to issues of life". (See Erickson, Millard 1983. *Christian Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker). Gehman, Richard (1983) on his part defines contextualised theology as "that dynamic process whereby people of God living in community and interacting with believers throughout time and space, under the illuminating guidance of the Holy Spirit, proclaim in their own language and thought-forms the word that God has spoken to them in their context through the study of the Scripture." (See Gehman, Richard 1983. "Guidelines in Contextualisation" *East African Journal of Evangelical Theology* 2, 1).

community by reflection on its conceptual framework and belief structure” (Grenz 1993:74). As Grenz (2000:183) submits:

The postmodern situation calls for a theology that is truly evangelical after the manner of the Reformation-Puritan-Pietists genesis of evangelicalism. At the heart of this theology is a commitment to the gospel as viewed through the lens of convertive piety. Such a theology is by its very nature apologetic, in that it seeks to engage the contemporary context for the sake of the mission of the Church which theology must always serve. As it does so, it will fulfil in contemporary context the vision of a new evangelicalism that in 1998, Millard Erickson hailed as the invigorating of the first generation of neo-evangelical pioneers.

#### **1.4 Standing on the Horizon**

The nature, implication of and proposed theological framework for responding to the emerging postmodern paradigm will be discussed in chapter four. For the moment, we note that the transitional times we live in today challenge us as evangelicals to perhaps re-look with integrity and faithfulness to the Scriptures, how we have and should articulate the evangelical ethos in contemporary times. We perhaps need to articulate a broader contextual understanding of who we are as the ecclesial of the Triune God. This process of re-examination is not necessarily new to the evangelical tradition in keeping with the Protestant principle of constant re-examination, reassessment and maybe restatement of core theological positions. Indeed, the Protestant principle will help us navigate more relevantly and even more sensitively the waters of the changing context of emerging postmodern and post-colonial paradigms (as we shall discuss in chapter three).

Perhaps, we need to understand afresh how the Biblical revelation, the historical Protestant tradition and the wisdom of contemporary cultural contexts enable us to better account for our being the people of God in Christ by the Spirit. In our present understanding, we concur with Grenz’s assertion that theology shapes the content and function of the church’s proclamation, ministry, as well as the nature of ecclesia life. A theological problem would therefore have a corresponding ecclesiological problem and vice versa. This further necessitates the need for a renewed evangelical theological-ecclesiological motif that will provide identity that is more relevant and direction for ecclesia life and ministry in various contemporary contexts. Intrinsic to this nuanced perspective should be a conscious quest to probe the ontology of the Church and rediscover the essentials in the great tradition of the church as the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. After all, it is only within a “church that is catholic and alive are truths traditioned and received as a living faith and not as abstract ideas and propositions” (Chan 2006:11). Furthermore, in our developing understanding, we hold that articulating a more intentional ecclesiology that is sensitive to the socio-communal context is essential as it further helps clarify the evangelical identity and ministry in emerging postmodern times. Articulating an ecclesiology that speaks relevantly and sensitively to the emerging contemporary context may

give an innovative and authoritative space for the varying expressions the ecclesial of God will take in various contexts. It will therefore be an ecclesiological understanding that seeks to move beyond the individualism of the years gone by and is set free from the modern Enlightenment rationalism that seems to have held it captive. It will therefore be an ecclesiological vision that affirms ecclesial life as existing in perichoretic union of the Triune God. This is even more so when viewed in the light of the emerging paradigm shift that is beginning to take root in the Euro-American contexts (i.e. emerging postmodern paradigm), alongside the post-colonial discourse that is gaining more significance in African intellectual discourse.

The emerging postmodern paradigm seems to represent the future, or perhaps, it may just be another fad! Nevertheless, it seems increasingly evident, as we shall discuss in the chapters to follow, that both paradigms are expressing ideas that are in many ways different to the categories that have traditionally informed evangelical theological and ecclesiological enterprise. The emerging church movement, with its emphasis on community, worship, liturgy, sacraments, is a return to the classical Christian traditions and the critique that the church needs to engage cultures and emerging context differently are encouraging initiatives within the evangelical movement that challenges us to rethink evangelical theological formulations and ecclesiological visions.

To this end, in chapter two, we shall take a critical look at the proposal of the emerging ecclesiology of the emerging church movement with its quest to provide an innovative space for developing evangelical ecclesiology that is sensitive to the postmodern paradigm. In chapter three, we shall attempt to explore the implication of an ecclesiology done with a postmodern focus as is being expounded by the ECM for ecclesiology in post-colonial Africa. We shall seek to understand if and how the ECM conversation opens up an innovative space that may further strengthen that quest for an Afrocentric ecclesial identity and expressions. While the contexts are not necessarily the same, (Africans speak not necessarily of postmodernism, rather of post-colonialism), we however presently hold that the challenge of doing theology in context is common to both. Therefore, the questions the ECM raises may have significant implications for the quest for a context sensitive Afrocentric ecclesiology. In our present understanding, our premise is that a critique of modernism and Enlightenment rationalism is as relevant in Africa as it is in the Euro-American contexts.

## Chapter Two

### The Emerging Church Movement – An Emerging Tradition

#### 2. Engaging the Emerging Church Movement

As Van Dyk (2007:132) observes, evangelical ecclesiology must expand, deepen and grow more texture. The evangelical ecclesiological deficit, she further adds, can only be overcome if the theological exploration is thorough and integrative. Van Dyk (2007:132) states, “If ecclesiology is to be understood to be an articulation of the character, acts, will and purposes of God for the people of God, our theological formulations and discourse needs to be more broader and grander in scope.” It is in the spirit of this apt observation that we engage the emerging church movement’s conversation about our being the ecclesial of God. The emerging church movement (ECM) is indeed one of such movements that in our present understanding offer a nuanced avenue for a broader and grander reflection on the nature and ministry of the Church and the evangelical articulation of the truth claims of Scripture vis-à-vis the method we employ in formulating our theological convictions.

Defining the ECM is not an easy task, ascertaining its theological centre and ecclesiological vision is even more taxing. “It has been likened by critics to nailing jello to a wall” (Springer 2008:6). Similar to the evangelical movement, loose relationships exist between the ECM. However, unlike mainstream evangelicals there is yet no formalised leadership, structure, systematized theology or methodology within the ECM (McLaughlin 2008:1). The movement cuts across the theological spectrum. It is as Jones (2008:8) notes, a “... resilient community of Jesus in a nebulous level of theological and ecclesiological conversation.” As Jones (2008:8) explains, “... emergents find little importance in the discreet differences between the various flavours of Christianity. Instead, they practice a generous orthodoxy that appreciates the contributions of all Christian movements.” ECM participants are keenly interested in classic Christian belief and practices, a return to traditions with innovative worship expression. Their instinct focuses on renewal, commitment and activism (McKnight 2006:8).

Why emerging church one might ask? Why are they evoking so much enthusiasm and concern among theological scholars across different cultural contexts? Why and what must emerge or change in our understanding of our being the ecclesial of God in Christ by the Spirit? Does the ECM point to the future shape of evangelical theological formulation and ecclesiological vision, or is it just another theological fad? Scholars engaged in this robust conversation are seeking responses to these questions. These are some of the questions we shall attempt to engage in this chapter. While there are a number of similarities in emergents’ expositions on ecclesiology,

emergents differ in many conceptual understandings from mainstream evangelicals. Though consciously associated with evangelicalism, the ECM has its own unique character. Having said that, there are some affinities between the ECM and the broad evangelical movement. These affinities are in terms of communication and affiliation. For the most, participants in the ECM conversation are themselves evangelicals, better still, post-evangelicals. As Jones (2008:47) highlights, emergents are a young generation of leaders within the evangelical movement, who because of perceived issues with both evangelical theology and evangelical method of Church, came together in an envelope of friendship. “Emergents believe that an envelope of friendship and reconciliation must surround all debates about doctrine and dogma” (Jones 2008:78). These affinities make the emerging church conversation important for any discourse on re-visioning evangelical ecclesial identity and expression in the light of emerging postmodern paradigms.

For our purpose in this discourse, we can take this notion a step further. Many African scholars (like Mabilia Kenzo) increasingly see postmodernism (the context emergents are seeking to respond to) as an ally of post-colonialism (i.e. he sees them as two sides of a coin). As we shall discuss in chapter three, while some scholars argue to the contrary, Mabilia and many other emerging African scholars contend that the postmodern paradigm seen as an ally of post-colonialism may enable an innovative space for thinking otherwise about Afrocentric theological formulation, ecclesial identity and expression. Akin to this understanding is the fact that the emergents are increasingly finding conversation partners within the African theological community with growing acceptance among churches in urban Africa. The correlations drawn, the implication and challenges therein and the promised opportunity, further necessitate the need for deeper inquiry into the emerging church conversation.<sup>16</sup> On route to engaging the emerging church movement, identifying its theological and ecclesiological position and the implications thereof, it is important that we understand the context within which the ongoing ECM conversation is taking place.<sup>17</sup>

## 2.1 Discerning the context of the ECM conversation

As many critics of the ECM have indicated, the impetus of the ECM is informed by the understanding that there is a transition from a modern to a postmodern paradigm. Emergents contend that the emerging postmodern context is defining itself in terms of incoherence, indeterminism, contextuality, hybridity and a lack of a single organising principle (i.e. relative,

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<sup>16</sup> For example, the Amahoro Africa group is a conversation among emerging African theologians and pastors that is in constructive conversation with the Emerging Church Movement. Visit: [www.amahoro-africa.org](http://www.amahoro-africa.org). Also see Mabilia's presentation: Future of Post-Colonial Theology- Imperative to differ, delivered at the Amahoro Conference in 2007 available: [http://www.codrington.biz/podcast/amahoro01\\_Mabilia\\_kenzo.mp3](http://www.codrington.biz/podcast/amahoro01_Mabilia_kenzo.mp3)

<sup>17</sup> We note that in our evaluation of the emerging church movement, while we will mention and allude to writings and works of other proponents, our focus will be more on some of the works of Tony Jones, Brian McLaren and Dan Kimball, who are seemingly more outspoken within the emerging church community.



subjective or pluralistic).<sup>18</sup> Emergents and a host of theological scholars hold that the emerging postmodern paradigm is in many ways a rejection of the modern paradigm and Enlightenment rationalism that have informed the evangelical theological formulations thus far.<sup>19</sup> Emerging church proponents argue that if the context is changing or has changed, we should perhaps employ new methods of and approach to doing Church. Simply put, old keys cannot open new doors. While not claiming that evangelicals were completely wrong in the modern theological musings, yet, emergents sense the need for a re-visioning of how we do church and of how we understand our being the ecclesial of God in Christ by the Spirit in the light of the postmodern challenge.

The question then is, if we accept that there is an increasing cultural paradigm shift (i.e. the emerging postmodern and post-colonial paradigm), how should we account for our being the people of God that faithfully proclaim the truth claims of Scripture and relevantly, yet holistically, minister to these contemporary changing contexts in the power of the Holy Spirit? What is postmodernism? Should there be an evangelical response? In what way is the postmodern paradigm challenging our evangelical ecclesiological visions? In our present understanding, the emerging church movement seems to be engaging these challenging questions head on. It is therefore worth listening to and engaging with their perspective.

Postmodernism is a difficult concept to define, especially because it is often defined in contrast to modernism (this is not to say that modernism itself is in anyway easy to define). Generally, emergents in their writings compare and contrast the two eras. While emergents vary in their take on both eras, all seem to embrace Grenz's premise that these two eras are antithetical to one another. We have in chapter one provided a brief overview of the modern paradigm, which gave it birth and to which postmodernism is reacting. Our description in chapter one helps us to set the context within which we shall briefly explain the postmodern paradigm. We shall also attempt to summarise the emergents' sense of a postmodern informed understanding of being and doing church.<sup>20</sup> By the mid-twentieth century, as we gather from Grenz, many scholars perceived that the soul of the enlightenment experiment was in trouble. Grenz provides a very informative historical overview leading up to the contemporary postmodernism.

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<sup>18</sup> See Greer, Robert 2003. *Mapping Postmodernism*. Downers Grove: IVP.

<sup>19</sup> See McLaren, Brian 2001. *A New Kind of Christian*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

<sup>20</sup> There are differing standpoints on postmodernism. Some scholars speak of hard postmodernism and others of soft postmodernism. For the most, emergents speak more of soft postmodernism, rejecting the extremes of hard post modernism. Most emergents would subscribe to Stanley Grenz's definitions of postmodernism. See Grenz, Stanley 1996. *A primer on Postmodernism*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.



The following is an attempt at a brief summary of Grenz's description.<sup>21</sup> According to Grenz, Friedrich Nietzsche (-1844-1900), considered a great foe of modernity, triggered the demise of the Enlightenment notion of truth. Abandoning his faith altogether, he asserted that knowledge or truth is a self-centred set of illusions. As a Nihilist, Nietzsche saw no meaning to existence, no access to reality and no true world but only a world of perspectival appearance from within. Michel Foucault, a disciple of Nietzsche and protagonist of knowledge as power, took the argument further. He rejected the modern worldview while celebrating the postmodern paradigm of complexity. According to Grenz (1996:138f), Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) represents Nietzsche's most rigorous interpreter. Jacques Derrida's goal was to deconstruct language by assuming hidden or double meaning in a text, while denying any universal meaning. As Grenz explains, because of the nature of language, Derrida holds that no text can have a fixed coherent meaning. Hence, Derrida calls for the deconstruction of both "onto-theology (the attempt to give ontological description of reality) and metaphysics of presence (the belief that something transcendent is present within reality)."

Richard Rorty (1931-2007) in Grenz's view exhibits the new pragmatism. He attacks the modern and Christian correspondence ideal of truth (i.e. the logic that statements always have a clear truth: an assertion is always either true or false according to the reality it purports to describe). Rorty seems to give a distinctive postmodern twist by seeing truth as what works, rather than what is theoretically correct. He denies the possibility of any universal meta-narratives and truth outside of one's own temporary context. The only valid guides for Rorty, as Grenz notes are those of the community in which one participates. Therefore, instead of systematic philosophy (which would presuppose a single unifying pattern of reality); he proposes edifying philosophy (which seeks to continue a conversation rather than to discover truth) (Grenz 1996:93).

Summing up the above antecedents, postmodernism rejects each of the modern assumptions about the nature of knowledge, including the understanding that knowledge is inherently good. For instance, proponents argue that there is no optimism and that progress is being made and must be made as modernism presupposes. The ecological concern about the fragile conditions of life (i.e. poverty and starvation, HIV/AIDS and the dangers of an extensive war), calls for cooperation to replace the thirst for conquest with respect for human dignity and a sustainable planet.<sup>22</sup> Postmodernism also rejects the idea that knowledge is completely rational and certain.

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<sup>21</sup> See: Grenz, Stanley 1996. *A primer on Postmodernism*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans (89-91, 123, 138, 150, 157-59). We also bear in mind here that intellectuals like David Hume (1711-1776), Immanuel Kant (1724-1894), Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) and Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) began to question religious teachings and Christianity's idea of divine revelation as the basic source of authority and truth and are thus earlier thinkers in the postmodern discussion. Also, see Greer, Robert 2003. *Mapping Postmodernism*. Downers Grove: IVP.

<sup>22</sup> For detailed insight, see Caputo, John 2007. *What would Jesus Deconstruct?* Grand Rapids: Baker.

Reason is not the sole means of gaining and judging knowledge. If truth is non-rational, then, there are other means of discovering it, including emotions and intuition (Grenz 1996:94ff). Further, postmodernism rejects the idea that knowledge is objective. Basing belief on an objective, rational order, which needs to be discovered by an inquirer, is seen as a mechanistic model, with a dualistic epistemology (Grenz 1996:94ff). Rather, proponents view knowledge as personal and relational, historically and culturally conditioned and thus, incomplete. Knowledge is limited and in fact relative (Grenz 1996:94ff). Interestingly, as Carson (2005:95) observes, both modernism and postmodernism begin the epistemological quest with the finite I, but the inferences they draw are quite different.<sup>23</sup> Postmodern proponents lay less emphasis on the individual and more on the cultural group (community). As proponents argue, each “individual is a member of a defined culture with a particular set of assumptions, values, structures of thought, linguistic usages and the like.” People generally look at the world primarily from their own cultural paradigms, before (or if) they look at other cultural paradigms (Carson 2005:95). According to Grenz, while postmodernism is being used in a multi-complex way, it generally describes a transitory period that marks the end of the Enlightenment’s hold on how people think, relate and value their lives (1996:96).

Grenz (2000:172) affirms Jean-François Lyotard’s simplified characterisation of “postmodernism as incredulity towards meta-narratives-” Thus, the Enlightenment ideal of seeking for a single, universal, timeless, supra-cultural truth, true for everyone at all times and in all places is fast losing its legitimacy (Grenz 2000:172). As Grenz (2000:172) further adds, “not only are people aware of the plurality of conflicting legitimising stories, everything is delegitimised.” Consequently, postmodernism attacks claims to universality and totality. Instead of grand-narratives (universalism), the postmodern paradigm favours local narratives (i.e. perceives life as a drama or narrative lived out within a socially constructed world) (Eagleton 1987:194). As Grenz (2000:174) observes, scholars are agreed that postmodernism may in fact be enabling an avenue were people not only accept that the global village encompasses great cultural diversity, this acceptance goes “beyond mere tolerance for other practices and viewpoints to actual affirmation and celebration of diversity.” Instead of the modern individualistic relativism (with an each to its own maxim), the postmodern paradigm “espouses a communal relativism with maxims such as, what is right for us, may not be right for you and what is wrong in our context, may in your context be okay or even preferable” (Grenz 2000:175). To be more precise (and at the risk of over simplification), the list below represents the postmodern paradigm shifts.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> In light of this understanding, some scholars prefer to treat postmodernism as a form of late modernism or even ultra-modernism. However, Carson notes, “Because the directions taken by the postmodernism are sufficiently different from those of the modern and can be nicely identified and evaluated, something is to be said for preserving the word postmodern, even if crucial points of continuity must not be overlooked” (Carson 2005:96).

<sup>24</sup>The list is informed by Birkey, Del 2009. The house Church book. (Online) Available: <http://www.thehousechurchbook.com/>. We note that postmodernism can on the one hand be healthy and helpful,

- ❖ Exposing the weakness and pretensions of many strands of modern epistemology
- ❖ Rejection of any overarching meta-narratives
- ❖ Sensitivity to cultural diversity and impress of culture
- ❖ Importance of human 'situatedness'
- ❖ Significance of metaphor and experience in shaping our interpretative perspectives
- ❖ Impossibility of objectivity of interpretation
- ❖ Flattening of hierarchies and structures of foundations
- ❖ Language as determinative of thought and meaning
- ❖ Renewed emphasis on feelings, aesthetics, symbols and mysticism

McLaren (2000:28ff) provides several descriptors contrasting the modern and postmodern paradigm. His comparison provides helpful insight into how emergents define and engage the contemporary postmodern paradigm. The table below shows McLaren's description:

Modern Paradigm	Postmodern Paradigm
Conquest and Control of Earth	Conservation of Resources
Mechanistic/Reductionistic Operations	Organic/Systems thinking
Whole divided into parts	Whole greater than parts
Analytical/Linear thought processes	Holistic/Global thought processes
Secular/Scientific emphasis	Spiritual/Scientific integration
Objective perspective/detached stance	Inter-subjective/relational perspective
Critical questioning	Collaborative Listening
Organisational emphasis on structure	Network emphasis on relationships
Individualistic mind-set	Community mind-set
Protestant/Polemic religious tradition	Spiritual/transformative Christian heritage
Consumerism	Sustainability
Nationalism	Global & Local "Glocal"

Table I

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but on the other dangerous and not so helpful. This depends on whether one speaks of hard postmodernism or soft postmodernism. For the most, emergents speak of soft postmodernism. For more critical insight, see Greer R. 2003. *Mapping Postmodernism*. Downers Grove: Illinois: IVP, Kleim, William et al 2004. *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

## 2.2 The Emerging Church Movement

McLaren's comparison, as Blevins (2010:2) observes, serves to remind us that postmodernism provides a transitional language that helps emergents to disconnect from the modern period, including some modern theological presuppositions. However, McLaren (as well as most emergents) as Blevins further adds, also embraces (though with new radical wrinkles) postmodern concepts that provide a continuation from modernism with a deeper heritage in Christianity. Indeed, emergents are largely motivated by their earnest desire to respond sensitively and contextually to the postmodern challenge. Spurred on by their ambivalence to the legacy of modern epistemology and enlightenment rationality, emergents see the need to start to listen closely and intently to emerging and changing contexts.

As Jones writes, confronted with radical pluralism (i.e. the globalization of postmodernity), instead of finding answers in *secularisation* (characterized by the desire to downplay all differences of belief) or *fundamentalism* (turning inward and circling the wagons with like-minded people with a candid effort at trying to determine what makes us distinct and how can we keep ourselves pure), emergents are seeking for a more holistic approach, one "between the fideism (in human reason) of the left and fideism (in the supernatural) of the right" (2008:155). Jones likens the change from modern to postmodern to the pay phone. As Jones (2008: 4) notes, we use the pay phone less than before. Yet, we make more calls than ever before, but we make them differently. Today, we make calls on the move with our mobile device ever so strapped to us. We make voice calls or video calls from our laptops/desktops. In essence, while phone calls aren't obsolete, the pay phone is (or at least it is quickly becoming obsolete). As Jones submits, the pay phone was not a bad idea, but we would agree that it has served its purpose well.

For emergents, the emerging paradigm shift in Euro-American contexts can no longer be ignored. As Kimball (2003:13) puts it, "perhaps the Spirit of God is stirring amongst us, giving us an unsettling feeling that Church the way we know it must change. It is important to note, as some critics argue, that the ECM may well be shifting back to old ideas in new ways. However, while emergents' visions may not be all new and revolutionary, yet, emergents are positing a nuanced understanding of being and doing church that tends to push the boundaries of evangelical theological tradition since the Reformation. As noted above, much of the difficulty in defining the ECM comes from the nature of the movement itself. Springer (2008:6-7), in her recent work on the ECM, describes the identifying characteristics of the ECM in two general foci and four sub-foci. Using an array of definitions, Springer sought to identify the emerging church movement. According to Springer, some descriptions explain the process by which the movement came into being. Other descriptions highlight the purpose for which the movement came into being. She notes that process entails two sub-foci (i.e. cultural shift and emergence), while

purpose entails two sub-foci (i.e. mission and reformation). In seeking to identify and define the ECM, we shall employ Springer's use of four foci (i.e. Cultural Shift, Emergence, Reformation and Mission).<sup>25</sup>

### 2.2.1 Cultural Shift

From our discussion so far, we can readily understand cultural shift as an identifying process of the ECM. As McKnight (2006: 9) notes, emergents are pro-culture in that they emerged and are shaped by the postmodern generation. The Emerging Church "is in a cultural flow with the newest fashions and ideas" (McKnight 2006:9). Carson (2005: 41) describes the ECM as a protest against conservatism and modernism. He notes that the emergents' protest can be usefully analysed along three axes (i.e. against what is perceived to be a personally stifling cultural conservatism, against modernism and its incarnation in modern churchmanship and against modernism's incarnation in seeker-sensitive churches)." Kimball (2003: 59), a leading proponent of the ECM affirms Carson's assertion in noting, "what we are experiencing in our culture is not merely a generation gap but a change in how people view the world."

In the light of the perceived postmodern cultural shift and the inherent religious pluralistic challenge, emergent evangelicals move beyond the methods of the modern context in order to relevantly proclaim the good news of God's grace in postmodern times (Gibbs & Bolger 2005:50). For instance, as Gibbs (2000:11) contends, "the storm fronts do not simply represent a short-term threat that the Church must survive in order to return to the familiar and more tranquil conditions they have previously known. Rather, these storms represent boundary lines that separate two different worlds." McLaren (2000:15) also echoes this understanding. He notes, "If you have a new world, you need a new church. You have a new world." Webber's description of the emerging church movement supports the idea that ECM came into being by a process of culture shift. Webber (2007:16) states:

...they (emergents) find themselves out of sorts with both traditional evangelical scientific theology and the pragmatism of mega-evangelicalism. Considering the new cultural context and the evangelical pattern of responding to the changing cultural realities, it can be said that the emerging church has the potential to establish a new kind of evangelicalism that will relate to the current cultural crisis.

According to Jones (2008:7), "emergent Christianity is in essence an effort by a particular people in a particular time and place to respond to the gospel as it once again breaks through the age-old crusts. The shifting tectonics of postmodernism has in many ways caused the initial fissure." What seems obvious as one takes a closer look at the current conversation is that emergents are seeking to be dynamic in the way they engage culture. Most emergents hold that

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<sup>25</sup> It is important to note as stated above that the ECM is still emerging, therefore any definition or description of the ECM will at best be provisional. Perhaps, it is in keeping with a theology and ecclesiology informed and expressed within the emerging postmodern context.

changing times demand that fresh questions be asked of Scripture and fresh answers will be discovered. What was an appropriate use of Scripture under modernism should not necessarily be taken as appropriate under postmodernism. Understood as such, the criticism is not that evangelicals were mistaken in their own times, but of being out of tune with contemporary times. In our present understanding, postmodernism it seems is not a concept that emergents teach, it is a cultural mind-set that they are seeking to respond to with the power of the gospel (the incarnate life of Jesus). As Kimball (2003:49) writes "... the leaders of the emerging church movement are not seeking to make people with a modern worldview switch over to a postmodern worldview, yet they are challenging those with the modern mind-set to realize that some of their beliefs and assumptions are not hard and fast truths." This in part explains the motivation of the ECM. It is an effort to minister the grace of God in Christ by the Spirit to an emerging postmodern world, while also acknowledging that there are good and not so good aspects of postmodernism.

From the early Church to present times, the relationship between the Church and culture has always been debated and problematic. There are varying perspectives on how the Church should relate to culture.<sup>26</sup> In the light of postmodern paradigms, the emergents are challenging the mainstream evangelical approach to relationship between culture and our theological formulations.<sup>27</sup> As Jones (2008:76) notes, the emergent way of interacting with culture is not monolithic. "Emergents look for the intersections and connections between the overarching biblical narrative, the story that orients our lives and the many ways that human beings cultivate their experiences." Moynagh's (2005:11) definition of the emerging church clarifies the emergents approach:

Emerging church does not parachute a set model of church on to people. It is church from below. It starts not with a preconceived notion of church, but with the desire to express the church in the context of the group involved. It is church shaped by the context, not by 'this is how we have always done it.' A growing number are geared towards people, with no church background. They start not with invitation, 'you come to us on our terms'. But offer instead, 'we'll come to you. If you want, we' help you to be the church at a time that suits you, in a place that is convenient for you and in your style, not ours.

Carson though quite critical of the ECM, sees culture shift as a defining strength of the ECM (i.e. the quest to discern contemporary culture and the implication of such discernment for our witness, our grasp of theology, our churchmanship and even self-understanding). Certainly Carson (2005:49) observes, "This is far more commendable than a cultural conservatism that acts as if the culture with which we are most comfortable (usually the one in which we grew up) is the only culture acceptable to thinking Christians and perhaps to God." The critical question here, however is whether the ECM in the quest to keenly read contemporary culture and to

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<sup>26</sup> Views vary from *Christ & Culture* of Richard Niebuhr, *Residents Aliens* of Stanley Hauerwas, and *Peculiar People* of Rodney Clapp, and of course Augustine's classic, *City of God*.

<sup>27</sup> Refer to our description of the evangelical approach to culture and theological task in chapter one.

incarnate Christ within particular cultures relevantly and dynamically, will continue to keep faithfully the counter-cultural nature of the Gospel? Will emergents soon become guilty of their own criticism? In anticipation of our discourse in chapter three, we concur with D.A. Carson in noting that there is great value in the ECM recognition that we are likely to be closest to the objective truth of the text of Scripture, if we encourage people with different backgrounds and social contexts to contribute to the discussion as to the meaning of the text and our understanding of being and becoming the Church God. “By bringing our different background and presupposition to the text, each group is more likely to overcome its own hermeneutical blind spot” (Carson 2005:52).

### 2.2.2 Emergence

Another defining characteristic of the ECM Springer (2008:10) identifies with is that ‘process’ is emergence. Emergence connotes the idea of being discovered or coming into light or prominence. Inferred in the ECM response to cultural shift as explained above is the idea that Kimball’s phrase as “leaving the old Country, but the journey seems to be to a place no one has ever dared to venture.” As we have noted above, ECM grew out of the interaction and relationships among young evangelical leaders, who “find little importance in the discrete differences between the various flavours of Christianity. Instead, they practise a generous orthodoxy that appreciates the contribution of all Christian movements” (Jones 2008:8). It is a quest for something radically different to what has been. As Jones (2008:20) explains, “emergents reject the politics and theologies of the left (liberal) versus the right (evangelical). Seeing both sides as a remnant of modernity, they look forward to a more complex reality.”

Emergents are seeking to move beyond the infighting that has so damaged the reputation of the Church in the past, which today seems to have been intensified. A move so to speak, away from the ‘reactionary’ and ‘revolutionary’ approach to theological formulation to an attempt at reclaiming Jesus’ role in society (i.e. revolutionary). This complex reality seeks to make orthodoxy an everyday orthopraxy, to understand our being the sent people of God not just as a mere invisible reality, but also as a visible reality. To build a community of disciples that ethically live and proclaim the Christ-like ethos in various communities and contexts (Jones 2008:21). As Pagitt (2003:15) notes, for the emergent churches, theology is an essential corporate practice. Pagitt (2000:15) contends that the communities that are best equipped for the task of spiritual formation in the post-industrial age (postmodern that is), are those who make the practice of theology an essential element of their lives together; Christian communities need to be more involved in the world of theology as a necessary part of the spiritual formation process. The critique then against mainstream evangelicals is that the emphasis on orthodoxy at seeming expense of orthopraxy has not been helpful in fulfilling the church’s mission of making disciples. Emergents in their earnest desire for inclusion are



navigating the turbulent waters of in versus out. Most emergents favour belonging before believing, over the traditional evangelical affirmation of believe, belong and become. As McLaren (2006:143) writes, “Jesus’ secret message in word and deed makes clear that the kingdom of God will be radically and scandalously inclusive.” Emergents hold to what Jones (2008:72) calls a hope-filled orientation, which is in stark contrast to the understanding that Jesus’ imminent return hinges on disasters and bad news for many. Jones is however quick to clarify that for emergents, this is not an Enlightenment-influenced hope in human progress, but what theologians called eschatological hope (i.e. Jesus brought good news and there is more good news to come, even on Judgement Day). Emergents posit that God is working in the world and the Church has the option to join God or not. The mission of the Church is the gospel because Jesus’ gospel was a gospel of the Kingdom of God (Gibbs & Bolger 2005:27).

From our evaluation above, one senses that their questioning and rethinking of the theology, ecclesiology and ecclesial practices are the means by which the ECM is emerging. The quest then, seems to be for a theology and ecclesial vision that is constantly forming and reforming in keeping the Reformation dictum. Whether the emerging church movement provides a door to future evangelical theological reflection remains to be seen. It remains to be determined how close the emergence of the emerging church movement will stir us towards a more contextual theological-ecclesiological understanding. For the moment, emergents seem to be challenging our theological and ecclesiological visions afresh. In the spirit of 1 Peter 2:12, emergents are seeking to make people long for God (i.e. making the Christian faith deliberately provocative). But shouldn’t all this be true of all Christian communities? Isn’t this what God has called us to be in Christ by the Spirit? It is worth noting the comments of Larson and Osborne written long before the emergence of the ECM. Larson and Osborne state:

If the Church is true to its Lord, it may never properly say it has emerged. In both the past and the present, the Church is in a process, moving toward a fulfilment of its calling. We have nothing of perfection to which we may return; we have no golden age to which our deepest longings draw us; we have no plumb line from the past, which is adequate for the Church of the future. Not renewal but a new thing is our concern as we begin to witness God’s fulfilment of His own word spoken through the prophet Isaiah: ‘Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? (Isa 43: 19). The new thing must find its own authentic form, lifestyle, and purpose, whether in small group meeting in a home, a remote rural church, a beleaguered inner-city congregation, or a great cathedral parish. Wherever there are a few individuals willing and ready to be Christ’s people in their own situation and place, there the emerging Church is coming into its own. Do you not perceive it? (1970:11).

### 2.2.3 Reformation

In further identifying the ECM, Springer (2008:11) highlights reformation as an identifying purpose for the ECM. Responding to the internal factors in the established Church and the external factors in the postmodern shift as Springer (2008:11) observes, emergents see their

defining purpose in terms of the reformation of the Church rather than just a mere added programme or cultural enhancement. For instance, though critical of the ECM, Taylor defines the emergents as individuals intending to reform and renew Christian belief, practice and community in a theological context that is neither conservative nor liberal. Taylor (2004:18) states:

They are self-professed evangelicals seeking to revision the theology, renew the centre, and transform the worshipping community of evangelicalism, cognizant of the postmodern global context within which we live. They desire a 'generous orthodoxy' that would steer a faithful course between the Scylla of conservative-traditionalism and the Charybdis of liberal-progressivism).

Scandrette (2007:236), as Springer (2008:11) highlights, understands the ECM as moving from teaching the facts of faith to training disciples in the way of Jesus. Scandrette (2007:236) posits:

If we want to believe Jesus' message and become the kind of followers His early disciples were, we might have to shift our expectation about what spiritual education looks like - leaving the metaphor of the lecture hall to enter the 'Jesus dojo'. A *dojo* is a Japanese word meaning 'the place where you learn the way'. Jesus once declared 'I am the way, the truth and life' (John 14:6), implying that He is both a saviour and a teacher for life - He provided the Way of God.

Challenged by the emerging postmodern cultural shift, emergents are (and might we even say obsessed with) challenging old forms of ecclesial understanding and ministry and are set on a journey of finding new forms of following the way of Jesus Christ in contemporary context. In writing a new story then as Jones writes, emergents aim to become communities where people not only feel welcome but are also able to express their concern about traditional theological positions and encourage a journeying together in exploring new ways of articulating and expressing their faith in various contexts without condemnation or threat of exclusion (Jones 2008:111).

In understanding reformation as a defining characteristic by which the ECM emerges, two things (notably among others) are implied. First, emergents are seeking a nuanced re-visioning of both evangelical theological method and the how to do church in postmodern context. Emergents are willing to deconstruct old formulations of the nature of the Church in order to reconstruct new ways of being the ecclesial of God in contemporary contexts (McKnight 2006:8). Emergents as Shults (2009:2) observes, believe that theology (and so any doctrine of the Church) ought to nourish the faith community and engender that transformation of persons in the world. Emergents are convinced that if forms of Church life are not reformative, why hold on to them. As Shults (2009:2) observes, while for "many conservatives (and some liberals) the primary goal of ecclesiology seems to be defending the status quo of one's preferred tradition. Emergents, as it seems, are more concerned with developing (and always developing) a reformative ecclesiology." Second, intrinsic to the reformative expression of the ECM is a value for mystery.

In the modern mind-set, everything is classified into neat categories, the world is often seen as black and white and everything can and should be systematically explained and understood. The postmodern mind-set does not seem to hold this supposition. The modern worldview is seen as an unrealistic way of viewing the world, one that cannot sustain scrutiny without falling apart (Zorgdrager 2008:4). In postmodern paradigm, as Zorgdrager (2008:4) writes, there is something freeing about allowing for mystery. "It feels more not less religious, which for emergents is an opportunity, a fertile ground to sow the seed of the gospel."

For emergents, the emphasis on mystery is not simply about allowing there to be fewer answers. It is also about experiencing God, rather than just trying to know God. Thus, emergents place emphasis on faith as the context in which questions such as creation, the meaning of life and the Trinity are lived as opposed to just developing coherent answers to these questions (McLaren 2006:78-79). Emergents will argue that this type of focus allows people to have faith without thinking they are then obligated to have all the answers neatly outlined. Having said that, we must ask, isn't there value in making clear what and why we believe as Christians at least to some extent within postmodern relativistic contexts. Perhaps, the point is that we state our distinctive belief boldly but humbly enough to allow space for evaluating our belief system as the challenges of time creep into it, more importantly, as the Spirit of God moves the Church to greater maturity. As Grenz (1993:58) aptly notes, a theology that arises out of discipleship (a similar point the emerging church movement is seeking to articulate)

... does not dismiss the questions of cognition and intellectual knowing. It does not eliminate the need for a proper belief structure. Nevertheless, because discipleship is concerned with behaviour, action and doing, the theology oriented toward discipleship constructs the Christian belief structure for Christian living. And it claims that integral to knowing God are being and acting in conformity with God's will."

While as some critics argue, emergents in engaging the postmodern paradigm are not teaching the Church anything new, emergents are reminding us of aspects of theology and ecclesial becoming that evangelicals may have neglected or ignored. Perhaps, we can in this sense see emergents' conversation as reformational.

#### **2.2.4 Mission**

From the above, it becomes clear that the fundamental understanding of the ECM is that the gospel should be lived out, proclaimed and performed within a local context or community in ways that are relevant to that context. This, as McKnight (2006:7) observes, is a commitment in ways quite similar to Anabaptism. It is a radical living out of the gospel, including commitment to economic simplicity and justice (i.e. a radical commitment to the Church as a contextual community). Springer (2008:13) is thus correct in identifying mission as a defining characteristic of the emerging church movement. Kimball (2007:21) highlights mission and discipleship as the key purpose of the ECM, noting that emergents see themselves as missionaries and their

churches as missional. By missional, as Kimball (2007:21) explains, emergent churches do not just have an evangelism programme, but see the core of the church as missions. The Church is the people of God sent on a mission. Like mainstream evangelicals, emergents hold that the church is God's vehicle for accomplishing God's mission in the world. More specifically though, emergents maintain that the mission of the Church is to promote the community of Jesus amongst all people that they may experience the kingdom of God in their present lives. For the ECM, "the kingdom of God is not only related to mission, but the kingdom of God is the mission" (McLaughlin 2008:2). Jesus announced the Kingdom of God and emergents are proclaiming this Kingdom message with a nuanced missional approach (Gibbs & Bolger 2005:64). For the ECM, the kingdom vision of Jesus ought to be the missional focus of every local church. Gibbs and Bolger (2005:44) thus understood the emerging churches as communities that practice the way of Jesus within postmodern culture. They further define the way of Jesus as "the life of Jesus and His engagement with his culture, as embodied in community and given verbal expression in the sermon on the mount."

Emergents see Jesus' model as prescriptive for all Christians. Jesus welcomed the outcast, hosted the stranger, and challenged the political authorities by creating alternative community. Thus, emergents see great riches in rediscovering the gospels. McLaren as Street (2006:3) observes, states this more clearly:

... many of us are seeking to faithfully incarnate the gospel of Jesus Christ, the gospel of the kingdom of God available to all through Jesus to people in our mission context. Really, we are just acknowledging and seeking to enter a new mission field, not to a new continent, but one that is emerging on all continents. So, in this sense, what people call 'the emerging Church' (a term I don't particularly like because it can sound divisive) is really the church that is engaging with the emerging culture.<sup>28</sup>

For emergents, to be missional entails embracing a holistic gospel, which is a gospel for the whole person (heart, body, soul/mind), for the whole society (political, economic, cultural and environmental) and for the world. The gospel is not only proclaimed but also performed. "Emergents often contend that people come to faith because they see the gospel and experience the gospel and come to trust and love others who live that gospel out in their daily life" (McKnight 2006:8). As McKnight (2006:8) notes, there is a robust humility in the emergents desire to avoid thinking of themselves as a group of right people surrounded by a majority of wrong people. "Instead emergents know that only God is right. Our task is to find what 'right' work God is doing and participate in God's work." The Church is not just missional; it is a missional community (i.e. the mission to which God called the Church is performed individually together).

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<sup>28</sup> Street, Alan 2006. "An Interview with Brian McLaren" *Criswell Theological Review* 3, 2.

In essence, the missional impulses of the ECM cannot really be separated from the sense of community emergents are seeking to foster. As Kimball (2003:204-205) says, the Church is a community of faith, a people living out the teaching of Jesus in such a way that non-Christians would be naturally drawn in. There is therefore a focus on being together, on genuine fellowship, on continued conversation; on our being what the Church is visioned to be. As the community of faith live with this missional perspective as emergents argues, the Church as it should be, will actually be a place where those who are not valued by society - the poor and undesirable, the marginalized - are welcomed, supported and affirmed. The Church will be a community living by the values of God's kingdom (McLaren 2004:103). This understanding in our present perspective explains emergents' quest for a reformative ecclesiology expressed within a missional framework (i.e. Missional ecclesiology). The missional approach, as McLaren (2004:103) highlights, changes everything. Among other things, "it eliminates old dichotomies like evangelism and social action. Those who want to become Christians (whether through our proclamation or demonstration), we welcome. Those who don't, we love and serve, joining God in seeking their good, their blessing, their shalom" (McLaren 2004:103). As McLaren (2004:111) states:

Missional Christian faith asserts that Jesus did not come to make some people saved and others condemned. Jesus did not come to help some people be right while leaving everyone else to be wrong. Jesus did not come to create another exclusive religion - Judaism having been exclusive based on genetics and Christianity being exclusive based on belief (which can be a tougher requirement than genetics). Missional faith asserts that Jesus came to preach the good news of the kingdom of God to everyone, especially the poor. He came to seek and save the lost. He came on behalf of the sick. He came to save the world. His gospel and therefore the Christian message, is good news for the whole world.

Emergents perceive that proclaiming the gospel along denominational lines has often been ineffective. As McKnight (2006:8) observes, because emergents are not shackled by denominational worries, emergents "find fruits in the whole Garden of Eden, that is, the Church." The ECM is "openly and centrally concerned with the Christian faith as something personal at the local and deepest level. The whole person is challenged, and this explains the popularity of story-telling as a feature of ECM worship and preaching" (McKnight 2006:8). A narrative approach to theology and ecclesial practices that invites both preachers and those gathered to be authentic and tell the truth about their own story thereby enabling authentic relationships.<sup>29</sup> It is here worth noting the observation of Frost and Hirsch (2003:30ff) on the missional nature of the Church, as they provide a contextual perspective:

The missional church, by its very nature, will be an anti-clone of the existing traditional model. Rather than being attractional, it will be incarnational. It will leave its own religious zones and live comfortably with non-church goers, seeping into the host culture like salt and light. It will be an infiltrating, transformational spirituality. That is, a

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<sup>29</sup> Emergent pastor John Burke in his book: *No Perfect People Allowed: Creating a Come as You Are Culture in the Church* elaborates on how authenticity has shaped their church experience.

spirituality of engagement with culture and the world in the same mode as the Messiah himself. Third, the missional church will develop an apostolic form of leadership rather than the traditional hierarchical models.

### 2.2.5 ECM - Towards a definition

From the above overview, we can say that emergents in their take on postmodernism and its implication for the theological formulation and ecclesia identity and expression, are seeking to appropriate the past in ways that may be more redemptive for the future. The extent to which this will be achieved, is yet to be seen. Whether most emergents hold to the view of postmodernism above also remains to be determined. For the moment, “postmodernism though maligned by many conservative evangelicals, seems to be providing a helpful framework for emergents understanding of cultural changes that refuse to discard everything of the past (a modern tendency)” (Blevins 2010:2). Thus, Webber an emerging church dialogue partner uses the phrase “ancient future” to stress that the best answer to the postmodern context is an evangelical faith that appreciates both the past (including early church liturgy and traditions) and an incarnational re-visioning for the contemporary context.<sup>30</sup>

In our present understanding, we concur with Springer (2008:17) in asserting that the emerging church came into being by emergence and does so along a shift continuum that runs from a shift in ecclesia expression and practices with the vision and purpose of reforming the theological framework that informs ecclesial expressions. Emergents sense the need for a systematic change in our understanding of being sent people of God in Christ by the Spirit. Though provisional, in the light of our description above and in our present understanding we define the ECM as, *Communities of resilient fellowships that seek to fulfil the vision of God’s kingdom within a dynamically loose reformative, theological and missional framework, incarnating Christ in various contemporary contexts in the power of Spirit.*

### 2.3 ECM – Towards a theological evaluation

Understood as a conversation developed largely as a reaction to what has been perceived as a stifling modern reductionism, ECM as described above, has been characterized by a pragmatic flair for ministry with a postmodern idiom. On the surface, the emergents quest is to develop broader incarnational/contextual ecclesial visions that prioritize community and relationships, a ministry experience that is expressed in nuanced worship styles (i.e. return to ancient Celtic liturgy, conversational preaching). The underlying realization, however is that these pragmatic changes are not without profound theological motivation. As some critics of the movement rightly observe, irrespective of how incoherent and chaotic one may characterise the emerging church conversation, the conversation is deeply theological. It is indeed sometimes radical and

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<sup>30</sup> See Webber, Robert 1999. *Ancient-future faith: Rethinking evangelicalism for a postmodern world*. Grand Rapids: Baker.



powerfully biblical and other times, somewhat controversial. Below, we shall briefly attempt to highlight the emergents general theological leanings in contrast to mainstream evangelicals as discussed in chapter one. Our account here is mainly informed by the writings of Tony Jones and Brian McLaren. While we do not in anyway claim all emergents hold to this theological understanding, in our present understanding, Jones and McLaren aptly capture emergents developing theological musings. As Jones (2008:104) writes, “the emergent movement is robustly theological; the conviction is that theology and practice are inextricably related and each invariably informs the other.” Jones holds that for emergents, theology and practice have to interconnect better than they do. The theological wars of the Christendom era need to be transcended. As Jones (2008:103) asserts, “Good theology begets beautiful Christianity and bad theology begets ugly Christianity.” In charting a course for theology with a postmodern outlook, emergents contend that theology begets a way of life. The better the theology, the better the way of life (Jones 2008:104).

Thus, emergents posit that theology must entail a generous orthodoxy inherently linked with orthopraxy (i.e. seeing orthopraxy as the point of orthodoxy). Moving beyond the foundationalism, polarization and sectarianism of the years gone by, emergents, as McLaren (2004:66) highlights acknowledge that Christians of each tradition (Conservative Protestants, Pentecostal, Catholic, Liberal Protestants, Anabaptist, etc.), bring their distinctive and wonderful gifts to the table, so we can all enjoy the feast of generous orthodoxy and also spread the same feast to the whole world”. As Jones (2008:103) narrates:

I experienced an existential freedom when I learned that there is a completely different way to conceive of being a follower of Christ. As a child, I had seen the black-and-white movies of 1950s polio patients, trapped in iron lungs, in fact, those iron lungs occasionally showed up in my childhood nightmares. If the conventional ways of understanding the Christian faith were like an iron lung, pressing down on my chest, this new, emerging way was a total release, freedom and liberation. I could breathe again.

More than anything, the hope for emergents, their ministry and message, as Jones (2008:104) posits, is a call for a reinvigoration of Christian theology. This theology will not be an ivory tower academic pursuit, nor even in pulpits and pews, but on the street. Too much thin theology, Jones argues is responsible for too many Christians who practice the faith in ways that are a mile wide and an inch deep. For emergents, as Jones contends the gospel is always more than we imagine. The Bible always has something for us greater than we expect. Theological formulations should not be qualified with words such as ‘just’, ‘only’, in a ‘nutshell’ and Jesus is always beyond what we conceive. Theology is not just “discourse about God”; theology also speaks directly of God. As Jones further explains, “ ... anytime human beings talk of God, they’re necessarily also going to talk about their own experience of God.” Theology, then for most emergents entails “ ... talk about the nexus of divine and human action” (Jones 2008:105).



Further, Jones (2008:106ff) contends that most human activity is inherently theological in that it reflects what we believe to be the case about God - (who God is, what God wants from us, how involved God is in our world, etc.). Therefore, the sacred-secular divide is eliminated because, in fact God cares about the minute details of our lives. Thus, even if we believe that God is not concerned about the minute details of our lives, there is still in some sense some theological orientation in that position. So virtually everything we do is inherently theological to the degree to which we believe or not. This being the case, emergents will argue our theological formulations should not be such that promote a “we already know it all” approach. Such an approach to theology is seen not only as disingenuous and untrue, but also disastrous in engaging emerging postmodern contexts. Space should be provided, emergents would argue, for people to explore the intricate depths of faith (Jones 2008:106). Emergents are therefore disheartened with a Christianity in which all the answers are already known and all the orthodoxies already reified. Instead, at the risk of being seen as puerile, emergents are looking for a Christianity that is still exploratory and adventurous (Jones 2008: 108). For emergents tough questions such as the following demand nuanced answers. What is the meaning of life? How is God involved in our lives? Just what is the kingdom of God? How can we be involved in God’s work in the world? (Jones 2008:110).

While many critics have labelled emergents as being slippery in their theological stance and responses, emergents continue to see questioning as a trait of integrity (i.e. a seeming appeal to deconstructive theology). Emergents see the gospel as complex and irreducible; and the complex meaning of Scripture to be in favour of the Christian story because “it jibes with the complex realities of the globalized, pluralistic, often confusing world in which we live” (Jones 2008:110). In the light of the above understanding, emergents, as Jones highlights, posit three traits that should make up the DNA of any theological reflection as we look to the future (2008:111). First, Jones (2008:111) posits that for emergents, **theology is local**. Informed by the postmodern paradigm as highlighted above, emergents posit that everything that emanates from a person is essentially local because it proceeds from the locus of that person. Our attempt to reflect on notions about God is therefore inherently local. Thus, theological reflections are not universal, nor transcendent. Yes, as Jones contends, the God about whom we theologize is transcendent, but our human musings about God are not. To think that our theology is not local and specific, emergents contend, is a falsity that has been foisted on the Church. The localness of theological reflections significantly informs emergents theological discourse and practice.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Jones, McLaren and most emergents tend to hold a strong version of rational actor theory at the expense of structuralism. See Bourdieu, Pierre 1980. *The Logic of Practice*. Stanford: University Press.

Second, **theology is conversational**. Jones (2008:103) argues that if Descartes had taken into cognizance in his quest for proving human existence the reality that discovery is inherently linked in conversation with history (i.e. philosophers before him) and contemporary context (i.e. present community), he might not have made the philosophical errors he made. As Jones contends, Descartes was on a solo journey of over confident reliance on his brain, a fallible organ. For emergents, there is no *ex novo* theology. There is only theology done in the aftermath of the multifarious theologies that has gone before. Emergents, therefore, seek to avoid the danger of solo theology by intentionally placing themselves in contextual theological communities and the more diverse the better. The intent of this theological dialogue is meant to be open and earnest, not defensive.

Third, **theology is temporary**. As Jones (2008:114) explains, since our conception of God is shaped locally and by continuously robust dialogue, we must hold our formulations and conclusions humbly. For as emergents, we cannot assume that our conceptions of God are timeless because this will be arrogant; it will establish an imperialistic attitude and limit the progress of sound theological reflections. While some critics see the emergents position (i.e. fluidity and plasticity of theology) as heresy, yet, emergents continue to teach that the kingdom of God is expensive, explosive and consequently our characterization of God and God's kingdom are necessarily fleeting. Though fleeting, Jones (2008:114) is quick to add that emergent theological conversation is not in anyway without substance. That theology is local, conversational and temporary as expounded by most emergents suggests that emergents hold post-systematic doctrinal statements; that proponents tend towards a move from propositional/informational notions of theology to a more transformational notion of theology. But what do emergents really mean by this nuanced understanding?

### 2.3.1 Post-Systematic and Pro-Narrative Theology

According to some proponents, the ECM wants to root its theology, which they view as more practical than theoretical, in the incarnate life of Christ (i.e. a theology shaped by a relationship with the person of Jesus, rather than rationality and systematic thinking). Emergents try to refrain from establishing their identity based on systematised creeds. Rather, emergents are more interested in talking about what they do and how they embody the Christian faith (McLaren 2004:280ff).<sup>32</sup> As McKnight (2006:10) observes, ECM wants its theology to be conversational, a dialogue between Scripture, tradition and culture. "Emergents missional shaped ecclesiology seeks to unite Christians for the sake of unleashing the gospel to change the world, rather than a theological movement designed to demand conformity on specific

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<sup>32</sup> Emergents argue that interacting with and engaging other faiths (Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism), may enable clearer understanding of the truth, As such, the more diverse the conversation the better.

theological issues” (McKnight 2006:10). The generous orthodoxy emergents are exploring trends towards a narrative approach to theology in the tradition of James William McClendon.<sup>33</sup>

McLaren (2004:289-290) writes:

Rather than trying to capture timeless truth in objective statements systematized in analytical outlines ... narrative theology embraces, preserves and reflects on the stories of people and communities involved in the romance of God (always returning to the treasury of stories in Scripture); the good, bad, ugly and undetermined lives of those who have sought God and found God and lost God and serve God and heard God and ignored God and oppose God and betrayed God and returned to God and loved God all the more for having being forgiven much.

In a narrative informed theology then, as McLaren (2004:291) contends, orthodoxy isn't a destination. “It is a way on which one journeys and on which one progresses, even if one never in this life arrives” (Phil 3:12-13). McLaren (2004:291) (like most emergents) submits, “To be a Christian in a generously orthodox way is not to claim to have the truth captured... It is rather to be in a loving ethical community of people who are seeking the truth (doctrine) on the road of mission (witness) and who have launched on the quest of Jesus, who, with us, guides us still ” The task of theology is not necessarily to ascertain correct conclusions, but a right process in seeking to reach new and better conclusions; not just correct ends but right means and attitudes to keep on discovering truth (McLaren 2004:294). Emergents hope that a theology so understood will welcome others into the passionate pursuit of truth, not exclude them for failing to possess the truth already (i.e. belonging before believing). This further affirms emergents' assertion that our understanding of theology and biblical truth claims are local not universal. The only unifying big story is the narrative of the cross, our experience, understanding and expression of the cross, however, remains contextual and provisional.

### 2.3.2 Post-Propositional and Pro-Transformational Theology

Emergents' emphasis on postmodern informed praxis-oriented theology and their flair for a post-systematic and pro-narrative theology, suggest that they are somewhat post-propositional and pro-transformational in their theological affirmations. This is a seeming move beyond informational and creedal understanding of Scripture to a pietistic transforming experiential understanding (i.e. transforming experience as primary focus and right doctrinal teachings as secondary concern). As Olson (2007:78-79, 88) asserts, “Doctrine comes into play along with experience, but doctrine serves experience and not vice versa.” The propositional understanding of Scripture while seeking to be faithful to Scripture as Knight III (1997:90) observes, “has been led by its apologetic concern to embrace many of the presuppositions of the Enlightenment.”<sup>34</sup>

<sup>33</sup> McClendon, James (1986) in his book *Ethics: Systematic Theology*. Nashville: Abingdon begins with Ethics, and then he engages Doctrine and completes the volume work with Mission. This is profoundly different to the more traditional evangelical way of systematizing, i.e. Doctrine, Mission and Ethics. It is systematic theology done within a narrative framework, so to say.

<sup>34</sup> For more understanding of Propositional view see Henry, Carl 1976. *God, Revelation and Authority*. Waco: Word. Carl Henry has been seen as the most prominent proponent of rational propositionalism. While not all evangelicals

For emergents, the postmodern shift in many ways now exposes the notion that to know God is to know God conceptually (i.e. the rationalist tendency of equating knowledge with information) as an accommodation to modernity. As Knight III (1997:91) contends, "... with rationalism, the propositional approach assumes a human rational capacity untouched by sin or cultural context." Knight III sees Carl Henry's quest for a universal reason, which, through testing for logical consistency, can uphold the authority of Scripture before the criticism of modernity as misguided. Further, Knight III (1994:91) argues that there is no "...transcultural reason; there are only fallible human thinkers whose categories and assumptions are influenced by their cultures (and language). However, Knight III (1997:91) quickly adds, "this is not the same as saying there is no transcultural truth, but simply recognizing the cultural embeddedness of we who seek to know the truth." In our present understanding, emergents would agree with Knight's perspective and acknowledge it as a preferred approach in the light of the postmodern turn. Emergents tend to favour the transforming nature of the Scripture (i.e. our encountered experience lived out) in their quest for relevant and contextual witness. Most emergents will agree with McGrath (1996:170) about the consequences of the narrative approach. He asserts:

Any view of revelation, which regards God's self-disclosure as the mere transmission of facts concerning God, is seriously deficient. To reduce revelation to principles and concepts is to suppress the element of mystery, holiness and wonder of God's self-disclosure. First principles may enlighten and inform; they do not force us to our knees in reverence and awe.

As Knight III (1997:104) further contends, to come to know the living God, to bow our knees in worship, is what the Scripture teaches. Thus, the narrative approach to theological formulations is the most adequate medium through which we have a true and growing understanding of the Bible and God. In our present understanding, the perceived inadequacies of propositional theology further highlights emergents hope in the promise of a narrative informed theology. For emergents therefore, a narrative approach is truer to Scripture and presents better possibilities for the Church in her ministry especially in the light of postmodern realities.<sup>35</sup> Taking a clue

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hold his view, the propositional approach is widely accepted within the evangelical Protestant circle. This is evident in debate as to the inerrancy of Scripture, objectivity of truth and so forth. Henry H. Knight here argues that propositionalists often see themselves as the defenders of historic Christianity against modernity, which is what they really intend to do. Propositionalists, Knight further notes, often see those who question strict inerrancy as capitulating to modern relativism and abandoning objective truth and hence holding uncertain subjectivism. While it is clear the critics of inerrancy do take historical and cultural relativity more seriously, as Knight emphasizes, they are at the same time suspicious of an overblown rationalism. That being the case, Knight concludes that the critics of strict inerrancy, not the propositionalists, are the strongest critics of modernity. G.C. Berkouwer, Donald Bloesch, Alister McGrath, George Lindbeck and Stanley Grenz are among scholars that in varying ways criticize rational propositionalism. They are not necessarily against reason but against rationalism, they also do not infer that the Bible does not contain propositional truth, rather they argue against propositionalism. In the writer's present understanding, Grenz and Franke's balance of Pannenberg and Lindbeck seems to be a very promising approach, as we shall discuss in chapter four. See: Grenz, Stanley and Franke, John 2001. *Beyond Foundationalism*. Louisville: John Knox.

<sup>35</sup> This is not to say that emergents deny the place of propositions as many have argued. Any good conversation includes propositions. What emergents seem to argue is that proposition should serve the process of enquiry rather than defend and shut down (See Jones, Tony 2008. *The new Christian: dispatches from emerging church frontiers*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.)

from Hans Frei<sup>36</sup> amongst others, most emergents seek to rethink and reinterpret our life story in terms of the biblical story. In anticipation of our discourse in chapter four, this emergents understanding alludes to the benefits certain aspects of post-liberal theology have for the evangelical theological formulation and ecclesiological visions. For emergents therefore, the method and language we employ in our evangelical theological reflections should be re-looked at especially in the light of the postmodern challenge (Jones 2008:152).

### 2.3.3 A Humble Hermeneutic

In the light of all we have discussed above, we at this point must ask – does the emergents' position that theology is local, conversational and temporary mean that emergents hold to their beliefs without any conviction? On the other hand, does the post-systematic and pro-narrative, post-proposition and pro-transformation leanings of the ECM equate to epistemological and pluralistic relativism as many have argued? What implication does the emerging nuanced understanding of emergents have for ecclesiology within the evangelical theological tradition? Jones provides a helpful response. As Jones (2008:115) writes, understanding theology as local, conversational and temporary does not mean that we must hold our beliefs without conviction. Rather, recognising our relative position to God, to one another and to history, should breed biblical humility, not relativistic apathy.

As Jones (2008:115) argues, our forbears promulgated things such as slavery, discrimination of women rights and racism with conviction, but, they were wrong at least looking back into time. "What I cannot say is which side of those issues I would have been on a century ago. Nor can I say which issues I am mistaken on today." Emergents believe that in the same way as we cannot fully describe God because human language is limited, finite and altogether incapable of doing so, truth cannot be definitely articulated by finite human being. Emergents therefore seek to be humble about the positions they hold today and about issues considered important. According to Jones (2008:116), from the emergents vantage point, "humility does not mean apathy." He states:

We have all sorts of strongly held positions about all sorts of things and we'll be happy to debate anything from the atonement to national politics to bioethics. So it is simply not accurate to say (as many critics do) that once the emergent Christians start talking about truth in context, they relativize what Christians believe and they are sliding down the slippery slope of meaninglessness. They cannot say anything authoritative about anything. Therefore anything goes.

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<sup>36</sup> Hans Frei posits a post liberal approach that does not begin with human experience, but with the biblical story. Most narrative theologies begin with human experience then go to Scripture, seeking to correlate the biblical story with human story to demonstrate the Bible's relevance. Frei seeks to read narrative as narrative and not as history allowing us to understand our world with the narrated reality of God and God's purposes, so we can lead transformed lives. Frei holds that understood as such, one is able to bring together the diverse components of Scripture into a single story without losing their particular unity, which preserves particularity. See Frei, Hans 1974. *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*. New Haven: Yale.

Similarly, McLaren (2004:286) clarifies the difference in the emergent position on relativity of truth from pluralistic relativism.<sup>37</sup> McLaren notes that emergents do not hold to pluralistic relativism, which can easily become an unwitting ally of narcissism.<sup>38</sup> While emergents do not hold to pluralistic relativism, as McLaren (2004:286) notes, they see “modernity with its absolutism, colonialisms and totalitarianism as a kind of static dream. Emergents see it as a desire to abide in timeless abstractions and extract humanity from the ongoing flow of history and emergence; a naive hope to make now the end of history (which actually sounds either like a kind of death wish or millennialism).” In Christian theology, McLaren (2004:286) further notes, “this anti-emergent thinking is expressed in systematic theologies that claim overtly, covertly, or unconsciously to have final orthodoxy nailed down, freeze dried and shrink-wrapped forever.” The emergents’ post-liberal, post-conservative understanding, views pluralistic relativism, absolutism, colonial totalitarianism and modern theology to be equally dangerous.

McLaren (2004:286) (and most emergents) believe that there is something beyond the current alternatives of modern fundamentalism/absolutism and pluralistic relativism. This ‘above’ and ‘beyond’ is as McLaren posits, the way of Jesus, which is the way of love and embrace. It integrates what has gone before so that something new can emerge. Emergents see truth not just as a question to be answered, but also as a beauty to be sought. The emergents’ view of truth is a beautiful messy incarnational truth.<sup>39</sup> According to Jones (2008:161) writes, “If we affirm that Jesus is God’s ultimate transcendent revelation, then we must at least admit that truth can be concretely represented at a certain place and time.” Therefore, “If truth is timeless and transcendent, then it is also time-bound and imminent.” Instead of a statement of faith that reads as follows, “We believe in the Bible as the inspired Word of God, without error in its original manuscript and in the Lord Jesus Christ both true God and perfect man a unique supernatural manifestation of God in the flesh”, it may be more helpful to state that:

We at First Christian Church acknowledge that God’s coming to earth in the person of Jesus Christ and recounted in the Gospels turns upside down what we used to think about concepts like truth. For in Him, “truth” walked around, talked to people, and even cried and bled. We are left with faith that, while deep, is also paradoxical and difficult. As a result, we have committed to leaning on each other as we collectively try to follow

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<sup>37</sup> Wilber, Ken (2001) in *A Theory of Everything*. Boston: Shambala describes pluralistic relativism as follows: “It claims that all truth is culturally situated (except its own truth, which is true for all cultures). It claimed there are not transcendental truths (except its own pronouncements, which transcend specific contexts). It claimed that all hierarchies or value rankings are oppressive and marginalizing (except its own value ranking, which is superior to the alternatives). It claimed there are no universal truths (except its own pluralism which is universally true for all people)

<sup>38</sup> As McLaren (2004:286) explains in his book, *A generous orthodoxy*. Grand Rapid: Zondervan, “narcissism will not acknowledge anything universal, because that places various demands and duties on narcissism that it will try to deconstruct. Narcissism’s egotistic stance, McLaren argues, can easily be propped up and supported with the tenets of pluralistic relativism.

<sup>39</sup> Taking a clue from Volf, Miroslav 1996. *Exclusion and Embrace*.



Jesus. We are confident about some things; Jesus' coming to earth was good news, its still good news, and there is more good news to come. You're welcome to join us anytime.

## 2.4 ECM— Towards an Ecclesiological Evaluation

So far, we have directly and indirectly highlighted the ecclesiological leanings of the ECM. In a more specific sense however and in anticipation of the chapter to follow, we can further clarify the difference emergents bring to the continued dialogue on the nature and ministry of the Church by exploring the four marks of the church (i.e. one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church). This will enable a better understanding of emergents understanding of how we should do Church in the light of postmodern realities. Shults (2009:2), in engaging Tony Jones' work (*The New Christians: dispatches from the emergent frontier*, 2008), which we have relied on greatly in this chapter, provides critical insight on the ecclesiological implication of the ECM conversation when considered in the light of the four traditional marks of the church. For our purposes, we shall attempt a brief summary of Shults' critical evaluation. As Shults aptly notes, the intention is not to deny the intuitions that gave rise to these four ways of marking the Church. Rather, it is to suggest that one of the things emerging churches can help us see is that these marks may not tell the whole story or provide the only (or final) word on our being and becoming the community of God in Christ by the Spirit.<sup>40</sup>

### 2.4.1 The Church is One (Or - What's the Point of Ecumenism?)

As Shults (2009:2) observes, this ecclesial mark is usually taken to indicate the unity of the Church. "In other words, the creed claims that, despite appearances, the true church is not divided or "many", but "singular and unified." As Shults (2009:2) aptly argues, this creedal formulation of imagined ecclesial unity emerged during the philosophical reign of neo-platonic metaphysics, with its strong emphasis on 'the One' over 'the Many' and the political reign of Roman Christian emperors. In their quest for control, Roman Christian emperors sought to maintain the unity of the empire at all costs. As such, early ecumenical councils' creeds (as Shults contends) were shaped by the categories of Greek ontology and sponsored by Constantine and his successors, to the point that diversity and plurality were forced into conformity in order to present an essence of unity.

As Shults (2009:2) notes, the empirical fact that the church was divided and multiple required the projection of the idea that the Church is one in an "invisible" sense distinct from the visible, temporal and material existence of actual churches. This ideal of an eternalized, perfect, pure bride of Christ, Shults argues, was employed to speak of unity and a resulting playing down of difference, which was taken as a sign of "fault" or "blemish" throughout history. Further as

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<sup>40</sup> McLaren (2004) in his rather controversial book, *Generous Orthodoxy*, also provides brief but valuable insights into the emergents view on the Marks of the Church.



Shults highlights, while the Princeton proposal for Christian unity insists that unity is a divine gift, that difference ought to be valued and celebrated, yet, it warns that diversity can easily be conscripted “to sinful purposes.”<sup>41</sup> The proposal Shults (2009:2) argues, fails to recognise that the drive for unity can also be used inappropriately to control and force Christians into one system of belief (2009:2). Recognising this possibility as Shults observes, most (if not all) emergents, while holding to unity of the Church, “tend to be less anxious about the obvious plurality and diversity that characterizes the actual state of ecclesial affairs” (2009:3). For emergents, the purpose of ecumenical dialogue is not to manipulate Christians with different perspective into conforming to an idealised sameness. Rather, the intent should be to find new possibilities for transformation among churches. To this end, the ECM seems to be seeking to provide a safe place for sharing, correction and ecumenical participation at varying levels. This openness as Shults (2009:30) suggests, is “in part due to emergents willingness to engage positively with what might be called the ‘philosophical turn to alterity’ in late modernity (i.e. postmodernity) (2009:3). Ironically, as Shults (2009:3) contends, this attitude of ongoing reformational engagement with “others” has opened up interpersonal space for authentic dialogue, fostering the practice of collaborative networking more effectively than many of the efforts of official representatives of various ecclesial hierarchies. Where this dialogue might be heading to, remains something of wide interest in current ecclesiological dialogue.

#### 2.4.2 The Church is Holy (Or - What’s the Point of Missions?)

The holiness of the Church (which is often referred to as the Invisible Church) highlights the sense in which the Church is set apart and called out for a special purpose in redemptive history. Unfortunately, as Shults 2009:3 argues, “the opposition implicit in such distinctions too often comes to the fore in alienating, isolating and destructive ways.” Analogous to the Constantinian ecumenical obsession with a certain kind of unity is what Shults (2009:3) called a colonial missional obsession. As Shults (2009:3) notes, “when the task of missions arises out of a sense of identity that depends on a sharp distinction between us (holy) and them (unholy), it can easily lead to modes of “outreach” that colonize (i.e. reaching out to make others in our same image, erasing their difference from us).” Understood as such, “holiness suggests the need to avoid contamination with the world except for the sake of assimilating them to the community of the holy people.”

As Shults notes, McLaren (2007:44-45) points to the importance of acknowledging the Church’s contribution to colonial practices in the past and calls for an engagement with the concerns of postcolonial analyses of social and global crises. Therefore, as Shults (2009:3) posits, emergents resistance to a missional approach that colonizes the other is reflected in theological

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<sup>41</sup> Jenson, Robert and Carl Braaten (eds) 2003. *In One Body through the Cross: Princeton Proposal for Christian Unity*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans (28).

commitments to a more dynamic, relational, contextual, ecclesial model. Further, from Irenaeus we get a key ecclesial expression, ‘where the Church is, there is the Spirit of God and where the Spirit of God is, there is the Church’. Clearly, as Shults (2009:4) highlights,

The holiness of communities that follow Christ is dependent on the dynamic presence of the divine Spirit. However, this presence is not contained by the walls of the Church or the souls of the saints; the Spirit hovers over the face of the earth, enlivens all creatures, blows where it wills, disturbs and comforts persons across national, cultural and even religious boundaries. If Spirit and salvation (making holy) are connected, why would we think that either is limited to “the” Church or dependent on particular ecclesial settings?

The point Shults makes highlights the fact that emergents are concerned with construing the process of becoming holy in a way that is reformative. “They have seen how the isolationist tendencies and colonizing policies of many evangelical missionary efforts are sadly intertwined. Instead of insisting on their own holiness (in contrast to and apart from sinners), emerging churches struggle to be wholly embedded within the concrete redemptive work of the Spirit throughout the world” (Shults 2009:5).

#### **2.4.3 The Church is Catholic (Or - What’s the Point of Polity?)**

Shults (2009:4) notes that one of the traditional ways of spelling out the catholicity of the Church has been to deal with the question of polity. The means of proper church polity for ecclesial communal life and universal hierarchical structure remains a keen debate in ecclesiological discourse. However, emergents, as Shults (2009:4) observes, tend not to worry in such detail as to determining the right polity, but are rather seeking to deconstruct old models that once worked well in the past in order to reconstruct new contextual reformative models that respect the particularity of each new context. This highlights one of the reasons the ECM is now beginning to win the hearts of many in Asia and Africa. For instance, as Shults (2009:4) notes, Church tradition (in almost all mainline denominations) insists that only believers can receive the Eucharist, an attempt to protect the wholeness of the community of faith. Emergents in their ecclesial practices see the need to challenge such exclusionary practices, because they sense it as inappropriately mired in medieval assumptions about substances or early modernist assumptions about efficient causality and that it is in conflict with Jesus approach to table fellowship.<sup>42</sup>

Shults (2009:4) affirms McKnight’s assertion (2007:54) that “the Lord’s Supper is “not a meal so much in need of protection as it is a meal in need of missional extension ... if a person seeks for grace, this is where we want them to come.”<sup>43</sup> Further, as Shults (2009:5) notes, emergents

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<sup>42</sup> For an exploration of the relational significance of the sacraments see Shults & Sandage 2003. *The Faces of Forgiveness: Searching for Wholeness and Salvation*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

<sup>43</sup> McKnight, Scott 2007. *A Community Called Atonement*. Nashville: Abingdon. (54).

challenge the dichotomy between clergy and laity in a way that opens up new ways to think about the ministry of the Church. “If ministering is about serving, (as the Greek word *diakonos* suggests) we might wonder why it is so often depicted as only for an elite class” or that a particular expressing of church leadership (and in fact biblical interpretation of one culture) is right. All others must just follow along.” One of the implications of emerging churches for reforming ecclesiology is that polity (and all “political” orientations) ought to enhance the mutual service among persons in concrete community (i.e. priesthood of all believers). Not some group lording it over others, but rather a community on a journey together, following Christ’s servant leadership, whose ministry in the Spirit expressed precisely this kind of love in redemptive fellowship.

#### 2.4.4 The Church is Apostolic (Or - What’s the Point of Tradition?)

The fourth mark of the church is its apostolicity. One of the key issues here regardless of one’s preferred polity is how to understand the relation between contemporary followers of Christ and the early Christians. As Shults (2009:5) states, apostolicity deals “with the debates over the appropriate way of relating to the tradition; an issue that brings us right to the heart of the challenge (and opportunity) raised by the emerging church movement.” As Shults (2009:5) explains, claiming to be part of the Church universal means claiming to have some link with the tradition that emerged in response to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As we have seen in church history, the early Christian community had two different ways of being connected. Shults affirms Anderson’s (2007:1) distinction between the “Jerusalem” model, which seems to focus inward and relates primarily to the past by maintaining historical precedent, and the “Antioch” model, which seems to be outwardly oriented, relating to the present authority of the Holy Spirit who is always renewing the praxis of the community of faith as it welcomes the arrival of the reign of God in each new context.<sup>44</sup>

Although, as Shults (2009:6) here explains, “... these centripetal (Jerusalem) and centrifugal (Antioch) forces are only ideal types, clearly emergents are more open to the latter force than many of their conservative evangelical relatives.” For emergents, the apostolicity of the Church connotes a prophetic understanding. Thus, we can situate the apostolicity of the Church within meaning of the term ‘Apostolos’ (one sent out on a mission). Emergents have come to recognise the colonizing tendencies of a mission mind-set understood exclusively in terms of ‘we’ are sent to ‘them’. Emergents increasingly understand mission not just as sending, but also receiving (Shults 2009:6). As Shults (2009:7) observes, “in addition to taking the good news to others, the church, emergents argue, also ought to be learning something new and good from authentic encounters with difference.” According to Shults, this requires that we remain:

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<sup>44</sup> Anderson, Ray 2007. *An Emergent Theology for Emerging Churches*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP.

Open to the transformative possibilities of the future that does not readily quickly silence others by enforcing the same legal regulations that guided the tradition in the past. Emergents are less worried about the dangers associated with risking an overly hospitable attitude toward the aliens among us than they are about the dangers associated with (medieval and modernist) strategies for manipulating others into agreement.

Instead of seeing biblical tradition as means of keeping to one's particular denominational version, most emergents, as Shults observes, seek to "conserve its living intuitions by liberating them for transformative dialogue with and practical emersion in postmodern contexts. Therefore, ecclesial becoming,

Takes shape as an active engagement in the world that works for the liberation of those who have been oppressed on the basis of differences like race, class and gender – to bring good news to the poor by setting captives free. Which is precisely the way of acting that characterized the life of the one whom Christians believe was sent into the world as a manifestation of the infinite divine hospitality that receives others into loving communion (Shults 2009:7).

According to Shults (2009:7), "the growth of the emerging churches world wide can play a vital role in opening us up for a reformative theology. Reflection on and the practice of becoming a fellowship of saints is less about circling the wagons to protect the past than it is about opening to the work of the spirit leading into new frontiers and new forms of exploration into God." Shults' point is not that the four creedal marks of the church are wrong, but that they are not exhaustive and can in fact be misleading especially when interpreted in absolute exclusive terms. As Shults (2009:7) submits:

- Yes, followers of the way ought to work for unity in love, but this does not require the denial or denigration of the multiplicity of expressions of that love. The many forms of ecclesial becoming can serve together in the infinite ecumenics of divine grace.
- Yes, churches are called to become holy, but this does not require isolationist walls that protect "our" sacrality from their supposed profanity. Missional care in the way of Christ is embedded in the concrete, mundane concerns of oppressed others.
- Yes, Christian communities ought to be characterized by a universal embracing love, but this does not require an anxious political exclusion of others. Different polities can facilitate the service of the church while celebrating the particularity of each context.
- Yes, becoming ecclesial involves making clear our connection with the first apostles, but this does not require a blind repetition of the tradition. Followers of Jesus can be identified by their receptive hospitality to, for and with their neighbours and enemies.

Similarly, Snyder (2003:83) argues that when we examine the four marks in the light of the actual faithfulness, unfaithfulness and renewal of the Church throughout history two things immediately becomes clear. First, "the formulations of the essential and defining character of the church began within a particular context and it was used to exclude Christians who understood the church differently." Second, at various points in history, earnest, fully orthodox Christians have argued plausibly that other marks more truly define the essence of the Church's

being and faithfulness.” This of course further raises the question of the functional adequacy of the classical marks, as they relate particularly to issues of revival, and renewal of the Church - (matters that are of course of central concern within the evangelical tradition) (Snyder 2003:83). According to Snyder (2003:102), the limitations of the traditional marks are “partly overcome by seeing the traditional marks as, in effect, only half the story.” Thus, Snyder (2003:85-87) concludes that if we consult the full range of Scripture inductively, we will discover that the Church is visioned as one and many, holy and charismatic, universal and local, apostolic and prophetic, For Snyder (2003:91) therefore, it is “biblically and theologically illegitimate to affirm that theologically the church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic but that sociologically it might less ideally be many, charismatic, local and prophetic.” The Church as Snyder (2003:91) further adds, is “called to be visibly, in society and in its social form, just what it is called to be theologically. Healthy evangelical churches Snyder (2003:91) contends, will exhibit all eight characteristics both in actual social form and in theological discretion. In anticipation of chapter three, we affirm Wilson’s (2005:71) apt submission, “We must learn properly to confess in word and deed that the Church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. But what these marks mean in particular times and places requires discernment under the guidance of the Spirit.”

## **2.5 ECM— Criticisms and Observations**

As we have already noted, whether the emerging church movement will achieve its theological and ecclesiological renewal and reformation remains to be seen. While on the one hand, the benefits of the ECM conversation and proposals are worth engaging, especially in the light of the emerging postmodern paradigm shift, there are, as critics of the movement have pointed out, potential weaknesses participants in the emerging church conversation may need to grapple with so as to enrich, sharpen and advance the ongoing dialogue.<sup>45</sup> The criticism against the ECM is extensively varied; our attempt is to highlight key contending issues that serve our purpose as we conclude this chapter.

### **2.5.1 Critique of Postmodernity**

As has been highlighted above, in the light of the postmodern challenge, emergents are enabling a refreshing understanding of our being and becoming the ecclesial of the Triune God. However, emergents in our present understanding are yet to carefully analyse postmodernism in terms of what is within postmodern epistemology that the Church may need to reject. As Carson (2005:127) emphatically asserts, there does seem to be scepticism towards the possibility of truth claims in the postmodern paradigm. A less than rigorous critique, as Carson highlights, may open the ECM to the same danger of the consumer-oriented culture of modern ecclesiology. While, as we have observed above, emergents attest to the truth of Scripture, maintain that

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<sup>45</sup> It is refreshing to note that emergents welcome and appreciate criticism of the wider community of God and are open to receive all criticism whether fair or unfair, kindly or unkindly articulated. Our hope and prayer is that the community of faith will continue to embrace the path of dialogue under the inspiration of the Spirit.

truth matters, and do not see themselves as epistemological relativist, yet Carson (2005:46) pointedly asks, so where are the substantive warnings about how to respond to postmodern inadequacies? While there is a lot to criticize in modern culture, it seems somewhat shallow to present modernism as bad and postmodernism as good. Even though postmodernity is an emerging context in which we do theology, it is, however as Carson (2005:46) aptly notes, still a context that needs to experience the truth of the revealed Triune God.

Nevertheless, this criticism does not mean that new possibilities for theological reflection, ecclesial identity and expression in contemporary contexts may not occur in postmodernity. Yet, while culture/context informs our theological formulation and ecclesial expression, the Church should in the end be Scripture driven and Spirit inspired. Keeping this tension dynamically, relevantly and faithfully is of great significance to any understanding and expression of the narrative of the cross. The Church needs to take heed lest contextualisation leads to compromise. Equally so, the Church must be open to the wisdom of culture in articulating theology for the community of faith. Carson and hosts of other critics are therefore apt in asking emergents for a biblical analysis and critique of postmodern culture, vis-à-vis emergents' celebration of postmodern blessings. Should the Church respond to postmodernism? In our present understanding, yes, however we must do so critically! Our summary of Stanley Grenz's proposal in chapter four will provide some clarity here.

### 2.5.2 Lack of Theological Coherence

As McKnight (2006:10) observes, "if there is anything ancient about the Church, it is its theological articulation. Creeds didn't jump up from behind and hijack the Church." McKnight (2006:10) aptly notes that creedal formulations began with the *Shema* of the Old Testament and emerged rather naturally as the Church came into being. Christian creeds are affirmation of what Christians believe to be true. While McKnight (2006:10) acknowledges emphasis on the interconnectedness of theology and practice, yet he does not see it as a groundbreaking idea. As McKnight observes, the Christian tradition has always emphasised the relationship between conduct and doctrine. This is why evangelicals actually emphasise the marks of the believer more than the marks of the Church.<sup>46</sup>

The New Testament, as Carson (2005:149) also observes, places an enormous emphasis on teaching, which includes, what to believe and how to behave. For instance, the gospel of John provides propositions that people must believe if they are to follow Christ. To be sure, we are not saved by ideas about God, Christ or the Spirit. Rather, we are saved by God's fulfilment of the cross. Therefore, in our present understanding, we affirm, as we discussed in chapter one that there will always be a place for propositional expressions of faith, even if differently

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<sup>46</sup> Refer to our discussion in chapter one.



articulated. Similarly, we also note that there are great benefits in a narrative informed theology. Biblical narratives also attest to the truth of Scripture, early Christians lived comfortably with the narrative of the Bible because they believed it was telling them the truth about God, God's unfolding history and relationship with humans, even if we only know it in part. Therefore, as McKnight observes, any simplistic either/or approach to theology and practice will not be sufficient for a re-visioned theology and ecclesia expression. As McKnight contends, the emergents position on Scripture is in need of further clarification. "For if Scripture is the inspired Word of God, then experiential and communal knowledge should in the end be subject to Scripture."

Thus, McKnight (2006:10) challenges ECM to live up to their claim to be continuous with Church history and articulate at some level its theology." McKnight notes that there is great danger in the tendency of the emergents to describe their movement by what they are not. As McKnight (2006:10) asserts, "No one is asking the ECM to produce a systematic theology. Instead, for this to be a charitable conversation, the ECM will need at least to declare its colours, state what it believes about what Christians everywhere and always have believed." Having said that, we heed Shults' (2009: 6) caution that the demand for a more coherent emergent theology presupposes early modern notions of language, hermeneutics and ontology that privileges stasis over movement. Providing a creedal statement as Shults observes, would allow critics to dissect the emerging church movement and then place it in a theological museum alongside other dead conceptual specimens the curators find opprobrious.

### 2.5.3 Ecclesiological Weakness

Our evaluation of the ECM ecclesiological understanding brings to light some interesting and thought-provoking issues emergents are grappling with. Having said that, critics seem at one in stating that the emergents ecclesiological weaknesses are the result of a theological framework that is lacking proper clarity. As McLaughlin (2010:12) observes, "any movement that self-consciously reacts against another faces the danger of misrepresentation." McLaughlin (2010:15) contends that the ECM faces this danger in two ways. First, emergents misrepresent modernism and postmodernism. Second, emergents misrepresent the practical ecclesial expression of the modern era.<sup>47</sup> McLaughlin sees the emergents tendency to misrepresent modern ecclesiology in

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<sup>47</sup> McLaughlin (2010:13) observes that the ECM presents both the modern and the postmodern eras as monolithic and therefore as "absolute antithesis", this he posits, poses a great danger to the responses proposed for meeting the need. According to McLaughlin, it often seems as if emergents believe that no moderns value any form of experience and no postmoderns value any form of reason. This is because, as McLaughlin argues, the ECM does not take into consideration the diversity found within each and as a result, "creates an analysis that is so stylized and reductionistic as to represent a major historical distortion" (McLaughlin 2010:13). In this regard, ECM seldom considers that the beginning of the twenty-first century may represent a transition from modernity to postmodernity, so that both worldviews are present at the same time. While McLaughlin's criticism is apt in that emergents constantly compare both the emerging postmodern era to the modern, we, in our present understanding do not think, as we have discussed above that emergents intend to speak as though the modern era is gone and a brand new era is come. In our present understanding, comparisons (amongst others reasons) seem to serve the purpose of distinction in mindset



emergents criticism of modern views of the kingdom of God. While he agrees with the current emergents understanding of the kingdom of God, McLaughlin notes that this understanding was never really lost by the Church, as the ECM claims. If it was, McLaughlin (2005:15) states, “I am not sure the Church should recover everything the ECM teaches about it.” In addition, while the narrative of the cross is inclusive, yet, it is dependent on faith in Christ as Scripture affirms. To neglect the necessity of trust in Christ may lead to an inclusivity that borders on universalism. This poses challenges for emergents understanding of the relations of the Christian faith to other religions (i.e. is there uniqueness in Scriptural truth claims and eschatological hope?). It also challenges aspects of emergents position on believer’s identity in Christ and participation in the community of faith (i.e. keeping the tension between believing, belonging and becoming faithfully). Emergents will still have to grapple with truth-related questions, which speak to the uniqueness of the Christian faith and the call to holiness of the believer in the power of the Spirit. Scriptures like 1 Peter, and Hebrews are texts that is instructive for our understanding of the relation between Church, world religions and culture. Emergents will need to engage these texts in more depth (Carson 2005:46ff).

## 2.6 Linking the Dots

Other critics question emergents understanding of God, use of Scripture and the nature and ministry of the Church that space will not permit us to discuss here. Indeed, a lot still needs to be done in the emergent frontier in their quest for a reformative theological framework that will inform a more holistic understanding and articulation of our being the Church of the Triune God in the light of changing paradigms and context. Having said that, emergents commitment to developing an intentionally contextual theology has resulted in consistent attention to missional ecclesiology that recognizes the significance of re-contextualizing the gospel in different cultures in particular places and times. “This theological intentionality may well be the ECM’s most important strength” (Springer 2008:115). In our present understanding, the ECM conversation seems to be pointing us to something.

Therefore, to be outrightly critical and negative would not really enrich the evangelical theological task and ecclesiological visions. To say the least, there is something enriching, refreshing and redemptive in the ongoing ECM conversation. It is a commitment to the lively pursuit of God, while inviting everyone into a dynamic and sometimes terrifying conversation. To the end that we seek an evangelical ecclesiology (that is biblically faithful, sociologically relevant and theologically coherent), rooted within a theological framework that creates spaces for and broaden the scope of evangelical theological and ecclesiological discourse in general and in the post-colonial, multi-ethnic African context in particular. The question we now need to

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between the two eras so we are better able to understand the challenges of ministry in contemporary times. Having said that, McLaughlin’s criticism highlights the dangers of inappropriate and inadequate descriptions of history. This is a point emergents and all theologians for that matter must take into consideration in our theological enterprise.

grapple with, amongst others, is whether the ongoing ECM conversation informed by the postmodern turn, as discussed here enables space for the African evangelical theological task and ecclesiological vision to move along. Put differently, are there any instructive parallels between the situation of the church in post-colonial, multi-ethnic Africa and the situation of the church in the postmodern West. What implications do the current theological and ecclesiological dialogue between mainstream evangelicals and emerging evangelicals have for evangelical tradition in the African context. These, amongst other questions, are the issues we seek to engage in chapter three.

## Chapter Three

### Spaces for Evangelical Tradition in Africa

#### 3. Evangelical Identity in African Context

In general, African evangelicals hold to the same evangelical doctrinal affirmations we have highlighted in chapter one. In our present understanding, most African evangelicals would also affirm Grenz's description of the evangelical identity as a specific vision of what it means to be a Christian, which, as indicated in chapter one, probably better captures the manifold nature of the evangelical movement. Amongst others, Grenz's description allows for the diverse and creative expressions of the Christian faith and, in essence better enables us to live and proclaim the narrative of the cross and the kingdom of God as a contextual reality in the power of the Holy Spirit. While there is a renewed quest for a context informed, culture sensitive, socio-economically focused theology and ecclesial expression most, if not all, African evangelicals hold to the Bible as the only authoritative source for theological formulations and reflections.

Thus, while the context may help to set the agenda for theological reflections, the Bible alone sets the pace for theological formulation and ecclesia expression, thus holding to the supremacy, inherency, and centrality of the Scriptures as evangelicals everywhere do. For African evangelicals, as evangelicals everywhere, Christ is the centre of Christianity and the Bible is the cradle where Christ is revealed. The Church is a community of individuals journeying together to fulfil God's Kingdom as they participate in the economic Trinity.<sup>48</sup> The extent to which this understanding is reflected in our ecclesiology is something up for debate as we have discussed in the previous chapters.

In the light of our discussion thus far, our task in this chapter, is to determine whether there are instructive parallels between the situation of the church in post-colonial, multi-ethnic Africa and the situation of the church in the postmodern Euro-American context. We seek to understand the implications the current theological and ecclesiological dialogue between mainstream evangelicals and the emerging church movement have for evangelical tradition in the African contexts. For while the ecclesial community in African has come of age, there are still many miles to travel. Most significantly, there is a pressing vision of ecclesial Identity and expression that reflects and is sensitive to contemporary post-colonial, post-missionary and post-apartheid, multi-ethnic Africa. African theological scholars have expressed the hope for a theological framework that will enable spaces for visioning an Afro-centric theology that makes context sensitive, biblically faithful ecclesial understanding a reality. As we have established from the

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<sup>48</sup> See Morris, Leon "What do we mean by Evangelical?"- <http://www.aeafrica.org/aboutus/>

emerging church conversation in chapter two, this challenge is not only an African challenge. It is in this light that the ECM is our discourse partner in this thesis. While we acknowledge that we could approach this chapter from several perspectives, for our purpose however, we shall attempt our discourse within the broader context of historical African theological enterprise vis-à-vis contemporary contextual challenge. Our ecclesiological discourse will be focused on the quest for a paradigmatic theological framework that could inform, shape and enable space for an Afro-centric evangelical ecclesial identity and expressions in the light of the emerging church movement's engagement of the postmodern paradigm and post-colonial African thought.

### 3.1 The quest for an Afro-centric Theology and Ecclesiology

Theological scholars are agreed that the growth of the Church outside the Euro-American context has opened up new paradigms for theological discussion, thereby enabling an avenue to explore new approaches to theological reflections and formulations. For instance, In Africa, we no longer speak only of a self-governing, self-supporting, self-propagating Church; but also a self-theologizing Church. African theological scholars (past and emerging) have written extensively with the vision of deriving a framework for theology in Africa that reflects the beauty of God's creation and the gospel within African Culture(s). Theology, (both Orthodoxy and Orthopraxy) as handed down from the West with its many benefits and breakthroughs have not been without real empirical challenges (theologically, pastorally and culturally) in Africa; and these challenges/limitations, as African theologians have argued, necessitate the need for an approach to theology that relates better to the hopes and aspirations of African communities; one that is in tune with the songs of the African communities.<sup>49</sup>

The idea that all Christians can understand the Bible, interpret it and insist upon their perspective being taken seriously stands at the heart of the sixteenth century Reformation and led to the development of Protestantism from which the evangelical movement evolved as discussed in chapter one. As McGrath (2007:2) aptly observes, while on the one hand, this great convulsion of the sixteenth century introduced into the history of the Christian faith a dangerous new idea that gave rise to an unparalleled degree of dynamic and creative growth in theological reflection, on the other hand, the emerging protest against the Roman Catholic Church caused new tensions and debates, which by their very nature seemed to be beyond resolution. In essence, the growth of Protestantism shaped decisively by these creative tensions that emerged from the Reformers perspective and articulation of Scripture, introduced us to a new world beyond what was ever imagined. Consequently, therefore, theological reflections and formulation like never before were now equipped with a new potency and capacity to engage

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<sup>49</sup> See Jenkins, Philip 2007. *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*. USA: Oxford.

with emerging new world and new cultures in a very dynamic way. The Reformation set the stage for a radical reshaping of Christianity, precisely because the restraints on change that seemed impossible had suddenly been removed. The Reformation principle is of course not without implication for new church frontiers, especially as the Christian faith spread southward to Africa, Asia and South America. In fact, there is today in the task of being the ecclesia of the Triune God, a growing dimension of negotiable and non-negotiable approach to Orthodoxy and Orthopraxy in current global North and global South theological discourse. To the end that African theological scholars are as increasingly committed to the task of the theology and mission of the Church as their Western counterparts, it has become obvious that a manifold new understanding of the Scripture, ecclesia identity and expression seems inevitable.

Indeed, many African theologians (evangelicals and catholic alike) are seeking a radical rethinking of ecclesiology in Africa- (i.e. ecclesia identity & expressions that is sensitive to the socio-political and cultural realities of African communities and developed within biblical and theological framework that is context sensitive). Indeed, if we juxtapose the principle developed by the Reformation fathers that everyone should be able to understand and interpret the Scripture and insist on their perspective being taken seriously, with the current quest for an Afro-centric theology and ecclesia expression, the result will most probably be to hold that the Protestant principle gives the undergirding impetus to African theological task as it did to Euro-American theological reflection and formulation.

Further, at the risk of stretching this notion too far, we could in some sense posit that while most Church historians acknowledge that Luther's 95 theses sparked and ignited the Protestant Reformation; few acknowledge that a major driving force behind the Reformation was possibly that of Identity (i.e. German nationalism/ German Christians). As Ellis (1995:2) observes, Germany was part of the Holy Roman Empire, which put the German church under Roman control. It would therefore seem impossible to be culturally German and Christian (i.e. to be a Christian you may have to be culturally Roman). When Luther translated the Bible into German and advocated German control of the German church, as Ellis (1995:2) further notes, he seems to have freed Germans from Roman-centric marginalisation. For the first time they were free to be German Christians. Thus, Ellis aptly asks if we could in some sense consider the Reformation as also a German-centric influenced phenomenon. Whatever way we may explain this, this creative cultural force unleashed by Luther's German Christian ideas in many ways seem to have contributed to the success of the Reformation (Ellis 1995:2). Known as the founding father of African Evangelical Theology, Byang Kato's famous statement "let African Christians be Christian Africans" comes to mind here. By this aphorism Kato, as Nystrom (2009:2) observes, did not mean that:

African Christians should rid themselves of cultural practices and adopt Western culture along with Western faith. Nor did he mean that Africans should remain cultural and spiritual Africans while dabbling a bit of Christian ritual onto their religious practice. Instead, he saw a regulating pivot between these two extremes: Scripture.

In 1975, Kato wrote for *Bibliotheca Sacra*:

It is God's will that Africans, on accepting Christ as their Saviour, become Christian Africans. Africans who become Christians should therefore remain Africans wherever their culture does not conflict with the Bible. The Bible must judge the culture; where a conflict results, the cultural element must give way (Tiéno 2007:218-219).

Some African scholars however disagree with Kato's perspective. For instance as Tiéno (2007:218-219) observes, Kwame Bediako makes the assertion that there is little in Kato's theological method, which does not have deep roots in Western conservative Evangelical tradition. Bediako posits that Kato's theological position does not entail an integrating framework for rooting the Christian faith in African culture. Bediako goes as far as criticising Kato as an extremist because he perceived Kato's developing theological framework as one of radical discontinuity- (i.e. the understanding that Africans come to the Christian faith religiously and spiritually empty).

Bediako's criticism, as Tiéno (2007:219) comments, only "reinforces the notion that African evangelicals are Biblicist who see no value in African religions and cultures". The extent to which this claim is actually the case has been an issue of debate in African theological discourse. In our present understanding, while ecclesial identity in Africa must take full cognizance of Africa's sense of spirituality as inherent within African cultural values, as Bediako emphasises. Such effort must, however always take good cognizance of the fact that the Bible does not uphold some African cultural practices and sense of spirituality. Keeping the counter-culture nature of the Scripture therefore, remains a key contending issue in any effort at context sensitive theology and ecclesiology. We shall return to shed more light on this below.

Some evangelicals recognizing the serious implication of Bediako's claim argued in Kato's defence. They described Kato as a "mainline evangelical who sought to defend the faith and to contextualise it in African culture" (Tiéno 2001:219).<sup>50</sup> Hence, as opposed to a representative of radical discontinuity as Bediako claims, Tiéno (2007:219) submits that when Bediako proposes that for the future, the task of African theology should consist not in indigenising theology and Christianity as such, but in letting the Christian Gospel encounter, as well as be shaped by the African experience,<sup>51</sup> he is not making a statement that Kato would have rejected outrightly. Kato himself argues that every effort should be made to make the ecclesia in Africa

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<sup>50</sup> See Palmer, Timothy 2004. "Byang Kato: A Theological Reappraisal" *African Journal of Evangelical Theology* 23.1.

<sup>51</sup> See Bediako, Kwame 2004. *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa: History and Experience*. Maryknoll: Orbis (4-19).

reflect the local culture of a given community, hence his famous statement “Let African Christians be Christian Africans” (Tiéno 201:220). However, as Tiéno further explains, Kato’s approach was more in line with the mainstream evangelical understanding that the culture is not necessarily the source of theology; it is a starting point.<sup>52</sup> Several factors (though not all theological) contributed to the call for an Afro-centric theology and ecclesial identity. As Parratt (1995:13) observes, “The emergence of independent nations from the colonial territories and indeed the pre-independence political movements themselves, certainly played a significant role.” The philosophy of negritude developed by French-Speaking Africans (like Senghor and others), as Parratt further notes, also sought to develop an African distinct identity that will in turn inform ecclesial identity. Black Theology as developed in South Africa, with the vision of asserting the dignity of African personhood within a context of white exploitation and oppression was crucial in enabling an ecclesial identity and expression that is not necessarily Western (Parratt 1995:13). In fact, theologically and pastorally, scholars continue to stress the need for Christian faith to be holistically incarnated within particular cultures. “Sawyer, as Parratt (1995:14) notes, with the awareness that theology should serve the pastoral and evangelistic work of the church asserts:

The church in Africa is faced with an clamant demand for an interpretation of the Christian faith in a sanguine hope that such an interpretation, when produced, would provide the means of bringing home to Africans the truths of the Christian gospel in an idiom related to the African situation.

Parratt (1995:16) situates the quest for Afro-centric theology and ecclesial identity in what Paul Tillich called theology of Culture, “in that it seeks to analyse what lies behind all cultural expressions as a preparation to relating them to a systematic Christian theology.” It is important to note, as Parratt aptly observes that Tillich understood theology as “statement of the truths of the Christian message and the interpretation of those truths for every generation”.<sup>53</sup> The implication of this, as Parratt (1995:18) observes, is a “pluralistic approach to the Christian faith and the acknowledgement that there can be no final theology”. The reality of the manifold dimensions theological reflections may take can be attested when we begin to engage concepts like Systematic theology or Narrative theology and African theology or African theologies.<sup>54</sup> In a modified form, this is also attested to in the decrees of Vatican II, and more clearly in Pope Paul VI’s address to the Ugandan bishops in 1969, when he declared: “The expression, that is, the language and mode of manifesting the one faith, may be manifold, suited to the style, the character, the genius and the culture of the one who profess the one faith: you may and you

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<sup>52</sup> Kato does not seem to give the same positive value to African religions as other African theological scholars. It shouldn’t however be seen as meaning that Kato believed that Africans come to the Christian faith religiously and spiritually empty.

<sup>53</sup> See Tillich, Paul 1978. *Systematic Theology*. Volume 1. London.

<sup>54</sup> Refer to our use of Africa in thesis introduction



must have an African Theology” (Parratt 1995:16). In a particular sense, evangelicals in their ecclesiological task, as Dyrness (2007:145) observes and as we have highlighted in chapter one, have displayed ambivalence towards culture as the context within which we do theology. Dyrness (2007:155) asserts, “The continuing failure to integrate the expanding multicultural experience into a consistent understanding of culture and cultural engagement still bedevils the evangelical movement.” This is not to say that evangelicals do not care about culture, they of course seek cultural transformation. But overall, as Dyrness (2007:157) argues, “evangelicals address culture; they do not listen to it. While their efforts are admirable and well intended, in general the evangelical relation to culture has been strategically rather than theologically motivated.” Similarly, Noll (1994:173) also notes that the activist, biblicist and populist character of evangelicalism continues to hamper systematic reflection on culture. Indeed, “activism and populism have largely precluded discerning involvement in culture, and sadly, the wisdom of culture has not been allowed to move the Church toward greater maturity” (Dyrness 2007:157).<sup>55</sup>

Today, the quest for an Afro-centric ecclesia identity and expressions has made significant progress. Yet, as almost all African scholars posit, methodological concerns (i.e. the theological framework that should inform Afro-centric ecclesial understanding) is still a pressing issue. As Okoye (1997:9-17) observes, there is yet no consensus on the framework that should inform Afro-centric theology and ecclesial identity. Okoye argues that this is so because, “theological writing in Africa has been circumstantial, focused on particular pastoral or moral problems. Only few of the writings are systematic treaties written with a view to developing a comprehensive theology” (1997:8f). We can of course debate the validity of Okoye’s conclusions. It is however true that African scholars like Charles Nyamiti, have also stressed the need for systematic approach to Afro-centric theology and ecclesia identity.<sup>56</sup> On the other hand, J. Healy and D. Sybertz (1996:105-106) (though not Africans), acknowledging that theological reflection and formulation should not always be systematic have called for a move towards an African narrative theology within which we develop a Trinitarian, proverb-based, African communion

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<sup>55</sup> Dyrness, William (2007) contends in his article “Evangelical theology and culture” in the *Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology* that two historical sources have shaped evangelical views on culture, namely the Reformation and the major revivals. He noted that while the watchwords of the Reformation - faith alone, the Bible alone, and Christ alone became central to evangelical theology; the roots of ambiguity toward culture lay in part, in the diversity of the views of the major Reformers. Further, because evangelicals have come to believe that God works mostly by way of periodic and intermittent intervention in the lives of individuals and communities, evangelicals see efforts at reform and influence as ineffectual apart from the direct working of God in the individual and the larger society. This Dyrness argues amongst other things has led to viewing revivals or personal conversion as the means to social renewal. This in turn has hampered the development of theological resources by which to engage culture appropriately.

<sup>56</sup> For an insightful review of Nyamiti’s approach see Vähäkangas, Mika 2006. “Inculturation and theological method in the work of Charles Nyamiti” In *Inculturation & Post-colonial Discourse in African Theology*. Edward Antonia (ed). New York: Peter Lang.

ecclesiology<sup>57</sup>. Further, from a Catholic perspective, the recently concluded Synod for Africa posits that the Church as a Family of God is an appropriate model for African ecclesial identity and expression. As Okoye (1997:9-17) notes, an African is a person-in-community and one of the deepest yearnings is to rediscover true community and solidarity amid the social changes of contemporary times. And because Africans see the only hope for this in the Church, hence the adoption of the Church as the family of God. As Okoye further observes, considerable theological reflection has already accompanied this African ecclesial understanding. “It cannot, however, be said that an ecclesiology has emerged; what is in place is the conscious and ongoing practical articulation of the Church as family...”

There are other proposals and efforts at deriving a particular theological framework for an African ecclesial identity that sing the songs that Africans can appropriately dance to.<sup>58</sup> Yet, there remains no consensus as to the theological framework within which we can situate a post-colonial Afro-centric ecclesial expression(s). On the other hand, Okoye (1997:9-17) wonders whether a coherent framework/method is truly germane to African thinking. Whatever our response is to this reality that the dialogue is ongoing and receiving increased momentum is noteworthy and encouraging. Evangelicals everywhere remain committed to fulfilling the mission of the church generation after generation, in particular place and time.

### 3.2 Evangelical Tradition and the global South-global North conundrum

To the end that we seek an evangelical ecclesiology (that is biblically faithful, socio-culturally sensitive and theologically coherent), rooted within theological framework/method that creates spaces for and broadens the scope of evangelical theological and ecclesiological discourse in general and in the post-colonial African context in particular, the question we now need to grapple with, amongst others, is does the ongoing ECM conversation informed by the postmodern turn as discussed in the previous chapter create further space for developing an Afro-centric theology and ecclesial expressions in contemporary times? The increasing quest to take seriously the contextual nature of theological and ecclesiological discourse, in many ways helps highlight the manifold nature of theological task. More so, the emergent’s quest for an ecclesial identity and expression that is Scriptural, innovative, reformative and transformative as discussed in the previous chapter, in a renewed sense, further affirms Africa’s call for a theology and ecclesial

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<sup>57</sup> Healy and Sybertz see significance in African oral tradition, proverbs, sayings, stories, cultural symbols, plays and songs for the theological and pastoral task. Hence, they sought to use this form of African oral tradition as a guide in developing an African narrative theology of inculturation so as to share the theological insights and praxis of the church in Africa with the world Church. Their primary intent is not necessarily to develop an academic or systematic theology in the classical sense, but rather to approach popular theology and pastoral theology starting with the experience of the African people at the grass root, while also showing the implication of theological reflection and insights for evangelization and pastoral praxis. See Healy, J. and Sybertz, D. 1996. *Towards an African Narrative Theology*. Maryknoll: Orbis.

<sup>58</sup> We refer here to works of scholars like Kwesi Dickson; Harry Sawyerr; Fashola-Luke; John Pobee, etc. We shall highlight aspects of their understanding in the next chapter.

expression that is incarnated within particular cultures. One gets the idea that the increased socio-cultural challenges in the West (as seen in the emerging church movement's engagement with the Euro-American cultural paradigm shift), has in some sense made real the challenges and implications of context for any theological reflection, ecclesial identity and expression. The ECM conversation as we established in the previous chapter, is largely based on the understanding that there is a fundamental shift from modernism (with its universalistic and individualistic enlightenment informed mind-set) to a postmodern outlook (that is a somewhat more localised and community focused paradigm). The emerging postmodern paradigm emergents hold, necessitates a re-visioning of the evangelical understanding of our being and becoming the ecclesial of God. As we also established in the previous chapter, the starting point of this re-visioning emergents contend, must be the theological methods and framework that have hitherto informed evangelical theology and ecclesia expression. Emergents argue that instead of evangelicals fixation with the dark side of postmodernism, there is a great deal that is positive in the postmodern paradigm that may enable the church to address and correct the imperial tendency and universalistic approach inherent in Euro-American theological formulations and ecclesiological missionary programmes.

The hope is that this will in turn enrich the ecclesial dialogue between the global north and the global south. In part, emergents posit that this re-visioning will enable space for a better context sensitive ecclesial identity and expression, which will reflect and respect the cultural realities of the people of God in different communities. To this end, emergents posit that theology is local and community specific; it is an open earnest scripture based conversation that is linked with history and contemporary community; and it is a temporal/provisional and generous orthodoxy. Hence, emergents call for a humble hermeneutic, which they argued should not be equated to apathy or relativistic pluralism. Further, while most emergents continue to confess in word and deed that the Church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic, emergents call the Church to begin to discern afresh what these marks mean in particular times and places under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Emergents will readily agree with Snyder's (2003:91) assertion that, "it is biblically and theologically illegitimate to affirm that theologically the Church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic but that socio-culturally it might less ideally be many, charismatic, local and prophetic. Hence, emergents are seeking to develop:

1. A post-systematic and pro-narrative theology, noting that to be a Christian in a generous orthodox way is not merely to claim that we have the truth captured. It is more about being in a loving ethical community of people who are seeking the truth (doctrine) on the road of mission (witness, which includes care for the poor and the marginalised) and who have launched on the quest of Jesus, who was, is with us and guides us still. Our collective stories and identity as a community needs therefore to be given more space in our theological reflections.

- II. A post-propositional and pro-transformational theology, noting that while we keep the transcultural truth of the Scripture, we need to recognise more intensely the cultural embeddedness of we who seek to know the truth. For emergent doctrine comes into play along with experience, but doctrine serves experience and not vice versa. Emergents therefore, tend to favour the transforming nature of Scripture in their quest for relevant witness. (Scripture being the ultimate narrative of our life transforming experience of the God who has revealed himself to us by the Spirit in Christ). Thus, for emergents, a narrative approach to theology is truer to the Scripture and presents better possibilities for the Church to fulfil God's Kingdom, and minister reconciliation and healing in various communities.

As highlighted in the previous chapter, some scholars have viewed emergents postmodern and post-conservative position as largely a negative development. In contrast to emergents postmodern hope, some scholars argue that the growth of the Church in the global South may in fact take a more fundamentalist and conservative turn, thereby having little sympathy for the positions of the emerging church movement. Arguing along the line of Philip Jenkins observation that Christian theology in Africa may move towards a literary reading of the Bible from issues rising out of the African existential realities.<sup>59</sup> If that be the case, emergents proposed postmodern promise that will supposedly allow for a more culture sensitive, narrative oriented ecclesial identity and expression, may not offer any value to evangelical theological reflection and formulation as a whole or to Africa in particular.<sup>60</sup> As we continue to ponder on this observation and the paradigms that is informing this renewed look at our understanding of being and becoming the ecclesia of the Triune God, we are left wondering what the precise implication, opportunity and challenge a postmodern sensitive evangelical theology and ecclesiology would have for Afro-centric theology, ecclesial identity and expression. To be more precise, will the emerging shift in paradigms enable space for articulating a broader evangelical ecclesiology?

### 3.2.1 Post-modern hope and Afro-centric Theology

As Kenzo Mabilia (2002:323) argues, "One of the challenges facing African scholarship today concerns the need to think differently about Africa". Mabilia (2002:323) posits that scholarly work in Africa cannot and should not rely on old ideas as they have "... failed the continent and are now being deconstructed as myths."<sup>61</sup> In Mabilia's perspective, what is now needed is a new kind of thinking capable of mobilizing enough creative energy to fuel the reconstruction of Africa vis-à-vis African theological reflection and formulation. Mabilia (2002:323) thus contends,

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<sup>59</sup> See Jenkins, Philip 2006. *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South*. New York: Oxford.

<sup>60</sup> For more on this view see Erickson, Millard et al 2005. *Reclaiming the Centre: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern times*. Wheaton: Crossway.

<sup>61</sup> Mabilia here refers the work of V. Y Mudimbe who argued that the idea of Africa and the African was invented by the colonial library to serve as the other to the West and the Westerner. Mudimbe's use of colonial library refers to the body of literature that developed around the modern project of colonization. (See Mudimbe, V.Y. 1988. *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the order of knowledge*. Indiana: IVP).

“Postmodernism offers possibilities to think otherwise about Africa.” Similar to emergents, Mabilia refers to postmodernism as a discursive practice as embodied in the works of Foucault or Jacques Derrida, which favours local over and against grand (or meta) narrative, decentred eclecticism and, at times, paradox and parody over theoretical unity and scientific formalism.<sup>62</sup> Mabilia was, however quick to note that this optimistic outlook on postmodernism does take into consideration the fact as an alien episteme, postmodernism could actually conspire against Africa. Acknowledging this risk, Mabilia sought to base his argument on the cumulative effect of postmodernism as opposed to one argument taken in isolation. Therefore, Mabilia (2002: 323-324) posits:

- It is legitimate to think about Africa in terms of postmodernism because there are historical antecedents for postmodernism in African culture and because the current postcolonial situation calls for it.
- It is beneficial to think about Africa in terms of postmodernism because postmodernism clears free space at the margins of Enlightenment reason where true alterity can be sought and expressed.

Based on these two fundamental insights, Mabilia (2002:324) contends that Afro-centric theological and ecclesiological task would find “postmodernism a fertile conceptual paradigm.” One will be naive to see this as an unproblematic position. A number of African theological scholars, as Mabilia rightly notes, have shown some reservation to the perceived promise of postmodernism for Afro-centric theology. On a broader scale, most African Scholars do not share the postmodern optimism; rather, they dismiss postmodernism as a typical Western malaise, which “breeds angst and despair instead of aiding political action and resistance”.<sup>63</sup> For instance, Katongole (2002:237-254) argues that postmodernism’s illusory attraction must be resisted at all costs. Though postmodern paradigm is sensitive to difference and otherness, and opens broader possibility for contextual expression by the deconstruction of grand narratives, Katongole argues that postmodernism is still caught up in modern predicament and failure. He sees nothing radically new or liberating within postmodern re-invention. Rather, for Katongole, postmodernism represents a heightened modernist determination in the destruction of whatever is local, particular or different. Katongole (2002:238) states:

The effect of this re-invention is nothing less than the creation of superficial characters and societies, people, in other words, who have lost not just hope for a meaningful existence, but even the power to locate their lives and activities within any historical meaningful narrative.

Though Katongole (2002:238) in some sense shares the opportunity postmodernism enables for developing an Afro-centric theology - (i.e. enabling a “narrative theology away from the totalizing master narratives against which we had up till now defined ourselves”). Yet, he sees

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<sup>62</sup> See our discussion on Postmodernism in chapter two. Also see Foucault, Michael 1980. *Power Knowledge*. New York: Pantheon.

<sup>63</sup> See Loomba, Ania 1998. *Colonialism and Postmodernism*. New York: Routledge (xii).

the decisive advantages of postmodernism mainly as an intellectual style or set of moods; one that casts suspicion on classical notions of truth, reason, identity and objectivity, of the universal progress or emancipation, of single frameworks.<sup>64</sup> In terms of cultural expression, however, Katongole argues that postmodernism could turn out to be far more deterministic than its intellectual roots. Katongole is however not claiming that the intellectual and cultural dimensions of postmodernism can be separated. However, he posits that by focusing on three cultural expressions of postmodernism within Africa,<sup>65</sup> postmodernism could perhaps be a hindrance to African Christian theology, ecclesiology and biblical hermeneutics. In the light of this, Katongole (2002:237-238) posits that the sort of self-understanding, which allows for appropriate ecclesia expression in Africa, is for the Church in Africa to be tactical communities of resistance and hope. Katongole here draws on Stanley Hauerwas' understanding of the church as *Resident Aliens* (i.e. Hauerwas' particular reference to the Church as a tactical community). To describe the church as a tactical community of resistance and hope means that the primary preoccupation of the church, according to Katongole (2002:250) is "not her own institutional existence, but that of providing her members with skills which will enable them to engage critically and selectively with the postmodern culture in which they live as Resident Aliens."

Following Hauerwas, Katongole sees the Bible as a story of hope. The story of a particular community who, given their unique experience of and with God, move on through history, through different challenges and trials as a community of resistance and hope, thereby underscoring the moral authority of the church as a story.<sup>66</sup> Katongole (2002:251) hopes that this will free the local community of God from liberal and individualistic notions of Salvation and hence allow for a full potential story of pilgrim community, which will in turn inspire new forms of communities embodied in the same prophetic vision of resistance and hope. Further, Katongole sees this alternative as an urgent necessity for Afro-centric theology and ecclesial expression in the face of what he called the "playful nihilism" of emerging postmodern culture.<sup>67</sup> While there are indeed many benefits in Katongole's understanding,<sup>68</sup> it is still

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<sup>64</sup> Katongole's point is informed by Eagleton, Terry 1996. *The Illusions of Post Modernism*. Oxford: Blackwell.

<sup>65</sup> That is, Postmodern celebration of difference; the global economy; and the "condomization" as playful Nihilism.

<sup>66</sup> See Hauerwas, Stanley 1981. *A Community of Character: Toward A Constructive Christian Social Ethics*. Notre Dame: Notre Dame University (53-71). See also Hauerwas, Stanley 1991. *Against the Nations: War and Survival in a Liberal Society*. Nashville: Abingdon. Katongole holds that the overall political context of this understanding endows Scripture with moral authority, it allows us to see the reading of the Scripture is not just for pious exercise, but also a political exercise as seen in the development of Black Theology and in its response to social control and discrimination in South Africa.

<sup>67</sup> Katongole has noted that his thinking is greatly influenced by the works of Hauerwas Stanley. See, for example, Hauerwas, Stanley 1999. "The Christian Difference: Surviving Postmodernism" *Culture Values* 3, 2 (April 164-181). Katongole holds that we need to recover such understanding if the Church in Africa is ever to be able to survive postmodernism and also meet with hope and dignity the challenges of contemporary times.

<sup>68</sup> We see value in Katongole's depiction of the Church as the narrative Community of God. The narrative character and community essence of the ecclesial of the Triune God as revealed in the Scripture must always be attested to in



however difficult to overlook the sectarian leanings and tendencies of such a position, particularly when viewed in the light of Hauerwas' approach. In our present understanding, any sectarian tendency in our understanding of being and becoming the ecclesial of God in Christ by the Spirit, will not necessarily create spaces for innovative, engaging and transformative evangelical/evangelistic ecclesial expression in contemporary Africa. Owing to the argued inadequacy of postmodern paradigm for contemporary African identity as well as the re-visioned Afro-centric ecclesial identity and expression, African scholars, as Mabilia (2002:324) observes, have shown a marked preference for post-colonialism, which they perceive to be more concerned with pressing economic, political and cultural realities of contemporary Africa. Yet, as Mabilia argues, it is difficult to dissociate post-colonialism from postmodernism. Indeed, when we think of post-colonialism in its historical sense, it has little if anything to do with postmodernism. However, as Mabilia (2002:324) aptly notes, the concept of post-colonialism has recently taken a socio-cultural and political dimension.<sup>69</sup> It has come to denote a particular discursive practice that takes colonialism and its aftermath as its subject matter. If we take the perspective, we will need to engage other pressing questions: What is post-colonialism and why does it matter? How does it relate to postmodernism? What space for innovation does it enable?

### 3.2.2 Negritude, Postmodernism and Post-colonialism

Space will not permit an extensive discussion of these questions, nor is our task here to define post-colonialism in any detail.<sup>70</sup> It is, however worth noting that in literary studies, post-colonialism has come to mean what used to be identified as Third World literature (Sugirtharajah 2003:13). Post-colonialism has multiple meanings depending where and how it is used. Post-colonialism as used here and in our developing understanding, is closely associated with the works of cultural critics like Edward Said (*Orientalism* - 1978), Mudimbe Y. V (*The Invention of Africa* - 1988), Homi Bhabha (*Of Mimicry and Man: the Ambivalence of Colonial discourse* - 1984) to mention a few. As Sugirtharajah (2003:15) explains, the writings of these scholars gave post-colonialism its theorization and practice. While these scholars approach the topic of post-colonialism from differing viewpoints, yet they all set out to investigate and expose the link between knowledge and power in the textual production of the West. As Mabilia

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our theological task. Sadly however, the narrative character of Scripture is often obscured when we attempt to merely objectify the Scripture without acknowledging enough the fact that we come to a better understanding of the revealed Word because of the historical experiential narratives of those gone before us. But, in our present understanding, to hold a sectarian understanding of the ecclesial of the Triune God amounts to missing the point of our missional purpose and reconciliatory mandate. Further, in our developing understanding, neither of the extremes of conservative evangelicals and liberal theology provides a meaningful avenue for an Afro-centric ecclesial understanding that is sensitive to the contemporary socio-cultural, economic and political realities of post-colonial, post-apartheid, post-missionary Africa.

<sup>69</sup> For instance, Sugirtharajah describes post-colonialism as "an active confrontation with dominant system of thought, its lopsidedness and inadequacies and underlines its unsuitability for us. Hence, it is a process of cultural and discursive emancipation from all dominant structures whether they be political, linguistic or ideological" See Sugirtharajah, R. S. 2003. *Postcolonial Reconfigurations*. SCM.

<sup>70</sup> For a more adequate discourse on post-colonialism see Young, Robert 2001. *Post-colonialism: An Historical Introduction*. San Francisco: Wiley-Blackwell.



(2002:325) argues, the affinity between post-colonialism and postmodernism as a discursive practice could be attributed to the fact that Foucault and Derrida provided Said, Bhabha and Mudimbe the conceptual tools they need in their post-colonial discourse. Thus, Bhabha, for instance could submit that post-colonialism is an attempt to re-articulate postmodernism in the light of colonial experience. Having said that, Mabilia is quick to note that this affinity alone does not provide sufficient reason to legitimise either post-colonialism or postmodernism for Africa as a matter of principle; hence Mabilia's appeal to Negritude thereby grounding the discussion in the existential experience of Africans in diaspora. Negritude, as Mabilia (2002:326) explains is a cultural paradigm initiated in Paris by the African and Afro-Caribbean diaspora.

Proponents (the likes of Leopold Senghor, who is seen as one of the founding fathers of Negritude) presented Negritude as critique of Enlightenment reason by emphasizing the autonomy of the African episteme. Senghor, according to Mabilia (2002:326), postulates two distinct rationalities, (i.e. discursive and affective rationalities) in expounding Negritude. Discursive reasoning seen as analytical and instrumental, explains data according to mechanistic and materialistic principles - a characteristic essence of the Western intellectual discourse. Though it has its own affective dimension, it, however sees otherness as something to be measured mercilessly and in a sense, destroys the otherness of the other; thereby reducing otherness to sameness in a centripetal force of assimilation.

On the other hand, affective reason, seen as the characteristic of the African paradigm does not submit the other to scrutiny. Rather, it feels the other and is moved by the other. Without being irrational, as Mabilia (2002:326) explains, affective reason is aesthetic, intuitive and participatory. The point here is that a discursive reason is not necessarily appropriate for Africa because Africa in her diversity and multi-ethnicity feels the other and dances with the other. Generally, Africans "assimilate and commune with the other", in the spirit of ubuntu as it were. Though Mabilia (2002:326) is not asserting that Senghor was a postmodernist, yet by promoting affective reason, as Mabilia argues, "Senghor sung a tune that has become more familiar since the advent of postmodernism."<sup>71</sup> As Mabilia (2002:326) contends, Negritude is in fact postmodernism before postmodernism, for it not only challenges Enlightenment reason, it also provides an alternative discourse of legitimation, "a distinct African episteme as the unifying factor in the linguistic, literary and cultural expression of the people of African descent" To the extent that Negritude sought to affirm an African otherness; expresses disenchantment with the hegemony of Enlightenment reason; acceptance of the radical historicity of all knowing; affirms

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<sup>71</sup> This is in some ways in line with Derrida's challenge of Enlightenment totalling control and occlusion of the other. See Derrida, J. 1976. *Of Grammatology*. Trans: G. C Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins. (Bearing in mind as well that postmodernity seems to promote community and communal experience over and above the individualistic tendencies of the modern era.

and exalts the plurality of epistemic spaces, Negritude like postmodernism promote rules and strategies that transgress modern orthodoxy. In a sense, “both Negritude and postmodernism over and against discursive reason, champion an aesthetic reason” that challenges modern epistemology (Mabiala 2002:328). While this does not mean that Negritude is synonymous with postmodernism, yet, as Mabiala (2002:328) submits, it means that “postmodernism is not entirely alien to Africa and that it should not be dismissed on the ground of its apparent foreignness alone.”<sup>72</sup> Viewed from this perspective then, Negritude seems to create space for an African episteme and in a sense it enriches contemporary African postcolonial discourse when viewed vis-à-vis the emerging postmodern paradigm as Mabiala here suggests. To think about Africa in terms of postmodernism therefore, (without undermining the apparent challenges postmodernism has for Africa, as Katongole cautions), becomes somewhat beneficial and appropriate. It may to a reasonable extent, enable space to think otherwise about Africa. As Mabiala (2002:336) posits:

On the one hand, postmodernism offers Africans the conceptual space where their otherness, which emerges out of their ancestral traditions as well as their colonial experience(s), can be expressed. On the other hand, postmodernism also allows Africans to overcome the weight of tradition, which threatens to drag them down, and the vertigo of modernism, which threatens to alienate them... Postmodernism provides room for creativity and innovation.

In a sense, Negritude in countering the colonial agenda, paves the way for a post-colonial African identity. Therefore, stressing post-colonialism as an ally of postmodernism as Mabiala (2002:339-341) argues, the post-colony is both an open space and a space of resistance. It is a post-colonial space that in its in-determination liberates Africans both from the shackles of nativism and the tyranny of Enlightenment reason and offers Christianity a unique opportunity to inspire Africans. It is also a space of “resistance to arriving at a simple totality of meaning, whereby we reclaim God who is not only the wholly Other and One whose being lies in being differentiated as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” To this end, Mabiala (2002:341) aptly argues that African theological reflection requires a paradigm shift that is best served by appropriating some of the concepts of postmodernism in a very selective and critical way. In our present understanding, Mabiala is somewhat apt in submitting, “Postmodernism proves to be productive conceptual category in the articulation of post-colonial African identity. It has the advantage of providing a better explanation for the hybridity of the present socio-cultural reality of Africa and it liberates Africans from the necessities of both tradition and hegemonic modernism” (Mabiala 2002:341)<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Mabiala notes that the extent to which Negritude succeeded in implementing its programmes remains an issue of debate among scholars. Some critics argue that Negritude enthrone the Western reason it seeks to challenge as the custodian of epistemic legitimacy. See: Sontag, Susan 1964. *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. New York: Delta Books. Mabiala was also quick to observe that with its “heightened consciousness of radical historicity of all knowing, its acceptance of the idea that reality is a social construct, postmodernism is breathing new life into Negritude”.

<sup>73</sup> It is important to note that while in our developing understanding we see post-colonialism as an hybrid reconciliatory process that enables a context sensitive ecclesiological understanding, we also take cognizance of the

### 3.3 Theological Contentions in Postmodern-Postcolonial Construct

In our present understanding, the emerging church movement's quest for re-visioned evangelical ecclesiology that takes seriously the emerging postmodern and Post-colonial context has significant ramifications not just in the Euro-American context, but also in Africa. As Mabila (2002: 341) observes, "The awareness of the actuality of our post-colonial enigmatic present, which (in a sense) is best conceived of in terms of postmodernism, imposes on African theologians the necessity of coming to terms with the context that fore-grounds their enterprise." This is even more so because theology in our present understanding cannot be separated from the context out of which it arises. Amongst others factors and for our purpose, a key contention in this quest is the pressing challenge of determining the theological framework that should shape, inform and enable space for developing such a broad evangelical ecclesiology that will take seriously the postmodern/post-colonial realities. Amongst others and for our purposes, this postcolonial Afro-centric ecclesiological quest will include a renewed look and broader discourse on:

- The nature of theological construct (i.e. the method we employ, whether we opt for a Narrative or Systematic theological approach, etc.)
- The challenge of globalization vis-à-vis contextualization and inculturation
- The tensions of world religions and the finality of Christ
- The nature (ontology) and mission (purpose) of the ecclesial of the Triune God<sup>74</sup>

While on the one hand, we may celebrate the space for innovation postmodernism seen as an ally of post-colonialism and as expounded on the premise of negritude, was created for the quest for an Afro-centric ecclesial identity. On the other hand, it becomes equally important to engage, even if only briefly, the resulting theological contentions as we seek to derive the theological framework within which we may begin to envision an afro-centric ecclesial expression.

#### 3.3.1 Propositional or Narrative approach to theological formulation

At the core, one can say that the emerging church movement, in its quest for a re-visioned evangelical ecclesiology in the light of the Western postmodern contextual challenge, seeks to better understand the nature and task of theology and how we should proclaim the message of scripture as the ecclesia of God in an ever-changing world. As De Gruchy 1994:8) notes, "the task of interpreting the Christian faith in relation to culture and the philosophical questions

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limitation of post-colonialism and its vulnerability to ethnocentrism as well as the challenge of globalization. We therefore attest to the limitations of post-colonial theory in biblical and theological constructs.

<sup>74</sup> We shall discuss the last point in chapter five; our purpose here is just to highlight it as key point of discourse in contemporary ecclesial contextual re-visioning.

raised as a result, has continued through the centuries as Christianity has expanded into new cultures.” The notion that the Euro-American theological systems are universal and therefore paradigmatic for all ecclesial expressions in various contexts seems now difficult to hold in the light of the emerging postmodern paradigms (De Gruchy 1994:8). Today, there is the recognition that all theological reflection, including Western theological perspectives, develops within a particular historical context (i.e. all theological reflection and formulation is contextual). As De Gruchy (1994:9) contends, what the Western system of theology from the *Summa Theologiae* of Thomas Aquinas to the modern systematic theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg has attempted to do remains important for us today. However, the postmodern realities has opened up more space for a variety of theological paradigms and models that arise from different contexts, using different approaches and seen as alternatives with increasing validity. As we have discussed in the previous chapter, the emerging church movement in the light of the postmodern realities sees a narrative approach to theological reflection as more true to the Scripture and more relevant for ecclesial expression in contemporary time.

As Maartenn (2005:1) observes, there is a growing call that “Christian theology’s use of the Bible should focus on a narrative presentation of the faith rather than development of a set of propositions deduced from data of revelations”. The rise of interest in the narrative approach to theology coincides with growing disfavour of the modern paradigms of rationality as we have already noted. Hence, postmodernism as Clark (1993:503) notes, is gradually filling the void left. Several features typify the postmodern paradigm of knowledge, for our purpose, we highlight two:

- Postmodernism takes the linguistic turn in that while moderns think language describes experience after the fact, post-moderns see language as shaping human experience before the fact. Thus language arises from its use within a particular web of belief or conceptual net. Experience of the world for those who adopt one network of belief does not correspond exactly to the experience of those who see the world through another language-shaped paradigm. Therefore, postmodernism contends that learning a language is also learning from a language (Clark 1993:504).
- Postmodernism stresses a community orientation over and against modernism’s individualistic tendencies. Theologians, in articulating a narrative theology and in varying degrees see life as based in community with its inherent story of origin and future. The individual is therefore part of that story and his or her essence is only better defined within that story. A community gains its identity and cohesion in part by using the same language. In partaking in the postmodern theme, “the church thus adopts a common language that forms her community (Clark 1993:504).

The broader implication, as emergents have argued, and as we have noted in the previous chapter, is that a narrative approach to our understanding and proclamation of the Triune God seems more relevant in a postmodern and post-colonial context. Having said that, we must ask, is the narrative theological framework a valid alternative for our understanding of being and becoming the ecclesial of the Triune God? In engaging this question, narrative theologians

suggest that the narrative approach makes theology more context related and less inclined to claim universality. Contrasting narrative theology with systematic theology, proponents argue that narrative theology aims to connect the Christian faith with the real life context of the people of God in various communities. Whereas, systematic theology with its rational propositionalism attempts to provide an overall description of God in the most precise terms possible and does not necessarily connect with context/culture (Knight III 1997:98-109). As Knight III (1997:101) posits, “a narrative approach provides a way to bringing together the diverse components of Scripture into a single story without thereby losing their particularity. It allows a unity which preserves diversity.” McGrath (1999:107) best expresses the consequence of a narrative approach in contrast to rational propositionalism, he states:

Any view of revelation, which regards God’s self-disclosure as the mere transmission of facts concerning God, is seriously deficient. To reduce revelation to principles and concepts is to suppress the element of mystery, holiness and wonder to God’s disclosure. First principles may enlighten and inform; they do not force us to our knees in awe.

Further, Pinnock (1990:153) sees the narrative approach as a more appropriate way to explore and proclaim the Christian message as the epic story of redemption enshrined in its sacred texts and liturgies, which announces the salvation of God’s liberation of the human race. For Pinnock, (1990:182-183) “truth and meaning of the Christian faith lie with the narrative before it is expressed in doctrinal forms”. Theology therefore, exists to serve the story and not the other way around. For Pinnock, we must look for truth in the biblical narrative and not in doctrine. Thus, Pinnock as Grenz (2000:148) observes, subordinates the role of propositions in theological reflection. “Theology then is a secondary language whose propositions live off the power of the primary story” (Grenz 1993: 71).<sup>75</sup>

As attractive as the narrative approach may seem, mainstream evangelicals as Knight III (1997:104) observes, can only “appropriate narrative approach in evangelical theology if it is compatible with the claims of inspiration of Scripture by God as an authoritative and reliable witness of revelation.” Evangelicals, caught in a modern complex of rational proofs of God will want to determine how narrative functions apologetically in an alternative way (Hunsberger 2003:129). This concern questions the precise sense in which a narrative approach can appropriately articulate truth claims and hold to the uniqueness of the Christian truth claim in the face of increasing faith alternatives, relativism and epistemological pluralism. For instance, Bloesch argues that the emphasis in “narrative theology has shifted from exploring the metaphysical implications of the faith to investigating the story of a people on pilgrim.” Thus, Bloesch (2005:133) contends, “Theology cannot afford to ignore the issue of truth because it is

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<sup>75</sup> Grenz observes that subsequent to 1990, Pinnock seems to have toned down his bold move toward narrative, because he did not invest his energies in articulating the contours of a narrative theology. Rather, he moved on to explore what he sees as a pressing interest. Yet, as Grenz notes, Pinnock opened the doors for others to engage a fruitful avenue of postmodern theological reflection.

truth that gives narrative its significance” (2005:133). Similarly, Carl Henry (1987:4) argues, “Narrative theology brackets historical questions by focusing simply on the text and its articles of faith. To read Scripture as narrative does not automatically settle the question whether it matters that its content is fiction or history.” In respect of the objections, surely and as other theologians have argued, the orientation towards story, its inherent community orientation, its context relatedness, its quest to allow for unity while at the same time preserving diversity amongst other claimed benefits, seems to make the narrative approach to theology even more at home with evangelical faith and ecclesial expression in Africa. On the other hand, however, the evangelical reservation about the narrative theological construct pushes us to further reflect as to how the narrative approach really enables space for a better understanding of our being the ecclesia of God in contemporary context.

Furthermore, should we even take an either or perspective. Would we not do well wherever possible to appropriate both in fulfilling the missional mandate of the Church?<sup>76</sup> In our developing understanding, both propositional and narrative methods need each other because they both can contribute to a better understanding of the Scripture and our understanding of being and becoming the ecclesial of the Triune God. As for the promise of narrative, we can provisionally assert that narrative and story appear to provide a cure, “if not a panacea to a variety of Enlightenment illnesses” (Hauerwas and Jones 1989:1). As Meylahn (2004:568) submits, “narrative thinking responds to numerous of the challenges that postmodernism raises.”

Insofar as human acts and identity are only intelligible in narrative form, as Meylahn (2004:568) further adds, “...narrative seems to accommodate the postmodern understanding of ontology, subjectivity and agency. It also enables new doors for postmodern understanding of epistemology”.<sup>77</sup> Of course, narrative orientation does not provide all the answers, however, as Grenz (1993:72) contends, it does mark a helpful beginning point. “We must view theology in terms of its proper context within the narrative of God’s action in history. This means that our theological task can be properly pursued only from the vantage point of the faith community in which the theologian stands” (1993:72). As such, our propositional claim should be rightly

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<sup>76</sup> It is important to note the approach posited by Healy, J. and Sybertz, D. 1996. *Towards an African Narrative Theology*. Maryknoll: Orbis. Constructed from the dual sources of African human experience and Christian tradition, they first based theology on stories, myths, proverbs, sayings, and riddles to articulate a narrative theology, which involves local African Christian communities. Though their intention was not to posit a coherent systematized African Narrative theology, yet, in our present understanding, they present a fascinating work – a unique attempt at an Afro-centric Theology.

<sup>77</sup> We are still growing in our understanding of a narrative approach to systematic theology. For insight on how narrative makes truth claims see Knight III, Henry H. 1997. *A Future for Truth*. Nashville: Abingdon. (109-116). Also, our use of Narrative theology here refers mainly to the popular approach as opposed to any specific work by post-liberal theologians. Space will not permit any in-depth discussion or comparison of Narrative and Propositional Systematic theology. Our modest intention here is primarily to ask in the light of postmodernism and the associated theological implications as the emerging church posit, what is the appropriate theological framework for our understanding of being the people of God in contemporary times. In making this enquiry, we highlight the need for more intentional constructs on the promise of narratives for the theological construct in contemporary times.



understood within the context of the narrative testimony of the revealed truth of the story of the Triune God in order for us to reclaim the more profound community outlook in which the biblical people of God are rooted.

### 3.3.2 Contextualization - Inculturation - Globalization

Another key point of discourse we can derive from the emerging church conversation in their quest for a contemporary incarnational, context-focus, context-informed ecclesial expression, is the dynamic relationship between contextualization and globalization. How do we, in our theological endeavours keep and reflect the identity of a particular culture without resulting to nativism and chauvinism in an increasingly globalized interdependent world? Put differently, how are we to articulate a context-sensitive theology and ecclesiology (e.g. Afro-centric ecclesial identity), while also remaining faithful and authentic members of the Church universal in an increasingly interconnected, interdependent world?

As we have already highlighted, postmodernism now entails not only a philosophical-intellectual worldview, but also a historical, socio-cultural and theological dimension, which has far reaching global implications and challenge. Amongst others things, it has encouraged emphasis on local expressions as opposed to universal foundation, thereby making the task of doing context-specific theology within the global village more complex, to say the least. The dialogue around globalization and contextualization is in itself another research enterprise, which is not our focus in this research. Our modest intention here is merely to highlight the fact that in the quest for a context-focus ecclesial identity and expression that is sensitive to the local narratives of a particular cultural context, we need to keep in careful perspective the dynamic relationship between a particular ecclesial community, the transcending power of the narrative of the cross, vis-à-vis the interconnectedness and interdependence of our universal human existence.

In our developing understanding, globalization is a concept we can categorize as an ambivalent discourse that is yet to be concretely defined. Having said that, advancement in Internet technology and associated web 2.0 advancement have brought the world to the fingertips of all people groups (a connected web community as it were). In the highly connected world of today, it is increasingly easier to recognize the otherness of the other while at the same time, share and enjoy the similarities of our socio-cultural existence. Our connected and shared experience within a global village, in a sense, points towards globalization. As Smit, Dirkie (2008:19-20) explains, Held et al in their definitive work (*Global Transformation-* 1999, Stanford University Press) posit: “globalization reflects a widespread perception that the world is rapidly being moulded into a shared social space by economic and technological forces and the development



in one region of the world can have profound consequences for the life chances of individuals or communities on the other side of the globe.” As Smit (2008:21) further explains:

Held (2000:15-21) observes that globalization has to do with four formal characteristics namely, stretched social relations, intensification of flows, increasing interpenetration and global infrastructure. Stretched social relations refer to the existence and increasing importance of cultural, economic and political networks of connection across the world. Regionalization, the increased interconnection between states that border on each other, is an important form of this, but there are also many others. Intensification of flows refers to the increased density of interaction across the globe, which implies that the impacts of events are elsewhere often felt much more strongly than before. Interpenetration refers to the extent to which apparently distant cultures and societies come face to face with each other at local level, creating increased experience of real diversity. Global infrastructures refer to the underlying formal and informal institutional arrangements that are required for globalized networks to operate (Held 2000:15-21).

Smit, in his article, notes that there are those who explain globalization in a positive light and others who see it as largely a negative phenomenon.<sup>78</sup> While globalization might well have positive and/or negative implications for Africa; in our present understanding, it seems clear enough that globalization aside from recognizing the diversities of cultures that exist in the world, also tends to affirm increasingly the fact that each culture has as much right to speak and be heard. Each culture can insist on their particular experience and language of expression within the connected global existence. This reality, as emphasized within the emerging church conversation, makes it even harder to do theology within a closed culture or to assume universal theological conclusions from a perceived dominant culture.

Affirming then, that a context-free theological formulation and ecclesial expression is impossible and biblically unwarranted; and in the light of the challenges globalization presents to the Church, evangelicals in keeping with these concerns, as Grenz observes, are increasingly adopting a contextualized theology and ecclesial understanding. According to Grenz and Franke (2001:155-156), evangelicals welcome contextualisation as a theological method and as a way of overcoming the ahistorical nature of conservative theologies that focuses on the transcultural nature of doctrinal construction and fail to take seriously the social context of the theological task and the historicity of all theological reflection.<sup>79</sup> While evangelicals see the importance of contextualization, they are however according to Grenz (1993: 72), too “easily trapped in the view of propositional revelation that they simply equate the divine self-disclosure with the

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<sup>78</sup> For a brief, yet good introductory overview of the ambivalent response to globalisation see Smit, Dirkie 2008. “Globalisation: An Orientation” In *The Humanisation of Globalisation: South African & German Perspectives*. Le Bruyns, Clint and Ulshöfer, Gotlind (eds). Frankfurt: Haag and Herehen. The book is actually a good starting point for understanding the macro-situation of globalization as it relates to cultural, political and economic challenges in the South African and German context, from a theological perspective.

<sup>79</sup> The call for contextualization was a result of the global situation of the church and developments in missionary movement. According to Grenz, a recurring theme among missiologists is the importance of the inculturation process with the view towards culture, rather than from a perspective of assuming the gospel as a transcultural given. See Kraft, Charles 1979. *Christianity in Culture*. Maryknoll: Orbis.

Bible, and that propounds an understanding of how the Bible in its canonical form came into existence, which in a sense are no longer viable.” Grenz bemoans the evangelical tendencies to carry on the enterprise of biblical summarization, with only a slight nod to the necessity of rephrasing theological propositions in contemporary context.<sup>80</sup> The contextualisation method suggests a parallel model for theological formulation and takes seriously the social context and historicity of all theological reflection (Grenz and Franke 2001:155-56). As Majawa (2005:54) explains, contextualisation replaces indigenization, which was earlier used to suggest a way of responding to the Christian gospel in terms of local cultures. Contextualisation was introduced to counteract the tradition-oriented and one-sided tendencies of indigenization. Thus, “Contextualisation includes what is implied in indigenization, but also takes into account the social, political, and technological changes at the historical moment of nations in the developing world” (Majawa 2005: 54).<sup>81</sup> Gehman (1983:27) defines theological contextualisation as that “dynamic process whereby the people of God living in a community and interacting with believers throughout time and space, under the illuminating guidance of the Holy Spirit, proclaim in their own language and thought-forms the Word of God that God has spoken to them in their own context through the study of Scripture.”

In African theological discourse, however, the term inculturation is widely used when discussing contextualisation. While, as Majawa (2005:55) notes, “Contextualisation and inculturation are not exactly identical; the two overlap at points and supplement each other. Neither of the concepts is entirely satisfactory and each has its limitations.” For our purposes however, we shall use the terms contextualisation and inculturation interchangeably.<sup>82</sup> Similar to the ECM, the dialogue around inculturation within African theological discourse has also taken an orthopraxis turn (implying the unity of correct thinking and proper action). Thus,

Inculturation is the incarnation of Christian life and the Christian message in a particular cultural context, in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the particular context in question (this alone will be no more than a superficial adaptation). It also becomes a principle that animates, directs, and unifies culture, transforming and bringing about a new creation (Majawa 2005:60).

Above, we alluded to Kato’s famous statement “Let African Christians be Christian Africans”. Indeed, the task of theological inculturation is today a significant part of African theological reflection. As Healy et al (1996: 20) assert:

The encounter of African culture with Christianity brings newness, freshness, originality, and difference, like a spice that brings a new taste of food. In one way, it is the same

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<sup>80</sup> For more on Grenz’s perspective here see Grenz, Stanley 1993. *Revisoning Evangelical Theology*. Downers Grove: IVP. (109-136).

<sup>81</sup> For more understanding of approaches to contextualisation see Bevans, Stephen 1992. *Models of Contextual Theology*. New York: Orbis.

<sup>82</sup> Also see Schreiter, Robert 1994. “Inculturation of Faith or Identification with culture?” In *Christianity and Cultures: A Mutual Enrichment*. Greinacher, Norbert & Mette, Norbert (eds). London: SCM.

food (core Christianity), but it tastes very different. Deep African values, such as community, hospitality, the living dead, patient endurance in adversity and holistic healing bring something new and truly enrich world Christianity and world Church.

Healy (1996:20) et al further assert,

Genuine inculturation goes far beyond translation and adaptation models of contextualisation to get to the heart and soul of African people. Through a deeper inculturation, people are challenged to discover the richness of African Christianity and to share this with other people and cultures in the world church.

Contextualisation or inculturation as Majawa (2005:57) observes, starts from a given context and its methodology is primarily inductive. In some ways, it contrasts the propositional deductive method of traditional systematic theology. While it is true, as Majawa (2005:61) notes, that the inculturation process also involves some level of pre-understanding, it nevertheless takes the context ever more seriously than doing theology only by the deductive method. As Majawa asserts, "Contextualisation need not be an intellectual activity with a subject-object split. It may lead to solidarity with people, even struggling together with the poor, ignorant and oppressed (liberation); but it is not mere social activism. Contextualisation or inculturation involves a holistic mode of consciousness infused by the Spirit of God." In many respects, ecclesial inculturation may well enhance the Scriptural message of unity in diversity within the one body of Christ, thereby enriching and liberating all cultures within the Church universal in the one God, and enabling the manifold expressions ecclesial may take in various contexts by the same Spirit. Some evangelicals have however argued that ecclesial contextualisation poses a danger to realizing the universality of the Church. To be sure, if we view the universal Church as something abstract (i.e. if we take unity to mean uniformity and if we attribute authenticity and loyalty to those who conform to a particular cultural ecclesia expression), then the argument may be valid (Majawa 2005:115-116).

On the contrary however, and as the ongoing ECM conversation suggests, universality may be better achieved through particularities and localization, unity in diversity and authenticity through freedom and originality. We will probably do well to acknowledge in our ecclesiological task that the Church could be envisioned as one and many, holy and charismatic, universal and local, apostolic and prophetic. This, in our present understanding, may enable space to begin to explore more intentionally the theological framework that will inform Afro-centric ecclesial expressions. While the narrative of the cross is universal and eternal, transcending space and time, our encounter with the Triune God as revealed in Scripture, has always been somewhat particular and specific, local and temporal, concrete and historical. The universality of the Church is perhaps better helped by incarnating the mystery of the cross and reality of the

Church in the community existence of people.<sup>83</sup> Furthermore, we also note that all ecclesial expressions should be sensitive to its context. Universality and unity are fulfilled in the one Spirit that is present in all places and by one faith in Christ. In present understanding and in anticipation of chapter five, we submit, African 'theologia ecclesia' will be both particular (local) and universal (Global). Our diverse contextual ecclesial expressions will always point to our union in Christ. In the light of the above we must ask, what then is the relationship between globalization and contextualization. Carson helps our understanding here. As Carson (1996:541) observes, the relationship is exceedingly complex. He notes that the two are somewhat at odds. "Contextualization from a world perspective becomes essential because of the inevitability of globalization...." In other words, "the pressures we face from globalization have the odd effect of making people in defined cultures think more clearly about their own context as the place where they do theology. On the other hand, the perception that inevitably people do theology from within a particular culture and that there are many cultures, contributes to an assessment of globalization" (Carson 1996: 541-542).

The observation brings the following questions to the fore. Is contextualization or inculturation enough to provide a theological framework for contextual ecclesial expressions? In the quest for ecclesial inculturation, how should we respond to the potential toward radical cultural accommodation? How do we interpret and articulate the truth of Scripture within different cultural expressions and practices. How do we respond Scripturally to the danger of theological and ecclesial fragmentation and relativism? These and other similar questions are not easy to answer. African theologians like Charles Nyamiti, John Mbiti, Kwame Bediako, Bolaji Idowu have given these issues tremendous attention in their theological work. They provide us with helpful points of reference. We will however also do well to allow space for the Holy Spirit to lead, teach and inspire us as we seek to be a contextual ecclesial community in a globalized world. In chapter four, we shall engage Grenz's postmodern informed, narrative leaning, communitarian framework, wherein he posits a helpful point of departure. For the moment, Carson's counsel is also helpful here. Carson (1996:552) asserts,

Listening to diverse cultures today can be an entirely salutary experience, when it is coupled with a profound desire to understand and obey what God has disclosed in Scripture and supremely in Jesus Christ. Globalization exposes us to a kind of instant history. Instead of appealing to principles of contextualization to justify the assumption that every interpretation is as good as every other interpretation, we will recognize that not all of God's truth is vouchsafed to one particular interpretative community. The result will be that we will be eager to learn from one another, to correct and to be corrected by one another, provided only that there is a principled submission to God's gracious self-disclosure in Christ and in the Scriptures. The truth may be one, but it sounds less like a single wavering note than like a symphony. The result could foster synergy in mission. Far from trying to gag God by relativizing all He has said, an informed

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<sup>83</sup> For more on the relationship between the particularity and universality of the Church see Montgomery R. 2001. *The Complementarity of the Particularity and the Universality of the Church*. Ottawa: Claims Christian Press. Montgomery informs our understanding here.

grasp of the diversities of cultures will sharpen our proclamation. There will also be mutual enrichment in our grasp of the mind of God, and wonderful opportunities to transcend the barriers that bigotry erects... Such action will not destroy us; it will purify and enrich us as part of God's great family."

### 3.3.3 Pluralism, Religions and the finality of Christ

Another challenge we will also have to respond to in developing a postmodern post-colonial sensitive Afro-centric ecclesial expression is determining exactly the theological construct that would respond to an increasingly pluralistic society in such a way that we keep faithfully the biblical proclamation of Christ as the way, truth and life. What will be our response to the possibility of theological pluralism? As Grenz (2000:249) observes, "theological reflection today is done in a context that increasingly chastens rationality and involves a shift from realist to a constructionist view of truth and rejection of the meta-narratives in favour of local narratives." "A far reaching result of the sensitivity to local nature of all narratives is the cultural pluralism indicative of the postmodern ethos." Globalization has enabled the understanding that humans even though citizens of one planet, live within a plurality of communities, "each of which gives shape to the identities of its participants" (Grenz 2000:249). Petersen (1994:220) sums this up aptly in asserting:

Pluralism is a given fact of political, cultural, theological and religious life. It is not merely a surface phenomenon that can somehow be subsumed under a ground of account of the whole. It is radical and irreducible. It calls for great sensitivity, for putting aside preconceived notions of the other and of oneself. It means that easy reduction of Otherness to our own comfortable categories must be resisted as imperialistic and authoritarian. It implies the ethical response of dialogue and conversation.

Globalisation has ramifications for our understanding of and approach to the claim of other religions in relation to salvation, (which is the event that initiate us into the body of Christ and as members of the community of Faith), the final destiny of all people and the finality of Christ in fulfilling God's coming kingdom. Traditionally, evangelicals have approached other religions with either suspicion or outright denial of their value. Belief in the singular authority of Scripture, insistence on the uniqueness of Christ and the conviction regarding only two destinies for people are some of the obvious reasons for our evangelical position. As Grenz notes, the question as to eternal hope and destiny of adherents of other religions have been a key bone of contention in theological discourse. Generally, there are three main views, namely: exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. As Grenz observes, "Carson's definition of the three terms reveals the orientation toward the question of eternal destiny that is generally linked to this threefold categorization." Carson (1996:278 -79) writes:

Exclusivism is the view that only those who place their faith in Christ of the Bible will be saved. Inclusivism is the view that all who are saved are saved on the account of the person and work of Jesus, but the conscious faith in Jesus Christ is not absolutely necessary: some may be saved by him who have never heard of him, for they may respond positively to the light they have received. Pluralism is the view that all religions

have the same moral and spiritual value and offer the same potential for achieving salvation, however salvation be construed.

As Grenz (2000:252) asserts, “at the foundation of the exclusivist position is the assumption that the biblical trajectory since Pentecost is focused on the church, as the sole vehicle of God’s saving work in history.” Therefore, exclusivist argues that there is indeed no salvation outside the Church and other religions have no role in the divine programme of effecting salvation. According to Grenz (2000:253ff), the Lausanne statement reflects the main theological themes that lie at the foundation of evangelical exclusivism. While the Lausanne statement acknowledged general revelation (i.e. all humans can have a sense of God from nature, their consciences and reason), evangelicals however maintain that Christ is the only atoning provision for the salvation of the world. As such, evangelicals acknowledge that general revelation is not sufficient for salvation. Humans have no hope of salvation except by special revelation. Thus, placing Scripture as the norming norm.

Inclusivists on the other hand, are willing to affirm the possibility of salvation for non-Christians. They affirm the possibility that those who do not encounter the gospel in this life may do so at or beyond death. According to Grenz, most inclusivists argue that salvation is not dependent on explicit faith in Christ. Rather, salvation can also arise through personal commitment to the God who saves through the work of Jesus Christ. Hence, those who never hear the gospel may nevertheless enjoy eternal life, if they respond in faith to the revelation they do have. Irrespective of their differing views, proponents remain committed to the unique veracity of the Christian vision of salvation and to the finality of Jesus Christ in procuring salvation. Proponents to a reasonable extent, favour dialogue with other religions (Grenz 2000:262). Other scholars see the inclusivist approach as insufficient. “In their estimation, it retains the imperialistic overtones of exclusivism.”<sup>84</sup>

To that end, some scholars are advocating for a move beyond inclusivism to pluralism and an acknowledgment of the essential truth status of all religions (Grenz 2000:263). As Grenz explains, they argue that the proclamation of the importance of Christ as a universal truth for all religions does not necessitate a negation of the importance of universal truth in other religions. They see each religion as a possible valid means toward the one ultimate goal (Grenz 2000:263). Grenz notes that advocates are quick to dispel the common stereotype that equates pluralism with relativism. “To embrace the relativity of all truth-claims,” they argue, “does not preclude commitment to a particular statement of truth. Pluralists seek to move for a Church-centred to a God-centred model of the universe of faiths” (Hick 1973:131). In our present

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<sup>84</sup> Chester Gillis (1996) expounds on this charge in his article, “Evangelical Inclusivism: Progress or Betrayal?” *Evangelical Quarterly* 68, 2 (April 148).



conviction, we wonder if such a move is faithful enough to the Scripture and is sufficient for articulating the relationship between Christ, His Church and world religions. Should a thorough inter-religious dialogue involve the necessity of moving away from a Christ-centric conviction of faith?

To be sure, we cannot view these positions as nicely defined positions with clear boundaries. It is indeed a complex discussion and as such, each position has different, similar and overlapping positions, which is outside our focus in this thesis.<sup>85</sup> The debate as to whether the hope of eternal life can be extended beyond the borders of the ecclesia of the Triune God and the nature of relationship between the ecclesial community and other religions continues to remain a key point of discussion and is likely to remain so. Our modest aim here, is simply to note that in developing an evangelical Afro-centric ecclesial expressions, we would have to respond comprehensively and dynamically, with renewed theological coherence and biblical grounding, to the challenge of world religions that has been made even more obvious by postmodernism, post-colonialism and globalization. The Muslim-Christian clash in countries like Nigeria, Sudan and Egypt to mention a few and the increased tensions in the Middle East, Islamophobia in the West, all testifies to the intensity and seriousness of this challenge. Therefore, we must in articulating an Afro-centric ecclesial understanding, reflects on these challenges afresh under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Petersen (1994:227) is perhaps apt in asserting:

The nature of our pluralistic world means the end of any totalising narratives of truth, knowledge or even religion. What confronts us is the ethical, epistemological and practical challenge of dialogue with the other; a dialogue, which takes our self and the other seriously, and which binds us together in the solidarity of mutual struggle for human freedom, dignity and understanding.

For instance, as Petersen (1994:223) observes, “one of the footnotes to the end of the second edition of the *Kairos Document* states: “What is said here of Christianity and the Church could be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to other faiths and other religions in South Africa; but this document is addressed to all who bear the name Christian.” Petersen sees this brief concession to the fact of religious pluralism as not so sufficient an answer to the challenge levelled by Muslim theologian, Faried Esack.<sup>86</sup> Whatever our response to Esack’s criticism may be, Esack, as Petersen observes, highlights a challenge that needs to be a key part of African Christian

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<sup>85</sup> For more insight see Netland, Harold 1991. *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the question of Truth*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, Heim, Mark 1995. *Salvation: Truth and Difference in Religion*. Maryknoll: Orbis, Surin, Kenneth 1983. “Revelation, Salvation, the Uniqueness of Christ and Other Religions”. *Religious Studies* 19, 3.

<sup>86</sup> Esack notes, “The Kairos theologians have not understood the universal nature of what they have produced and so they offer it only to Christians. Their inability to do so does not stem from a Christian humility or a fear that adherents of other faiths may reject it. It comes from a deep-rooted Christian (European) arrogance that leads to ignorance of other faiths and indifference to the possible contribution of their adherents to the creation of a just society.” See Esack F. “A Muslim Perspective on the Kairos Document” In Newsletter of the World Conference on Religions and Peace, South African Chapter, 3.1 (1986), p. 2 as cited in Petersen, R 1994. “Theological and Religious Pluralism”, in *Doing Theology in Context: A South African Perspective*. De Gruchy et al (eds). Cape Town: David Philip.



theological reflections. Karkkainen (2004) in his book, *The doctrine of the Trinity in Christian Theology and Religious Pluralism*, posits some ways evangelicals everywhere may begin to advance the quest for a theology of religions. Taking his point of departure from pneumatology, he sought to develop what he calls the Trinitarian theology of religions. First, Karkkainen emphasizes the criteriological role of the Trinity in helping to distinguish the Triune God among other gods. Then he stresses the critical relation of the Trinity to Christology, noting that, while one does not necessarily need to be exclusivist in the question of the extent of salvation, only a high Christology makes the view of God as Trinity possible. Third, he relates the Trinity to history (incarnation, cross, resurrection) and resists the kinds of approaches divorced from historical contours. Fourth, the Trinity safeguards an integral relationship between the Spirit, Church, and the kingdom of God, noting that the presence of God through the Spirit in the World is Trinitarian. Christians, while sent to proclaim the good news of the cross and invite people of other religions to become members in the ecclesia community of the Triune God, are both enriched and challenged by the encounter with the other. This makes them humble disciples. Karkkainen's perspective may be a promising framework for engaging world religions in our quest for a postmodern, post-colonial sensitive theology and ecclesiology.

### **3.4 Setting the puzzle**

In our developing understanding and as our discourse here suggests, to the end that evangelical ecclesiology must reflect the fact that all theological reflections and formulations are contextual, we perhaps need to situate our ecclesial understanding within a coherent theological framework that allows for a reformative evangelical ecclesiology identity and expression that is biblically faithful, theologically coherent, and socio-culturally sensitive. In the light of our discourse above and in our present understanding, we find Stanley Grenz's nuanced proposal for a re-visioned evangelical theology and ecclesiology as a helpful point of departure. While Grenz has received ample criticism for his proposed paradigmatic approach, still we find his proposal one that should be further explored. Grenz's proposal may enable a broader and grander theological exploration that is thorough and integrative as Leanne Van Dyk (2007:132) suggests. Furthermore, if we constructively put Grenz's proposal in conversation with African theological reflections, his proposal may provide a wider framework for mapping and shaping an Afro-centric theological-ecclesiology. Our task in the next chapter is to engage Grenz's proposed framework. We shall also attempt to submit Grenz to the critical pens and lens of those who critique his perspective and put his nuanced perspective in dialogue with the community of African theologians.

## Chapter Four

### Theological Construct and the Faith Community

#### 4. Theology and Ecclesia: Towards a nuanced framework

Our task in this chapter is to engage Grenz's proposed theological framework, which in our present understanding may allow for a more context sensitive, theologically coherent and biblically faithful ecclesial identity and expression in the light of contemporary realities. Grenz (2000:107) proposes a "theological method that holds promise for engaging theologically with the postmodern situation and for appropriating critically, the central postmodern sensitivities, so as to assist the Church in being the community of Christ within and in witness to a postmodern context." This, as we have discussed so far, is the contemporary challenge in Euro-American contexts when viewed from the ECM's perspective. As we have argued in the last chapter, this is also beginning to inform some aspects of post-colonial African theological discourse and ecclesial identity.<sup>87</sup> In our present understanding, we posit that the following are some of the emergent's quest in their engagement with the realities of contemporary contexts (i.e. postmodern, post-colonial sensitivities):

- A chastened, realistic and humble hermeneutic that recognizes the limitations of Enlightenment-modernist informed theological reflections and formulations.
- A contemporary yet history informed re-contextualization of the core evangelical theological terminologies and ecclesiological leanings, which includes our understanding of doctrinal affirmation, salvation, justification, ecclesia participation, heaven and hell.
- A recovery of biblical narrative for the community of God that goes beyond reasoned propositional articulation of faith, but also takes seriously our stories and transforming experience of God as reflected in our dynamic relationship with the Triune God and one another.
- An understanding of defining narrative for the ecclesial of God that reaches back to the calling of Abraham and understands the story of Jesus as an intrinsic part of Israel's history.
- A theology that takes orthopraxy more seriously (without undermining the significance of right orthodoxy), so that the community of Christ is intentionally missional, building authentic, contagious disciples, thereby affirming the gospel is not only proclaimed, but also practiced.
- A willingness to explore a nuanced theological and ecclesiological vision, to re-examine and restate the theological formulations of the Euro-American context in the light of the

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<sup>87</sup> If as we have argued in the last chapter we take postmodernism as an ally of post-colonialism

postmodern and post-colonial challenges, thereby allowing for the manifold expression ecclesial practices may take in various cultural contexts under the one God, the one Christ and the one Spirit.

- A prophetic insight into the current global human realities, including better grasp of the challenge and implication of emerging post-Christendom worldview, without losing sight of the present and the past.
- A generous orthodoxy, an emerging contextual ecclesiology, and a humble hermeneutics.

As noted in chapter two, the ECM conversation is still emerging. We noted that the challenge for the emergents is to live up its claim to be continuous with the Church history and articulate a more coherent theology of the Church. While one can appreciate the emergents quest for an ongoing intentionality shaped less by an anxiety about finalizing statements than it is by an eager attention to the dynamics of the Spirit's presence, yet there is great danger in the ECM description of itself by what it is not. Furthermore, while we find definite strengths in emergents developing ecclesiological understanding, there are areas of weakness emergents still have to engage. A lot still needs to be done by emergents in their quest for a nuanced theological framework that informs a more context sensitive understanding and articulation of our being and becoming the Church of the Triune God in response to changing paradigms and cultural contexts.

Having said that, we find pointers for the future in the emergents' commitment to developing an intentional postmodern theology. This quest has resulted in a dynamic and consistent attention to an incarnational, missional, communitarian and sacramental ecclesial identity and expressions. An ecclesial understanding that recognizes the significance of re-contextualizing the Gospel, in different cultures, in a particular place and time. As it were, it is a move, to a more Trinitarian, narrative shaped, community based, context sensitive ecclesial understanding. This theological intentionality as we have highlighted above may well be the ECM's most important strength. In our present understanding as we stated in chapter two, there is something redemptive, refreshing and enriching in the ECM conversation. It is a commitment to a refreshing pursuit of God and an invitation to a vibrant and sometimes difficult conversation. The ECMs influence continues to grow around the World and in Africa. It is taking different directions and understandings as it engages different contexts and cultures, while still keeping to some of the main points highlighted above. The space for innovation and difference it advocates is refreshing to some and concerning for others. In our present understanding, while we may not agree with all the answers emergents are providing, we find the questions they are engaging very relevant and crucial, especially when viewed vis-à-vis the historical and contemporary African theological enterprise and contextual ecclesiological quest. These questions and concerns are important and relevant and we need to continue to intentionally

engage them in developing contextual Afro-centric ecclesial expressions. Our quest is for a more promising theological framework for the community of the Triune God that takes seriously the emerging postmodern sensitivities and postcolonial realities. In our present understanding, it is worth engaging Stanley Grenz's instructive work on these issues. Some evangelical scholars have portrayed Grenz as emergent instructive theologian because of his positive response to the emerging postmodern situation. Grenz posits a promising proposal that could perhaps point us in the right direction and at the same time give somewhat more coherent construct to the ECM conversation (i.e. a promising and helpful balance between the emergent developing theology and ecclesial understanding and the mainstream evangelical position).<sup>88</sup>

In his work co-authored with John Franke (*Beyond Foundationalism* 2001), Grenz posits a theological construct that views theology as arising out of the interplay of the Spirit, (which speaks authoritatively through the biblical text); tradition, (which provides a historical interpretative framework); and culture, (which gives context to constructive theological reflection). Such an evangelical theology, Grenz asserts, will result in a theology that is Trinitarian, communitarian and which holds to an eternal perspective (eschatological).<sup>89</sup> It is in the light of this understanding that we are presently convinced that Grenz's proposal might also offer some promise to the quest for a theological framework that enables space for post-colonial Afro-centric ecclesial expressions.

#### 4.1 Theological Reflections in Times of Transition

Most scholars today will agree with Grenz and Franke (2001:3) who posit that "theology is in a time of transition and may be ferment because of the collapse of the categories and paradigms of the modern world as influenced by the Enlightenment rationalism." This is implying that this is something foreign to the Christian history and theological trajectory.<sup>90</sup> The contemporary situation seems very similar to other periods of Church history when cultural upheaval led to rethinking of key theological positions. Theologian past and present continues to reflect on the appropriate framework that enables a broader understanding and articulation of the truth claims of the Bible as the Revelation of God. Christian theological discourse continues to seek better

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<sup>88</sup> We do not here infer that the latter was Grenz's intention.

<sup>89</sup> In developing a nuanced theological framework, Grenz (and Franke) engage the instructive works Platinga, Frei, Pannenberg and Lindbeck, amongst others. The writer's objective in this chapter is to attempt a summary of Grenz's nuanced framework and in more specific terms, to understand how this framework informs ecclesial understanding in emerging postmodern times. Therefore, while the writer has consulted a number of these authors, the writer refers to their works only to the extent to which Grenz and Franke engage them in developing a nuanced theological ecclesiology.

<sup>90</sup> The Christian faith took shape in the context of numerous cultural transitions; from an initially Hebraic setting to the Hellenistic world and then the Greco-Roman culture. Christianity transitioned from the Franco-Germanic context to the world of medieval feudalism to the Renaissance. It took another expression from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment; from the developing world to the colonized world and now in complex existential realities of modern, postmodern and post-colonial contexts.

contextual way of explaining the interplay of the divine with humanity and the eschatological promise of fellowship with the Triune God made possible by the Spirit (Grenz & Franke 2001:4). Throughout Church history, as Grenz and Franke (2001:3) observe:

Christian theology has shown itself to be remarkably adaptable in its task of assisting the Church in extending and establishing the message of the gospel in wide variety of context. At the same time, theological history also provides numerous examples of the inappropriate accommodation of Christian faith to various ideologies and cultural forms. This chequered past confirms the vitality of Christian theology while warning of the dangers of too closely associating it with any particular form of cultural expression.

Evangelicals, as we have now established, are increasingly seeking an appropriate response to the emerging postmodern phenomenon. In Grenz's view, "the postmodern ethos is on the one hand modern" (i.e. it retains the modern). Instead of a move back to the pre-modern era, the postmodern outlook retains aspects of the "Enlightenment, especially its elevation of sceptical rationality." On the other hand, the postmodern paradigm, as Grenz (2000:108) argues, is *postmodern*; it sees some "inherent dangers in the very sceptical rationality it accepts."<sup>91</sup> Thus, as Grenz (2000:108) contends, "postmodernism seeks to live in a realm of chastened rationality."

#### 4.1.1 The Dimension of Postmodern Chastened Rationality

As Grenz (1996:168) posits, "a dimension of this chastened rationality is the move from meta-narratives to local narratives, from individualistic to post individualistic paradigm." Grenz (1999: 168), as we have noted in the previous chapter, sees the elevation of the individual as one of the hallmarks of the modern era. While we must not overlook the biblical emphasis on the relationship God has with each person and the responsibility of the Church to share the good news to each individual. Grenz (1996:168) however, finds problematic, the evangelical tendency to overly heed to radical individualism (a modernist influence), wherein we make the message of the cross appear as though God saves in isolation. Grenz contends that an individual's knowledge and discovery of truth is dependent on the community's construction of reality (i.e. a person comes to knowledge by way of a cognitive framework within the context of community in which he/she participates). Therefore, the essence of our personal stories is rooted in the narrative of the community in which we participate.<sup>92</sup> Informed by the postmodern challenge to modernism,

<sup>91</sup> Grenz and Franke (2001) in their book, *Beyond Foundationalism* see no value in the purely negative response to postmodernism by some evangelicals. At the heart of this critique is the identification of postmodern thought with deconstructive relativism. For Grenz and Franke the wholesale identification of postmodernism with radical relativism is simply too narrow to do full justice to the phenomenon. As Grenz and Franke explained, while French structuralists like Derrida, Foucault and Lyotard are associated with postmodern thought and are committed to the project of deconstruction, the equation of postmodernity with these thinkers is far too restrictive. As Grenz and Franke argue, Hans Frei and Lindbeck amongst others for instance, are in some way indebted to aspects of postmodern theory. Grenz and Franke's point here is basically to state that it is inadequate to dismiss postmodern concerns based on the thought of only a limited number of proponents or one particular strand of postmodern thought.

<sup>92</sup> The South African ideal of ubuntu (a person is a person because of another person) readily comes to mind here. So also is the African emphasis on community and participation. See Goba, Bonganjalo "Corporate Personality: Ancient Israel and African". *BTS* (65-77).

Grenz (1996:167-168) affirms the understanding that “the community mediates to its members a transcendent story that includes traditions of virtue, common good and ultimate meaning.”<sup>93</sup> Thus, the central feature of Grenz’s proposed framework is the theological significance of incorporating a communitarian understanding in the contemporary theological construct. According to Grenz, this will enable us to develop more context sensitive ecclesial identities and expressions. Indeed, while we are saved as individuals, we are saved together and to be together. Thus, we should reflect the social Trinity as expounded by the biblical writers.<sup>94</sup> Another dimension of the chastened rationality as Grenz posits, is the move from rationalistic to post-rationalistic paradigm (Grenz 1996:167). As Grenz (1996:169) explains, while in our contemporary theological reflections and formulations, we must not give up the modern emphasis on reason; “the emerging postmodern paradigm reminds us that we are not simply rational” (i.e. ‘our humanity does not consist only of cognitive dimension’).

As Grenz (1996:17) explains, “there are dimensions of reality that rational scientific method must not touch. Theology must always give place for ‘mystery’ as a reminder that God and everything in the world go beyond human rationality.” Thus, Grenz argues that traditional evangelical theological reflection must move beyond modernistic articulation of truth as a matter of correct propositions, where we mainly state Christian truth as simply doctrinal statements. As Grenz (1996:47) contends, scientific method cannot achieve objective truth in an unbiased manner. Rather, our “human reflections and formulations will always be influenced by emotions, intuition, experiences, and our contextual community.” Furthermore, Grenz (1996:171) notes that both knowledge and belief are socially and linguistically constituted (i.e. experience and interpretative concepts are reciprocally related). Theologically, the implication is that there is a reciprocal relationship between doctrinal propositions and our transformative experience of God. Therefore, not only are propositions used to express our experiences, they also facilitate those experiences. This in Grenz’s perspective, (which seem to agree with the emergents’ perspective), highlights the promise of a narrative approach to theology, (while not providing all the answers), may have for our systematic theological construct and ecclesial

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<sup>93</sup> Simplifying to the extreme, Grenz (1996:167-168) sees “postmodernism as incredulity towards meta-narratives, the loss of meta-narratives and the advent of local narratives.” This suggests that the narrative in emerging postmodern times is local rather than universal. And since one community’s construction of reality may differ from the other, we need to celebrate diversity without necessarily throwing out our unity (i.e. allowing for the manifold expression the ecclesia of God may take in various contexts). See also Lyotard, Jean-Francois. 1984. *A report on Knowledge*. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press:34.

<sup>94</sup> As highlighted in chapter two, this understanding in part informs emergents contention that the Church must re-discover a gospel that is bigger than salvation of my individual soul and an understanding of ecclesial expression in which we does not exist for me. Emergents as Jones (2008:103-114) posits, are “seeking to avoid the danger of solo theology by intentionally placing themselves in the theological communities and the more diverse the better.” This also highlights emergents understating?understanding that “theology is a conversation, not only between my theological forbears, and me but also between me and those with whom I live.” As Jones (2008:103) further observes, Descartes might not have made the philosophical errors he did had he put himself in community with other people who could have challenged his assumptions like his overconfidence is his own fallible intellect.

visioning in the light of emerging postmodern (and post-colonial) contexts.<sup>95</sup> A further dimension of Grenz's argued chastened rationality is what he sees as the rejection of epistemological foundationalism (i.e. a move from foundationalist to post-foundationalist theology). According to Grenz (2000:110), foundationalism is the main bedrock of Enlightenment rationalism. "The goal of the foundationalist agenda is the discovery of an approach to knowledge that will provide all rational human beings with absolute, incontestable certainty regarding the truthfulness of their beliefs." For the foundationalist according to Grenz (2000:110), "acquiring knowledge must rest on sure foundation in a manner similar to the construction of a building." The Enlightenment's epistemological foundations as Grenz (2000:110) further explains "consist of a set of incontestable beliefs, unassailable first principles based on which the pursuit of knowledge can begin. These sets of beliefs must in essence be universal, context-free, objective and discernible at least theoretically by any rational person."

In essence, as Grenz (2000:111) explains, the "foundationalist task is to establish an epistemological foundation for the construction of the human knowing by demonstrating the foundational beliefs on which knowledge rest." In which case, "human reasoning moves only in one direction, from bottom up, from basic beliefs or first principles to resultant conclusion." This conception of knowledge, as Grenz (2000:111) contends, came to "dominate theology as theologians sought to reshape theological structure in agreement to this rationalist approach." According to Grenz (2000:112), this foundationalist impulse, in part, created the theological division between liberals and evangelicals in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Liberals sought to construct a theology based purely on the foundation of human experience. Conservatives on the other hand, developed a foundationalist theological method that appealed to the inerrancy of the Bible, "the veracity of which was thought to be unimpeachable by human reason."<sup>96</sup> As Grenz (2000:112) contends, in emerging postmodern contexts, foundationalism no longer commands the wide acceptance it once enjoyed. In Grenz's (2000:112) view,

Its assertions of the objective, context-free, certain and universal knowledge are being extensively rejected. The emerging postmodern paradigm with its affirmation of local narratives over meta-narratives sees the modern quest for certainty and the vision of laying the foundations for our knowledge as impossible.

In our developing understanding, Grenz is apt in asserting that this argued demise of foundationalism carries far-reaching implications for theological reflections and ecclesiology.<sup>97</sup> For instance, if we are to juxtapose the quest for a post-colonial, multi-ethnic, Afro-centric

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<sup>95</sup> Refer to our discussion in chapter two and three.

<sup>96</sup> For a better understanding see Murphy, Nancey. 1996. *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*. Valley Forge: Trinity.

<sup>97</sup> For more on foundational epistemology and post-foundational Theology, see Grenz, Stanley 2000. *Renewing the Centre*.



ecclesial identity and expression as discussed in chapter three, with the postmodern theological and ecclesiological challenge from the vantage point of the emerging church movement, we are in our present understanding and among other things, left with the realization that Christian theology is in many ways a continuous contextual enterprise developed within, by and for the community of the Triune God. As Grenz (2000:112) submits, the emerging postmodern paradigm requires of us to develop a nuanced theological framework that enables an innovative space for context sensitive ecclesial expressions.

Having said that, Grenz (2000:112) notes that this acknowledgement also introduces a number of other challenges. Amongst others, we must enquire as to how the Bible that emerged in a particular ancient context exercises a normative function for culturally diverse incarnations of Christian theology? What is the value of past theological reflections and formulations for contemporary times? How should we relate the stories and reality of various contemporary communities to the biblical-narrative of God's sovereign saving grace in Christ by the Spirit? How should we in the light of the emerging postmodern and post-colonial paradigms, begin to develop local community sensitive, scripturally faithful and theologically coherent evangelical expressions? How does the demise of foundationalism shape the future of evangelical theological reflections and ecclesiological understanding? These questions amongst others have inspired participants in the emerging church movement and a host of African and Western evangelicals and have set them on the quest for an alternative epistemology that enables a nuanced perspective of the theological motifs that inform our being the ecclesial of the Triune God in contemporary times.

#### 4.1.2 From Foundationalism to Communitarianism

To further ground this nuanced theological framework, Grenz appealed to the instructive work of Pannenberg. According to Grenz and Franke (2001:43-45), at the heart of Pannenberg's coherentist theological method is the understanding of truth. Pannenberg as Grenz and Franke observe, contends that truth is essentially historical. Thus Pannenberg in Grenz & Franke's (2001:43-45) view holds to the classical Augustinian thinking that "all truth ultimately comes together in God, who is the reality that determines everything and the ground of the unity of truth." In Grenz and Franke's (2001:43-45) perspective, Pannenberg sees the goal of theology as the demonstration of the unity of truth in God (i.e. "bringing all human knowledge together in our affirmation of God"). As Grenz and Franke (2001:43-45) explain, because truth is historical, Pannenberg posits that the focal point of certitude can only be the eschatological future. Thus, until the eschaton "...truth by its very nature will always remain provisional; truth claims contestable and theological statements like all human assertions are hypotheses to be tested."<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> See Wolfhart Pannenberg's *Systematic Theology*. See also Grenz, Stanley 1990. *Reason for Hope: The Systematic Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg*. New York: Oxford.

Another theologian that provided insight for Grenz's nuanced theological framework in emerging postmodern times is Lindbeck George.<sup>99</sup> Lindbeck, as Grenz (2000:116) explains, posits a "cultural-linguistic approach as an alternative to the cognitive-propositionalist and the experiential-expressive understandings of doctrine." Lindbeck in developing his cultural-linguistic method, as Grenz and Franke observe, followed the coherentist path and incorporated insight from Ludwig Wittgenstein.<sup>100</sup> For Lindbeck as Grenz (2000:116) explains,

Doctrines are like rules of grammar and they constitute the rules of discourse of the believing community. Therefore, like grammar Church doctrines have a regulative function, serving as community authoritative rules of discourse, attitude and action." "Doctrines entail our conception of beliefs, Christian practices and lifestyle, they establish ground rules of the Christian thinking, speaking and living

As Grenz and Franke (2001:46) further write, Lindbeck's use of Wittgenstein has far-reaching implications for our concept of truth. For instance, as Grenz & Franke (2001:46) observe, if, as Lindbeck contends, "rules of grammar are routinely stated in the form of propositions; then, asking whether any one of them is objectively true or false involves fundamental misunderstanding of the type of proposition the rule is." In a sense therefore, as Grenz and Franke (2001:46) observe, "the rules of grammar are not meant to say anything true about a reality apart from the language they regulate. Each rule is only true in the context of the body of rules that govern the language to which the rules belong." As Grenz and Franke further argue, Lindbeck's understanding suggests that we can view doctrinal statements in a similar manner. If we take this perspective, as Grenz and Franke (2001:46) submit, doctrinal statements then do not necessarily make first order truth claims; they do not necessarily assert something objective about reality. Instead, "... like the rules of grammar, they are second order assertions (i.e. "church doctrines are primarily rules for speech about God, rather than actual assertions about God").

Thus, they only make 'intra-systematic' truth claims (i.e. they are "true primarily as parts of a total pattern of speaking, thinking, feeling and acting"). As Grenz and Franke (2001:46) explain, Lindbeck's theological perspective implies that "theology draws from the text to explore what it means to articulate and live out the community's vision within a specific time and place." For Grenz (2000:120), if we are to take the postmodern paradigm seriously and at the same time be solidly biblical, theological reflection must not proceed from enlightenment foundationalism.

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<sup>99</sup> For deeper understanding see Lindbeck, George 1984. *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Post-Liberal Age*. Philadelphia: Westminster.

<sup>100</sup> For Wittgenstein, as Grenz explains, meaning and truth are not directly related to an external world of fact that needs to be understood. Rather, they are internal functions of language and all utterance can be taken to be true within the context in which they are spoken. Language therefore "does not find its genesis in the Individual mind grasping a truth about the world and then expressing it in statements. Instead, language is a social phenomenon, and any statement acquires its meaning within the process of social interaction" (Grenz 2000:116). See also Wittgenstein, Ludwig 1953. *Philosophical investigation 1.65*. Trans. G.E.M. Anscombe. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Rather, in seeking to respond to the postmodern (and by inference, post-colonial)<sup>101</sup> challenge, Grenz contends that evangelicals can gain some insight from the non-foundational approach of Lindbeck and Pannenberg, without having to follow their conclusions to the letter. To achieve this (i.e. a midpoint between Lindbeck and Pannenberg), Grenz (2000:120) contends that the Reformed epistemology of proponents like Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff provides a helpful signpost and points the way forward to developing a non-foundational, context-sensitive, community-focus evangelical theology.<sup>102</sup> As Grenz (2000:120) explains, proponents of Reformed epistemology acknowledge the inevitability of our being situated in a particular community and the indispensable role our respective communities play in “shaping our conceptions of rationality, as well as the religious belief we deem basic and by which we test new claims.” According to Grenz (2000:120), proponents of Reformed epistemology deny categorically the validity of the foundationalist search for basic beliefs.<sup>103</sup> However, proponents reject the enlightenment foundationalist restriction that assigns belief to the realm of superstructure. Instead, as Grenz (2000:120) notes, proponents hold that “belief in God ought at times to be viewed as properly basic.” The believing community, thus, becomes the basic in Christian theology.

Further, as Grenz (2000:120) observes, proponents of Reformed epistemology admit the attendant loss of certitude inherent in their perspective (i.e. they acknowledge that “various communities may disagree as to the relevant set of paradigm instances of basic belief”). Thus, Grenz (2000:121) warns that we must not ignore the difficulty this acknowledgment possesses for any claim to universal truth. Yet, Grenz (2000:121) sees promise and hope in the communitarian turn inherent in Reformed epistemology because it situates theological reflection primarily within the believing community. To put it more succinctly, “non-foundationalist approaches see Christian theology as an activity of the community of God that gathers around Jesus the Christ, by the Spirit” (Grenz 2000:121).

#### 4.1.3 Evangelical Theology in Communitarian and Pragmatic Perspective

In our developing understanding, the core implication of Grenz’s communitarian perspective is that a particular believing Christian community becomes the matrix out of which theological formulation is developed (i.e. a particular Christian community forms the experience-facilitating interpretive framework). In his construct, Grenz is quick to observe that although in this

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<sup>101</sup> If we take postmodernism as an ally of post-colonialism as discussed in the previous chapter.

<sup>102</sup> See Plantinga, Alvin & Wolterstorff, Nicholas (eds) 1983. *Faith and Rationality*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.

<sup>103</sup> Grenz here argues that Reformed epistemology’s emphasis on believing community as basic for Christian theology is what makes it a seemingly weak brand of foundationalism and at the same time non-foundationalist and decidedly postmodern. See Plantinga, Alvin 1983. “Reason and Belief in God” In *Faith and Rationality*. Plantinga, Alvin & Wolterstorff, Nicholas (eds). Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.

perspective, theological reflection is developed from a particular community's experience, it must not be seen as a return to foundationalism as in Protestant liberalism. Grenz disagrees with the liberal project because it sought to determine a single, universal, foundational religious experience that lay beneath the plethora of religious experiences found in the various religious traditions (Grenz & Franke 2001:103ff). According to Grenz (2000:121), "liberalism fails to see that various religions mediate religious experiences that are categorically different to each other." As Grenz (2000:121) aptly asserts, the "experience of the Christian community is specific to it."

For Grenz (2000:121), the encounter with the God of the Bible by the Spirit, which is made possible by the power of the Cross of Christ, remains foundational to the Christian community. This transforming encounter with the Triune God is potentially universal (i.e. available to all who will believe). "This common transformational experience of the cross forms the identifying character of one's participation within the Christian community. A different experience will identify one as member of a different religious community." Furthermore, Grenz (2000:122) affirms Lindbeck's insight that religious experience does not precede interpretation as liberalism posits. Rather, Grenz notes that religious experience is dependent on a cognitive framework that sets forth a specifically religious experience of the world. Grenz (2000:122) however, goes a step further than Lindbeck. As Grenz (2000:122) asserts, there is no generic religious experience, but only tradition-specific religious experiences. For Grenz (2000:122), since "Scriptural narratives inform the community's interpretive framework that theology attempts to delineate, then the task of theology is both descriptive and prescriptive." Therefore, in Grenz's post-foundational theological perspective (not anti-foundational as some have argued), theological reflection entails "articulating in a systematic manner what ought to be the interpretive framework for the sake of the mission of the community of the Triune God in contemporary contexts."

Furthermore, Grenz (2000:123) does not see the cognitive interpretive framework that he argues is basic for theology as a given that precedes the theological enterprise. For Grenz (2000:123), it does not provide a sure foundation on which a theological construct can be built. To view it as such, according to Grenz (2000:123), would signal a return to foundationalism. Rather, in Grenz's perspective, an interpretive framework is clothed in any specific theological understanding. Christian theology, therefore, embodies a specific interpretive framework of conceptualizing the world holistically, in connection with the biblical view of God. Therefore, the systematic articulation of the Christian interpretive framework takes the form of integrated and prescriptive statements of Christian doctrine; a kind of coherentist theological method Pannenberg sought to achieve. For Grenz (2000:123) therefore, "Christian doctrine comprises of a web of belief or a mosaic."

This mosaic consist of a set of interconnected doctrines that together comprise what ought to be the specifically Christian way of “understanding the universe and of ourselves in connection with the God of the Bible” and the unfolding salvific narrative of God (Grenz 2000:123). As Grenz (2000:124) submits, our theological task should not only explicate the belief-mosaic, but should also demonstrate what Pannenberg termed “the explicative power of the Christian faith” by “indicating the interconnectedness of the set of doctrines and the value of the Christian worldview for illuminating human experience.” This being the case, theology then, is conversational. It is a conversation between the doctrinal mosaic and human experience, involving what Grenz sees as the “interplay, or perichoretic dance, of an ordered set of sources of insight” (Grenz 2000:124). It is a conversation in which a particular faith community, by explicating the meaning of the revealed word, their shared cultural values, symbols and language (through which they express their specific understanding of the world), “... seek to articulate what ought to be the Christian belief mosaic” (Grenz 2000:124).

## 4.2 Voices in the Theological Conversation

As Grenz and Franke (2000:46ff) emphatically note, this community based construct does not entail a theological conversation where anything goes. On the contrary, the conversation proceeds under the guidance or interplay of an ordered set of sources of insight. The theological structure must be supported by three norms of theology. These sources of insight (i.e. Bible, which is the primary voice in the theological conversation; Tradition, which is the hermeneutical trajectory of the theological conversation; and Culture, which forms the wider context of the theological conversation), constitute the voices in the theological conversation. We shall attempt a brief summary of Grenz and Franke’s nuanced instructive perspective.

### 4.2.1 The Primary voice in the theological conversation

The Bible as canonized by the Church is of primary importance in articulating the cognitive mosaic of the Christian faith. As evangelicals, we give prominence to the place of the Bible in theological reflections. In affirming this Reformation stance, Grenz (1993:93) notes “theologians must look first and above all to the kerygma as revealed in the Bible.” However, as Grenz (1993:93) contends, some evangelical thinkers take loyalty to the Bible to heights not necessarily intended by the Reformers. Influenced by the modernistic quest for foundationalist theology, Grenz contends that Luther’s principle of *Sola Scriptura* was deprived of its concern to affirm the living relationship between the Word and the Spirit. According to Grenz (1993:93; 2000:124), in a complex prolegomena to theology, “the bible was too readily transformed from a living text into the object of scholarly exegetical and systematizing prowess.” Grenz (1993:94) argues that the divine nature of Scripture vis-à-vis revelation need not be demonstrated in the prolegomenon to theology. For Grenz (1993:94), the nature of theology itself as a reflection on

the community's faith is "sufficient for our systematic theological enterprise." As Grenz (2005:125) contends, at the heart of the historical understanding of the Protestant principle of *Sola Scriptura* as attested to in the paradigmatic statement of the Westminster Confession is the concern to bring the Word and Spirit together in a living relationship (2000:125). To show how his nuanced approach to Scripture may be understood in post-foundational perspective, Grenz employs insights from contemporary speech-act theory. According to Grenz (2000:125), through the Scripture, the "Spirit performs the illocutionary act of addressing us." In keeping with the manifold diversity of Scriptural writings, the Holy Spirit speaks to us in several ways. For instance, 2 Tim 3: 16 tells us that through the Scriptures the Spirit teaches, instructs and reproveth. Through other Scriptures like the Psalms, the Spirit informs us how to voice our thoughts and emotions about God.

The goal or product of the Spirit's speaking, as Grenz explains, is to perform a perlocutionary act of creating an eschatological world that finds its cohesion in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17), which is the new ecclesial community of renewed persons. For Grenz (2000:125), the "Spirit through the Bible orients our present on the basis of our past in accordance with a vision of the future." Contemporary believers, by the Spirit's illocutionary act are thus able to ascertain the meaning of the historical text for their present context. In addition, by the Spirit's perlocutionary act, contemporary believers are drawn to participate in God's eschatological world (i.e. "open themselves and their present to the power of that future"). Therefore, theological reflections and formulations as Grenz (2000:125; 1993:94) submits, must be focused at helping the contemporary community of faith to "hear the Spirit's voice through the biblical text, as inhabitants of God's eschatological world in the present."

#### **4.2.2 The Hermeneutical Trajectory of the Theological Conversation**

The second norm of Grenz's (2000:126) proposal is an extension of the first. As noted above, Grenz contends that the Spirit's speaks through the Kerygma in order to establish a community that lives the paradigmatic biblical narrative in the contemporary context. As the ecclesial community of God, we read the biblical text in order to be led by the Spirit and to be formed into the new community. Taking this understanding further, Grenz (2000:126) asserts that the "contemporary believing community engage the Bible recognizing that they participate in a historical sense, in the one faith community that spans the centuries." Therefore, there is a need for a conscious and continuous recognition of the theological tradition of the Church. Grenz's use of tradition is not necessarily in the same sense as used in the medieval Roman Catholic Church's understanding. On the contrary, tradition in Grenz's construct means the conscious understanding that contemporary ecclesial community is part of an ongoing listening community.



Since every generation of Christians engages the “biblical text through the lenses provided by a particular hermeneutical context”, contemporary believers are the embodiment of the age-old historical community of Christ (Grenz 2000:126). Thus, tradition plays an important role (even though secondary) in contemporary theological reflections and ecclesial expressions. For Grenz, tradition (understood as the believing community’s historical theological heritage) is an extension of the authority of Scripture. As a resource for theological reflection, ecclesia identity and expression therefore, the Church’s theological heritage has value, because, past doctrinal statements and theological models alert contemporary believers to pitfalls to avoid, and even more significantly, they point the contemporary community of faith towards fruitful theological reflection in the power of the Spirit (Grenz 1993:95-96).

Grenz (1993:96) agrees with Clark Pinnock’s assertion that “tradition is a defence in the Church against individualism in interpretation... The Church would be foolish to turn its back upon tradition.”<sup>104</sup> We should hold some past formulations dearly because they have stood the test of time; they constitute classic statements of theological truth and have a special on-going significance for the believing community. The characteristic outlook of this trajectory is a dialectic that involves a faithful ecumenical continuity with Church throughout the ages and a dynamic change in contemporary times under the guidance of the Spirit’s speaking through the Scriptures. Grenz used this dialectic of change and continuity to construct a non-foundational understanding of tradition (Grenz 2000:126-127; Grenz & Franke 2001:93-129).

#### **4.2.3 The Wider Context of the Theological Conversation**

According to Grenz (1993:95), to assume an unaltered corpus of doctrine articulated by early century Christians for all time, even though true in some sense, oversimplifies a complex phenomenon. In Grenz’s perspective, our understanding of our theological heritage must be nuanced, because, all expressions of the Christian faith, including creeds are in many ways culturally conditioned; they are formulated in the linguistic and philosophical frameworks of the age in which they were developed. In responding to the challenge of contextual relevance therefore, “the contemporary context of the recipients of the kerygma function as a tertiary pillar for theology” (Grenz 1993:97). As Grenz (1993:97) argues, the historical-cultural context of the faith community plays a significant role in evangelical theological enterprise. For Grenz, “the social community in which the people of God participate contains its own cognitive tools (i.e. language, symbols, myths) and outlooks on the world that facilitate identity formation and the experience of reality.”

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<sup>104</sup> See Pinnock, Clark 1984. *The Scripture Principle*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.



The faith community in fulfilling its mission and proclaiming the gospel message, therefore, must take cognizance of the identity-forming and experience-facilitating concepts of the contemporary community. Grenz's conclusion here is in part based on his analysis of insights from cultural anthropology.<sup>105</sup> According to Grenz (2000:127), the "Spirit's speaking through the Scriptures is the ultimate authority in the Church." However, the Spirit speaks to us usually within a specific historical and cultural context. In essence, this makes conversation with culture and cultural context crucial to the hermeneutical task. The quest for a culture-free theology is both theologically and biblically unwarranted (Grenz 2000:127). Grenz affirms Pannenberg's stance that since God is the ground of truth, all truth ultimately comes together in God. In establishing the pneumatological basis of the Spirit's voice in culture, Grenz (2000:128) asserts, "culture and biblical text do not comprise two different moments of communication (with tradition then forming a third). Rather, they are ultimately one speaking."

In Grenz's view, Western theological reflections have "focused on the Church as the sole repository of all truth and the only place in which the Spirit is at work." However, the Biblical writers as Grenz (2000:127) argues, creates a much wider understanding by connecting the Spirit's presence with the Spirit's role as life giver (Gen. 1:2) and life sustainer (Ps. 104: 29 - 30, Isa 32: 15). In a sense therefore, the Spirit's voice can conceivably resound through the media of human culture, because, the Spirit is present wherever life flourishes. In the same manner, believers can anticipate traces of God's presence in cultural expressions because the Spirit-induced human flourishing evokes cultural expression. Grenz (2000:128) submits that in the evangelical theological and ecclesiological task, we must listen to the "voice of the Spirit who is present in all life and engaging the world through the artefacts and symbols humans construct."

In this sense, Grenz posits a nuanced approach to how culture is to be incorporated into the theological formulations. In response to the question we posed in chapter three, (i.e. Is contextualization or inculturation enough to provide a theological framework for contextual ecclesial expressions) Grenz submits, that both the contextualization method<sup>106</sup> and the correlation approach as expounded by Paul Tillich<sup>107</sup> are inadequate by themselves because ultimately, both methods function in a foundational manner, even though they move in opposite directions. Whereas, the correlation method tends to assume the universality of culture and ignores the specificity and particularity of cultures, the contextualization method is more often inclined to overlook the distinctiveness of every understanding of Christian message. The contextualization method tends to "assume too readily a Christian universal, which in turn

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<sup>105</sup> See Grenz & Franke 2001. *Beyond Foundationalism*. (131-147).

<sup>106</sup> Refer to our discussion on Contextualisation in chapter three.

<sup>107</sup> See Tillich, Paul 1951. *Systematic Theology*. 3 volumes. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

functions as the foundation of the construction of the theological superstructure, even though its architects articulate this superstructure in the language of the culture to whom they are seeking to speak” (Grenz & Franke 2001:152-158).<sup>108</sup> Keeping true to his non-foundational approach, Grenz posits that holding the two models in tandem, as an interactive process that is both correlative and contextual may point a better way forward. For Grenz, neither the gospel nor culture should be seen given realities that subsequently enter into conversation. Rather, in an interactive process, both gospel and culture are “dynamic realities that inform and are informed by the conversation itself” (Grenz & Franke 2001:158). As Grenz (1993:100) posits “the evangelical theologian must be an artisan who seeks to express the faith of the people of God by looking at the kerygma, the heritage of the church and the contemporary situation of the ecclesial community.” Having said that, we must equally note Grenz’s caution. As Grenz argues, we must not pit the Spirit’s voice in culture or any other media, against the Spirit speaking through the Scripture, because, that may result in foundationalism. In acknowledging the Spirit’s voice in other media, we must as evangelicals, give primacy to the Spirit’s speaking through the Scriptures. Ultimately, “we listen for the voice of the Spirit, who speaks the Word within the particularity of the hearers’ context and who thereby can speak in all things, albeit, always according to the Word, who is Christ” (Grenz 2000:128-129; Grenz & Franke 2001:130-166).

### 4.3 What makes any particular theology Christian?

Grenz’s (2000:129) postmodern informed non-foundational theology invariably means that all “theological formulation is local, community and situation specific.” The challenge however, is what keeps Grenz’s understanding from being interpreted as subjectivism. This awareness raises for Grenz the need to clearly define what makes any particular local theology Scripturally Christian. In Grenz’s perspective, for a local theology to be Christian, it must reflect the Scriptural pattern. It must hold to Trinitarian structure, a communitarian perspective, and an eschatological orientation. In other words, the Trinity is theology’s structural motif, the community is theology’s integrative motif, and eschatology is theology’s orientating motif (Grenz 2000:129). We shall attempt a brief summary of these three motifs.

#### 4.3.1 The Trinity: Theology’s structural motif

Grenz (2000: 129) agrees with Emil Brunner’s assertion that the “ecclesiastical doctrine of the Trinity, established by the dogma of the ancient Church, is not a Biblical *Kerygma*”, but a

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<sup>108</sup> Mabila (2002:338) for instance contends that although the method of correlation has appealed to African theologians because it pays attention to culture and despite its legitimate concern for context, it suffers from an inherent inability to carry out its own project. This is because to successfully practice correlation, a theologian, African or otherwise, will have to engage theological reflection from a position that is above both text and context. But the consciousness of the radical historicity of all knowing has enabled the understanding that no theologian enjoys this privilege. The pole of the temporal situation, as Mabila argues, remains part and parcel of the conscious and subconscious subjectivity of all theologians and it moves them in the effort to articulate the eternal truth of the Christian message.

“theological doctrine which defends the central faith of the Bible and of the Church.” For much of Christian history, the “Christian answer to the question of who is God is ultimately answered in the doctrine of the Trinity as attested to in the Nicene Creed and Apostles Creed.” Thus, Grenz (2001:131) notes that the “core content of Christian theology consists of witness to, as well as participation in the narrative of the being and the act of the Triune God.” Theology then, is “Christian, when it adopts a Trinitarian understanding of the being of God” and when the very explication of a particular believing community’s belief structure is Trinitarian in nature.

#### **4.3.2 Community: Theology’s integrative motif**

For Grenz (2000:133), “Christian theology must be communitarian because it is linked to the particular community of Jesus’ disciples.” Indeed, as Grenz observes, theology has been understood as faith seeking understanding. Faith entails a personal response to the good news. Nevertheless, “this does not mean that theology is solely the faith of the individual believer seeking understanding.” To be a Christian entails being in fellowship with the community of the people of the Triune God. Theology in turn, as Grenz contends, is the “community seeking to understand the faith they share.” As a “shared faith of the community seeking understanding, Christian theology is inherently communitarian.” It is even more so, because, it is the “explication of the Christian conception of God.” Therefore, because the biblical narrative presents God’s ultimate goal as the establishment of community in the highest sense, community becomes the integrative motif, “the theme around which all Christian theological foci should be understood and explored” (Grenz 2000:133).

#### **4.3.3 Eschatology: Theology’s orienting motif**

Lastly, to be Christian as Grenz (2001:239) submits, theology must entail an eternal perspective because it is the teaching about “realities that are linguistically and socially constructed and tending toward the promise of God who is bringing creation to an eternal *telos*.” This eternal perspective leads to a theology that is theocentric rather than anthropocentric (i.e. Christian theology proclaims that history is the story of God and the human story only finds meaning in God’s story). As the ecclesial community of God, we participate in God’s salvific work in which God’s acts will culminate in history. Therefore, theology is Christian when in articulating the belief mosaic of the Christian faith it entails an eternal perspective that anticipates the future with the present as revealed in the biblical narratives. Grenz’s argument is that this eschatological construct carries significant implication for theological methods. Theology as Grenz and Franke (2001:239-273) posit, “... explores the world-constructing, knowledge-producing, identity-forming language of the Christian community.” The goal is to “show how the Christian belief mosaic offers a transcendent vision of the glorious eschatological community”,

God has envisioned and how this vision provides the coherent foundation for life in the present, as we anticipate the glorious eschatological future. Thus, theology assists the community of God in the task of being the sign of the age to come.

#### 4.4 Critiquing Grenz's Communitarian Approach

While Grenz's proposed theological framework has received favourable response from some quarters, other theologians have been quite critical, sometimes even harshly so. We shall briefly highlight some of the major concerns raised by theologians within the mainline evangelical community, while also highlighting aspects where there has been some agreement. Our intention is merely to highlight the concerns raised without really qualifying them or providing any structured response. Our main aim is to acknowledge that the postmodern challenge has plunged the evangelical movement (both in Euro-American context and Post-colonial multi-ethnic African contexts) into a painstaking process of re-evaluating our approach to the theological motifs that informs our being and becoming the ecclesial community of the Triune God.<sup>109</sup>

##### 4.4.1 The authority of the revealed Word

Wellum (2004:168-210) commends Grenz for challenging evangelicals to take seriously the theological task in a post-theological age. On the one hand, he contends that some of Grenz's depictions of conservative evangelical borders on the line of generalization and needs further clarification. Wellum however, agrees with Grenz that evangelicals should not view the theological task merely as an inductive collecting, organizing and arranging of texts; a kind of proof-texting approach. Evangelicals, as Wellum notes, need to be careful not to conceive of propositional revelation as such that does no justice to all the language of Scripture. He thinks evangelicals need to be reminded of their own 'historical-locatedness' and the importance of listening to the past in theological reflection and the hermeneutical-spiral nature of interpretation; and that the demise of classical foundationalism entails that we rethink traditional method, especially the agenda of natural theology. He further applauds Grenz's desire to be 'intratextual' and not 'extratextual' in his theological reflection, wherein he gives priority to the language, categories, form and structure of Scripture.<sup>110</sup> Wellum however, took an opposite position to Grenz's intratextual approach. He sees Grenz's approach as more indebted to post-liberalism. For Wellum, Grenz is correct in "emphasising the need for Bible to be the norming norm for all theological reflection. He affirms Grenz's notion that the task of theology is to re-describe reality within the Scriptural framework, so that amongst other things,

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<sup>109</sup> The array of responses we present here are mainly from Erickson et al (eds) 2004. *Reclaiming the Centre*. Wheaton: Crossway. The contributors critique the post-foundational approach to theology, especially that of Grenz.

<sup>110</sup> To be extra-textual is to read Scripture through an ideology that we bring to the text, and according to Wellum, in a worst case scenario, priority is given to a secular worldview and Christianity is only valid in so far as it fits in with that worldview (Wellum 2004:168). See Carson D. A 1996. *The Gagging of God*.

we may be able to respond to the challenges of life in the present as the contemporary embodiment of a faith community that spans the ages.” Nevertheless, Wellum wonders if Grenz, in depicting theology, as a second-order language, will be able to fulfil these aspirations without compromising the authority of Scripture as historically understood. Wellum argues that the grounding of theological reflection is not found in the community of God’s people or human reason and autonomy but in Scripture itself. To think otherwise, Wellum notes, is to “surrender the very transcendent condition for doing theology in any kind of normative way.” He states, “The burden of what it means to be biblical in our theology will be placed on various community interpretations, throughout history, as we listen to the voice of the Spirit through Scripture; but that kind of subjectivity will greatly undercut the very doing of a normative evangelical theology” (Wellum 2004:203). Wellum (2004:168-210) however, affirms that Grenz’s proposal is challenging and admirable, especially in the light of the contemporary changing cultural context.

#### 4.4.2 The Spirit speaking through the Scripture

Caneday (2004:141-167) on his part finds Grenz’s partial use of Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic theory regrettable. He argues that Grenz favours a functional view of Scripture that discards the propositional understanding of Scripture. For Caneday, Grenz should have situated doctrinal authority within the linguistic practices of the biblical canon, instead of within the language games of the believing community. For Caneday, Grenz’s appeal to speech-act theory entails misappropriation because Grenz places authority in the Spirit’s appropriation of Scripture, which is hardly accessible, instead of focusing on the Scriptures which are the Spirit’s accessible speech acts. For Caneday, Grenz’s appropriation of the speech-act theory moves beyond what Scriptures says and means (i.e. what is textually accessible) to God’s acts and speech today (textually inaccessible). Furthermore, Caneday argues that Grenz locates the Spirit’s speaking outside of the canon of Scripture, irrespective of how close he links the Spirit’s contemporary speaking with Scripture.

For Caneday, we can access God’s speech today only through God’s Word, the text of Scripture. Though Grenz agrees with Hans Frei’s locating of meaning in the biblical narrative and not residing in an event within ancient history that lies behind the text, Caneday wonders why Grenz did not focus on the text of Scripture as the location of Scripture for the contemporary community of believers. In Caneday’s perspective, Kevin Vanhoozer’s canonical-linguistic proposal is more helpful because it better accounts for the place of God’s people. According to Caneday, in Vanhoozer’s approach, “... doctrinal authority does not lie in how the faith community appropriates the Scripture, rather it is derived from how the biblical authors authorized by God’s Spirit use terms such as God, grace, Salvation.” Caneday holds that Vanhoozer’s approach preserves Scripture as the believing community’s foundation of faith; it

retains the correspondent theory of truth (as opposed to Grenz's coherentist and pragmatist view), and reclaims the priesthood of individual believers as capable of doing theology rightly.

#### 4.4.3 A Prescription for Pluralism and a Missional Dilemma

Donkor (2004:211-234) argues that how Grenz addresses the question of truth could encourage pluralism. For Donkor, Grenz's theological construct cannot address the truth question directly and adequately, which in turn does not make evangelicalism worthwhile. He argues that the demise of propositionalism in Grenz's understanding is accompanied by a corresponding de-emphasis of doctrine, which makes the evangelical apologetics recede into the background. As Donkor argues, to posit an epistemology that is community-specific as Grenz did, we need to tackle adequately the issues of heresy in theology. Donkor maintains that Grenz did not provide sufficient criteria for assessing other competing truth claims. Donkor wonders how we can still maintain a legitimate apologetics, if we formulate theology along the lines of postmodernism as Grenz did. Furthermore, Donkor argues that Grenz's approach to missiological issues and world religion raises a few conceptual difficulties. From an African perspective, as Donkor argues, both the theology of adaptation ("which seeks to penetrate the mentality, culture and philosophy of Africans and adapt to those values") and the critical African theology ("which adopts a more radical and pluralistic approach, accusing theology of adaption of concordism") will create a dilemma for post-conservative apologetics.

Donkor argues that postmodern epistemological commitment will create a roadblock for evangelization in Africa, "because critical African evangelicals appear to see quite clearly the undeniable pluralism of postmodern epistemology." However, Donkor admits that the same argument can be made against conservative evangelical apologetics. Donkor further contends that the communitarian turn in Grenz's proposal would provide a catalyst for pluralism. Donkor holds that the pluralistic problem will stem out of the fact that the Western take on community largely involves different communities of the Christian faith, whereas in African contexts, community discourse revolves around traditional, religious, experience-consulting communities, which are now seen as relevant for the Christian theological construct. As Donkor contends, Grenz's community-oriented framework will make it difficult to purge aspects of African Christianity and spirituality that would be deemed superstitious by biblical Christian standards. "Asking these communities to purge themselves of these errors even in a dialogical ways," in Donkor's (2004:211-234) perspective, "would essentially entail developing some global cognitive propositional apparatus that would be outside of the traditional community's framework." Post-conservative theology, he holds, does not provide this yet. Donkor however, agrees that the future of evangelical tradition is at stake, and that there is an urgent need for an ongoing

dialogue around key issues, such as methodology. This discussion Donkor adds must be broader than exegesis and should include the nature of biblical interpretation.

#### 4.4.4 On Flying in Theological Fog

Erickson (1998:97-102) commends Grenz's courage to be innovative and genuinely contemporary, rather than just articulating evangelical theology in the same familiar manner. As Erickson notes, Grenz is right in arguing the Enlightenment ideals are still reflected in the thought of many evangelical theologians. Erickson finds Grenz's ascription of a positive role for the Holy Spirit in the hermeneutical process to be more in agreement with the Reformation heritage, which is contrary to the presuppositions method adopted by some evangelicals. In Erickson's perspective, Grenz correctly recognizes that our knowledge is often obtained within particular historical and cultural settings and as such, there is a degree of relativity within each scheme of theological construct. He concurs with Grenz in noting that evangelicals must not downplay the force of this concern. While Erickson does not fully agree with Grenz's depiction of the evangelical movement, especially as it concerns the influence of Enlightenment rationalism in the evangelical theological construct, he however, agrees that Grenz has correctly pointed out the danger of excessive individualism in evangelical ecclesiology. Erickson notes, "When one combines the influence of Western individualism with the natural inclination towards independence of many in the Free Church tradition, the priesthood of all believers becomes transmuted into the priesthood of each believer, which is a somewhat different matter" (1998:98). The latter, Erickson continues, often turns out to be something like everyone is entitled to his own opinion, and this is very different to what the Reformers had in mind.

Erickson (1998:90) acknowledges that Grenz attests to the complexity of postmodernism and that he affirms that evangelicals cannot go all the way with postmodern scepticism. For instance, Erickson affirms Grenz's stance against postmodern rejection of the correspondent theory of truth not only because it can lead to scepticism that undercuts the idea of objective truth in general, but also because it could undermine the Christian claim that our doctrinal formulations state objective truth. Erickson also acknowledges that Grenz is clear and emphatic in his rejection of the postmodern despair idea that reality is not a unified whole with a transcendent centre.<sup>111</sup> Having said that, Erickson finds Grenz's depiction of postmodernism as too simplistic. He argues that a variety of influences, such as the new historicism, empirical theology, and neo-pragmatism, make postmodernism more complex than Grenz pictured.

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<sup>111</sup> We note that while Grenz (1996:164-165) agrees with the postmodern assertion that all human interpretations are in some way and to some extent deficient, Grenz also contends that all interpretation are not equally invalid. Grenz's response to this loss of unity of reality as Erickson rightly notes, is in terms of the postmodern focus on story. Grenz maintains that the biblical narrative of God and the incarnation of Christ is a unifying story applicable to all people and all times. Hence, all interpretation can be evaluated according to a single criterion, the story of God's action in Jesus Christ. The Biblical narrative brings all people into a single story.



Furthermore, while Erickson (2004:366) notes that Grenz does not overtly reject the correspondent view in his communitarian theological framework, Erickson however thinks that Grenz's rejection of foundationalism seems to be a move beyond the correspondence view of truth because of his move to coherence and pragmatism, (aspects of which are borrowed from Pannenberg) and Grenz's use of the language games. As Erickson observes, because, Grenz affirms that knowledge is relative to the community of which one is a part and that doctrinal formulations may differ from one ecclesia and theological community to the other, Grenz will have to deal with the questions such as, which community? Why this community rather than another, a non-Christian community? Which of the Christian sub-communities is the one within which beliefs are to find their validity? In the end, Erickson, though not in complete agreement with Grenz's proposal, acknowledges the realities of changing times and the implications for theological formulation and ecclesial expressions. Erickson (2004:365) states:

When I was in graduate school, the cultural and intellectual visibility was high. Theologies were clearly identified and classified. Cultural trends were evident, and in general, uniform within a given culture. Great schools of thought existed, not only in theology but also in other disciplines. It was relatively easy to tell where one was on the ideological map. The categories were quite firm and fixed. My doctoral mentor was a conservative neo-orthodox, and I was an evangelical. Each of us knew what he was and what the other was. Things have changed, however. One development is the fragmentation of theories, and of the communities of their adherents. There really are no great systems, nor great leaders who symbolize them. Part of this is the aversion of our time to all-inclusive theories, or as postmodernists call them, "meta-narratives." In addition, categories and terms have become quite elastic. I term one aspect of this, "category slide." A person who once was considered neo-orthodox may now be termed evangelical and someone who formerly was clearly identified as an evangelical may now be branded a fundamentalist, without the actual views of the persons involved having changed in any significant way.

Erickson likens the realities of present time to an unpalatable meteorological condition (i.e. flying in theological fog). For Erickson, the fast changing realities of contemporary times contribute to the present low-level visibility in theological discussions. As Erickson observes, we are beginning to emerge from some of the obscurity resulting from postmodernism. Having evaluated Grenz's perspective and in the light of the various criticisms and praise, Erickson sets forth to sketch the emerging contours of the type of theology that evangelicals will need to follow in the years to come, which he reluctantly calls "post-postmodern theology."<sup>112</sup> We shall attempt to provide a very brief summary of Erickson's perspective. First, Erickson contends that emerging evangelical theology will be global and multicultural. Acknowledging the fact that the centre of Christianity is moving to Africa, Latin America and Asia, Erickson holds that theological reflections and conclusions can no longer be viewed from the Euro-American cultural context. Erickson (2004:266-267) observes that the future evangelical theology and ecclesial expression will broaden itself to include voices of the developing world and female theologians in an intentionally, rather than, condescending way. Erickson laments the fact that Grenz's works

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<sup>112</sup> Erickson used the term because he perceives that postmodernism is also beginning to be transcended.

show little reference to the works of theologians from the third world. Second, the emerging evangelical theology Erickson is proposing will put emphasis on objectivity. This will be, however “not the type of relatively naive objectivity that modernism thought it had attained.” In Erickson’s (2004:266-267) perspective, “future evangelical theology will hold to correspondence theory of truth together with metaphysical realism.” It will be based on “foundationalism that regards some conceptions and propositions as basic from which other propositions derive their validity, but without claiming indubitability as did classical foundationalism. Part of this objectivity”, he adds, “is the need to choose and use theological language very carefully as well as taking historical data very seriously.” Third, a special feature of the evangelical theology Erickson is proposing will not just be an ivory tower theology done by academic theologians, separated from the practice of Christian ministry. Erickson (2004:380-381) states:

This means that the theology being developed in the coming era will need to be subjected to the experience of Christians who are not themselves professional theologians.... If theology is to be more than just a theology for professional theologians, it will need to be formulated with laypersons in mind ... the theology of post-postmodernism will be a holo-ecclesiastical theology, not simply a theology for the elite. In part, this involves the language of theology being translated into common language accessible to all persons, not merely members of the guild. Every discipline has its jargon, and that language is essential for the accurate analysis and formation of the issues and answers. When that theory needs to be understood by those to whom it is applied by practitioners, however, it is essential that the terminology be clarified and contextualized (2004: 380-381).

Forth, Erickson agrees with postmodern informed theological emphasis on community and the assertion that the check for subjectivism is found in community. Erickson notes that there is a genuine benefit of community and future evangelical theology will have to take advantage of this perspective. Paul’s writings make clear that the Church is a body (1Cor 12:4-31). Fifth, the future evangelical theology, Erickson posits, will hold to Scriptural meta-narrative. He concedes that it is difficult to maintain dogmatically the universal and exclusive claim of the Christian story in the face of many religions and alternate ethnic communities without substantiating the Christian stand. As Erickson (2004:385) argues, the presentation of the gospel requires a more rational argument than what Grenz or other post-conservative theology offers. Erickson observes that although Grenz espouses a form of foundationalism based on the community of faith, it does not fully justify exclusiveness or a meta-narrative for Christianity.

Sixth, the emerging evangelical theology Erickson further asserts must involve dialogue. “It must interact with different theologies, considering thoughtfully their claims and advancing its own with cogent argumentation.” This, as Erickson (2004:387) states, does not mean that theology must be polemic, rather theology should hold firmly to the doctrine clearly taught in Scripture, but find creative ways of expressing them (i.e. a reforming contextualization). It is, however, extremely important, as Erickson notes, that theological discussion is carried out in a proper spirit. Seventh, Erickson posits that evangelical theology must not simply relate to the then and

contemporary times, it must attempt to anticipate the future and prepare for it. Erickson notes evangelical theology has for long been too slow in recognizing changes and adjusting to them. For Erickson, The evangelical aim is not to accommodate too closely with any given cultural situation, but to be prepared to contextualize the message in ways that make it more easily understood in any given context. In conclusion, as Erickson (2004:387) submits, “the exact course of evangelical doctrinal formulation is unknown, but [regard] these suggestions as helpful instruments in plotting that course.”

#### 4.5 Inculturation and Theological Method in African Context

In our present understanding, while some may not agree with Grenz’s perspectives, all agree that in the light of the emerging postmodern paradigm, evangelicals cannot naively approach the theological task, without giving careful and deeper reflection to what it means to be the ecclesial of the Triune God in changing contexts. In engaging Grenz’s communitarian approach, we remain mindful of the concern and criticism raised by other evangelicals, as we continue to develop in our understanding. We shall not attempt to situate Grenz’s communitarian theological framework within the community of African theological reflection. Our intent is to highlight the great deal of affinity between Grenz’s postmodern informed theological framework and the broad methodological approach of African theologians, especially from the Protestant frontier. Erickson (2004:266-267) is apt in observing that future evangelical theology and ecclesial expression will be “global and broaden itself to include voices of the developing world and female theologians and this will done intentionally, not condescendingly.”

This realization in part, informs the kind of postmodern theological framework that Grenz is seeking to develop. Unfortunately however, Grenz’s proposed framework has very little references to theologians from Africa, Asia and South America. Grenz’s proposal would perhaps have been richer had it included the reflections of these theologians, who in some ways share similar concern. According to Parratt (1995:40), the most significant Protestant contribution to methodology can be traced back to the Ibadan conference of 1965. The underlying assumption at this conference, as Parratt notes, was that African culture had a genuine value and therefore should play a vital role in rendering the Christian faith relevant to Africans. This statement below captures the motivating position of the conference participants:

We believe that God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Creator of Heaven and earth, Lord of history, has been dealing with mankind at all times and in all parts of the world. It is with this conviction that we study the rich heritage of our African peoples, and we have evidence that they know Him and worship Him. We recognise the radical quality of God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ; and yet it is because of this revelation we can discern what is truly of God in our pre-Christian heritage; this knowledge of God is not totally discontinuous with our previous knowledge of Him (Parratt 2005:40-41).

As Parratt (1995:43) observes,

This statement is important because of its theological assumptions. It affirms that God has been active in all cultures at all times, that traditional African religion is indeed in a sense the worship of the true God, and there is a continuity between African religions and the Christian revelation. At the same time, the revelation in Christ represents a radically new element, which shed lights on the traditional past, revealing all that is truly God in it.

The two foci of this understanding are therefore African religion on the one hand and Scripture on the other. According to Parratt, Harry Sawyerr was the first to develop a methodology along the line of this understanding when he attempted to answer the question, what is African Theology? For Sawyerr, as Parratt explains, theology should be essentially pragmatic and must not be separated from worship. While he recognizes the significance of traditional religion, he rejected any approach that seeks to replace the Old Testament with traditions of African religion. Sawyerr, as Parratt (2004:43) explains, maintains that the heritage of Israel is integral to the Christian and key to understanding the New Testament. However, he equally argue that to do an Afro-centric theology that seeks to use the ingredients of the African soil, “theologians must carry out a searching investigation into the contents of traditional religion’s thought-forms with a view to erecting bridgeheads by which the Christian gospel could be effectively transmitted to African peoples” (Parratt 2004:43).

According to Parratt (1995:42), Sawyerr regards as imperative the role of Hebrew and Jewish concepts in the Old Testament, which he argues have their culmination in the incarnation. Essentially, Sawyerr sees the task of Christian theology in Africa as one that concerns function, rather than radically new content. Yet, he encourages African theologians to vigorously pursue systematic theology based on philosophical thought-forms of African people. Aside from Sawyerr’s emphasis on the pastoral and the liturgical needs of the Church, Sawyer, as Parratt explains, sought to establish the biblical evidence for Christian doctrines. He stressed the urgent need for a clear appreciation of the Scriptures and the history of dogma, which will avoid the pitfalls of a superficial fundamentalism. Sawyerr as Parratt (1995:43-45) notes, argue that we must “subject African beliefs to the penetrating scrutiny of Christian doctrine and to reject aspects we find inadequate for our proclamation as the ecclesial community of God.”

Fasholé-Luke sought to develop on the approach of Sawyerr. Fasholé-Luke, as Parratt (1995:44) notes, contends that the essence of African theology is to “translate the one faith of Jesus to suit the tongue, style, genius, character and culture of African people.” As such, “it must be incarnational in the sense that it must be implanted in every society, and the form it assumes should be determined by the needs and character of that society” (Fasholé-Luke 1975:77). For Fasholé-Luke, the primary source of theology must be the Bible. According to Parratt (1995:44), Fasholé-Luke pleads for an understanding and interpretation of the Bible that is viewed both as

the Word of God and the word of man. This approach, he hopes, will correct some fundamentalist aberrations in African theological reflections and lead to a more fruitful understanding of the Bible. This, he contends, will enable the construction of more relevant and contextual post-colonial Afro-centric theology. For Fasholé-Luke, the Bible is the primary source for African Christian theology; African religions and philosophy are next in importance. Hence, Fasholé-Luke stresses the need for a wider use of anthropological findings and a thorough study of oral traditions in African religions, with a view to their use in Christian theology. "Rejecting the extreme positions that dismisses Western theology as irrelevant, he notes that pluralism in Western theology itself makes it possible for the African theologian to select those insights that are meaningful while rejecting those that are culturally conditioned" (Parratt1995:45). The vision, therefore, is to enable space wherein both African and non-Africans can continue to reflect on the Christian faith as led and guided by the Holy Spirit. Kwesi Dickson also echoes Fasholé-Luke's understanding. According to Parratt (1995:47), Dickson notes,

The Scriptures themselves are a witness to the revelation of God mediated through particular events in a particular historical and cultural context. The church therefore, wherever situated, should relive Scriptures in its own experience, so that it becomes the living Word of God and speaks to each people group's real-life situation.

For Dickson, as Parratt observes, African theologians should be at liberty to develop their own theological categories as informed by their contemporary contexts. However, as Dickson contends, they must not assume that the traditional categories of doctrinal statements are immutable. Dickson asserts, "the fundamental tools of the Bible and Christian doctrine should therefore provide the basis of African theology, but should not be a straitjacket by which Africans are constrained, and should not stifle innovation"(Parratt 1995:47). Dickson further argues, as Parratt (1995:48) observes, that theology can only be done in particular cultural contexts and that from its inception the gospel has been culturally coloured.

In this sense, culture for Dickson, "becomes the formative factor because the salvific vision of God in Christ embraces people of all cultures and languages, living their own differing but authentic life-styles as created by God." This "obliges the Church to expect that there will be different understanding and expression of the same fact" (Parratt 1995:48). According to Parratt, Pobee shares Dickson's biblical and cultural approach. Recognizing that there are multiplicities of cultures in African, Pobee posits that we ought to speak of theologies and not theology. He approached the task of theology as it relates to his culture - (i.e. Akan culture). He, however, suggests that his own particular study may well be applied elsewhere in Africa. According to Parratt, Pobee argues that African theology must be rooted in the Bible and the historical dogmas of the Church. This, he hopes, will ensure that theology in Africa is not insular but ecumenical. According to Parratt, Pobee favours an impartial phenomenological approach that entails the collection, analysis and elucidation of oral literature - (i.e. myths, proverbs,

etc.). Thus, the biblical-theological materials and the oral traditions of African religions and cultural expressions form the sources of African theology. Pobee, as Parratt notes, emphasizes the Christ event as the centre of Christian faith. For Pobee, theology should entail a reflection of the Christ event from within a particular worldview. Interpretation of faith will therefore be specific to every historic community because theology implies participation. Thus, the function of theology in African context in Pobee's perspective, as Parratt explains, "should be to ask what statements could be made about Christ when His person and work are seen and are reflected upon from within African cultures" (Parratt 1995:48-49). Pobee, as Parratt further adds, argues that postcolonial Afro-centric theological reflections will entail employing African concepts and the African ethos as a means of our ecclesial proclamation. This is even more so, because, for almost all African cultures, existence depends on being part of a community ("*cognatus ergo sum*" – "*I belong through blood relations, therefore I exist*). Seeing that this sense of community is closely related to the biblical view of solidarity, African theology Pobee submits, "will do well to begin from this reality, even as we seek an Afro-centric ecclesial identity and expression" (Parratt 1995:49). According to Parratt (1995:49-50), Pobee's method seeks to bring out the "real value of African culture, while at the same time subjecting it to penetrating criticism in the light of the Bible as the ultimate sources of Christian revelation and the norming norm for theology and ecclesial proclamation."

In essence, while Grenz may not have included the thoughts of these theologians in his proposed communitarian theological framework, they in many ways echo Grenz's understanding that visioning the Bible, tradition and culture as the basic mosaics of the Christian faith and voices in the evangelical theological construct, will enable a broader understanding of the nature and purpose of the ecclesial community of the Triune God in the context of changing cultural paradigms. Having said that, we need to also note that while these scholars have notably emphasized the place of the revealed Word, the incarnation, Trinity, community and participation and the need for a sympathetic yet critical treatment of African cultures and expressions in theological construct (and these factors, as we have argued remain essential parts of African theological reflection), some of them have however seen the task as mainly that of reclaiming Africa's past, with much focus on African traditional religion.

Indeed, this task, as Mabilia (2002:332-336) aptly notes, served a significant "purpose of providing Africans with cultural continuity, which in turn helps to clarify African Christian identity;" nevertheless, it may perhaps be a task whose time has passed. What is needed, as deduced from Mabilia's perspective and Grenz's framework, is a form of hybrid reasoning and theological framework that balances both the contextualization and correlation method. The approach should enable a conceptual space that allows "Africans to overcome the weight of



cultural traditions, which threatens to drag them down, and the vertigo of modernism, which threatens to alienate them” (Mabiala 2002:336). In many ways, as Mabiala 2003:336) submits:

A postmodern informed Afro-centric theological construct helps us to become aware of the actuality of our postcolonial enigmatic present... It imposes on African theologians the necessity of coming to terms with the context that foregrounds their enterprise. If they are successful in rising to this challenge, they will doubtless find that postmodernism offers Christianity a unique opportunity to gain a hearing in Africa since it offers the promise of a truly contextual theology. Modernism favours only those theological expressions that are *una et catholica*. By contrast, postmodernism, when purged of the scoriae of its own dogmatism, holds the promise of liberation from ‘eurocentrism,’ increased sensitivity to differences, and increased toleration for otherness. Finally, postmodernism would allow African theology to achieve its goal of becoming a theology of otherness and difference.

#### 4.6 Theology for the Community of Christ

Informed by our discourse in this chapter, our task in chapter five is to attempt to enumerate an ecclesiological framework as informed by Grenz’s nuanced postmodern communitarian theological framework. Grenz’s nuanced perspective embodies an ecclesiological orientation because of his communitarian understanding. We shall conclude our discourse with some possible ideas around which we can begin to define an innovative post-colonial space for articulating Afro-centric ecclesial expressions. Grenz’s proposal takes seriously the contemporary understanding that because humans are inevitably situated in particular communities, the community plays a formative role in shaping both individual conviction and conception of reality. In the same sense, “being a Christian entails membership in a specific community. It is a fellowship of those who have come to know the God of the Bible through Jesus the Christ by the Spirit”, the ecclesial community of disciples that proclaim the message of Christ in word and deeds in all spheres of life. In the image of the Triune God then, as Grenz (2000:287) submits “the Church is a community of believers and Christian theology is communitarian.”



## Chapter Five

### Towards a Theological-Ecclesiological Construct

#### 5. Evangelical Ecclesiology in Changing Times

We began our discourse in chapter one with a brief overview of the Evangelical tradition, with specific focus on the evangelical identity, theology method and ecclesiological leanings. Based on our evaluation of the evangelical movement, we agree with Chan (2006: 11) that it is only within a Church that is Catholic and alive (dynamic, discerning, engaging, continuously forming and reforming) that truths are traditioned, received and proclaimed as a living faith and not as mere abstract ideas and propositions. We argued that in defining the evangelical identity in contemporary times we need to rediscover the profound community outlook in which the biblical people of God were rooted (Grenz 1993:73). We concluded that there is a certain weakness or lack of clarity in the way evangelicals theologise about the Church. We highlighted the need for an evangelical ecclesial understanding that speaks relevantly and sensitively to the emerging postmodern context and in a renewed sense, intentionally allows for the manifold expressions the ecclesial of God will take in various cultural contexts.

In our present understanding, we concur with Grenz's (1993:34) assertion that central to evangelicalism is a common vision of the faith that arises out of life transforming narratives couched within a common interpretative framework consisting in theological beliefs and categories we derive from the Scriptures and that these categories which form the cradle for this experience, in turn, constitute the grid by which we now interpret all of life. Our personal relationship (individual spiritual journey) with the Triune God therefore, finds meaning within the community of faith, which itself participates in the economic Trinity. This understanding of the evangelical identity, as Grenz suggests may enable us to better make the narrative of the cross a contextual reality in contemporary times.

Further, this evangelical ecclesiological understanding, we argue may enable us to better "embrace the need to break free from the tensions between unity and diversity and truly embrace unity in diversity", as the apostle Paul admonished in 1 Corinthians (Mannion 1989:223). In our present understanding, Grenz (2000:308) is correct in asserting that the "postmodern pluralistic context, calls for an apologetic evangelical theology that reaffirms the place of the Church as a people and in a sense, as a soteriologically relevant reality." It therefore becomes expedient that we rediscover the sense of the Church as community with renewed emphasis on the place of the local Church. Thus, amongst others factors, emphasis should be placed on both the invisible dimension of the Church (Church universal) and visible contextual ecclesia expressions (i.e. the local Church). Thus, we noted that emerging church

proponents will readily agree with Snyder's (2003:85-97) assertion that it is biblically and theologically inconsistent to affirm that theologically the Church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic but that sociologically it might less ideally be many, charismatic, local and prophetic." Indeed, the ECM theological framework and ecclesiological leanings are not without weakness and criticism as we have highlighted in chapter two. Nevertheless, the emerging church conversation is enabling a dynamic platform for renewed reflection on the nature, purpose and mission of the Church for contemporary times. In many ways, this is broadening the scope for innovative and creative dialogue on the evangelical quest for a biblically faithful, theologically coherent, socio-culturally sensitive ecclesial identity and expression.

### 5.1 Evangelical Ecclesiology as Missional and Improvisational

In our present understanding, the Evangelical–ECM ecclesial conversation is aptly worded in Wilson's (2005:71) assertion that as evangelicals we need to reclaim an ecclesiological understanding that is missional and improvisational as opposed to one that is functional and instrumental. Improvisational in the sense that it allows space for theological reflection and formulation that is innovative and creative; that recognises and keeps faithfully the tension between contextual relevance and the proclamation of the never changing truth of Scripture (Wilson 2005:71). To arrive at this insightful conclusion, Wilson explored the implicit and explicit ecclesiology in works of evangelicals like Francis Schaeffer, Charles Colson, Rick Warren and Brian McLaren.<sup>113</sup>

In Wilson's (2005:65) perspective, Schaeffer's ecclesiological work reflects his commitment to a contextual understanding of the church in a particular place and time. For Schaeffer, as Wilson notes, "cultural critique is the basis of an ecclesiology that recognizes the existence of co-belligerents with the Church in the course of history, the centrality of truth in preaching and practice, the necessity of the orthodoxy of community, and the New Testament teaching on form and freedom of the Church."<sup>114</sup> Like Schaeffer, Colson, as Wilson observes, also begins with cultural analysis and contextual ecclesiology. Colson was also concerned for the co-belligerents of truth and community, however, with some extended modification. For instance, as Wilson explains, while Schaeffer provided a historical narrative, his focus was primarily to show the course of culture as it rebelled against God. Based on Schaeffer's understanding, as Wilson

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<sup>113</sup> Schaeffer and Colson represent mainstream evangelical ecclesiology, Warren represents the evangelical seeker sensitive view and McLaren represents the emerging church movement's view.

<sup>114</sup> Schaeffer's books (*The Church at the End of the 20th Century*; *Escape from Reason*, and *The God Who is there*) are key works that show his sensitivity to the cultural situation, his concern for true truth in the context of late modernity and the danger of subjectivity. As Wilson here observes, Schaeffer wrestled with two tension in which he sought to establish the authoritative guidance of the New Testament teaching alongside the transformations necessary to fulfilling the mission of the Church as he saw it in a particular cultural moment. Schaefer posits propositional apologetics as observable love, thus seeking to balance the call to visible purity with the mark of true Christian love. Schaefer developed an ecclesiology that goes beyond his heritage, thereby pushing the evangelical church beyond comfortable practice into a hospitable and compassionate Christianity that welcomed the poor and the misfit.

observes, Colson, “interweaves stories from history of the church to display the roots of our life and to guide our present and future life” (Wilson 2005:66). In Wilson’s view, Rick Warren’s ecclesiological perspective is more difficult to discern, especially in his book *The Purpose-Driven Life*. Wilson (2005:68) finds the absence of ecclesiology, or what he calls ‘silent ecclesiology’, as problematic. As Wilson notes, the absence of any “critical examination of culture could be taken to mean that Warren sees the relationship between Church and culture as unproblematic.” According to Wilson, Warren mainly speaks of cultural sensitivity as it relates to communicating the gospel to a particular audience. As such, for Wilson, Warren’s ecclesiology is silent on “the world” as a theological challenge. Wilson also observes that the absence of the oneness, holiness, catholicity of the church in Warren’s book could imply that there was no evident concern for the particularities of time and place as a theological problem. Wilson (2005:68-69) notes that while *The Purpose-Driven Life* may in fact indicate a movement of the Spirit, we are left “concerned by Warren’s naïve approach to cultural and historical dimensions of ecclesial dialogue.”

Turning from Warren to Brian McLaren, Wilson contends that the work of McLaren presents an innovative format and creative thinking. Wilson sees McLaren’s emerging ecclesiological perspective as closer to that of Schaeffer and Colson, even though the estimates of the contemporary cultural situation differ (i.e. Schaeffer and Colson draw on modernity for understanding of truth, McLaren draws on postmodernity). Wilson notes that McLaren’s work shows concern for the oneness of the Church, the apostolicity of the Church in his vigorous advocacy for mission. He, however, observes that McLaren’s pursuit of apostolic mission threatens to overwhelm any consideration for apostolic faithfulness. While McLaren’s ecclesiology conveyed some concern for holiness and catholicity, not much is said about the church as set apart by and to God (Wilson 2005:69). Contrasting McLaren to Colson, Wilson argues (2005:69-70) that while Colson sees the fear of the Lord as the basis of ecclesiology, McLaren’s emerging ecclesiological perspective (as well as most within the emerging church movement) seem to be driven by the fear of relevance.<sup>115</sup>

Wilson (2005:71) notes that while his brief comparative exposition of the ecclesiological perspectives of these evangelicals is not a coherent narrative continuity and development, the conclusion derived emphasizes the fact that what evangelicals need is an evangelical ecclesiology, “as an account of the Church that holds us accountable to the gospel.” Wilson (2005:71) argues that evangelicals have somehow abandoned ecclesiology in favour of mission (i.e. no critical reflection on the mission and its attainment). The result, as Wilson suggests is

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<sup>115</sup> While we do not completely agree with Wilson’s evaluation of Rick Warren and McLaren’s ecclesiological perspective, (it seems to appear somewhat too simplistic in our present understanding). Nevertheless, we find his point significant and his evaluation as a useful guide for discerning a nuanced evangelical ecclesiology, when viewed in the light of our evaluation of Grenz’s proposed communitarian theological framework.

that the life of the Church has no implicit or explicit root in the work of the Triune God. The Church at this point inevitably becomes instrumental to something other than the mission given by God. The evangelical church, as Wilson (2005:71) further posits, "... needs to maintain a missional ecclesiology with commitment to mission and concomitant flexibility, while also remaining faithful to our commission." He further posits that the "best way to equip evangelicals for faithful flexibility is to add to our missional ecclesiology an improvisational dimension. Wilson (2005:71) asserts,

An improvisational ecclesiology recognizes the demands of adaptation and faithfulness, committing ourselves to both. We must properly learn to confess in word and deed that the Church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. But what those marks mean in particular times and places requires discernment under the guidance of the Spirit.

Wilson (2005:72) aptly argues that when evangelical ecclesiology is improvisational, it enables the church to fulfil her mission in different contexts. On the other hand, when evangelical ecclesiology is instrumental or merely functional, as Wilson argues, it fails to enable the Church to fulfil her mission in different contexts. According to Wilson, evangelical ecclesiology becomes instrumental when it resists change and clings to past forms, or when we embrace change that disconnects the Church from its life source. Wilson's holds that Schaeffer's and Colson's ecclesiological positions are examples of improvisational ecclesiology; the ecclesiology of Rick Warren he sees as instrumental and the ecclesiology of McLaren as an emerging attempt at improvisational ecclesiology. Wilson contends that while improvisational ecclesiology depends on some tacit dimensions that are difficult to identify, they are acquired through apprenticeship, and practice combined with spiritual gifts. Wilson (2005:72) aptly posits:

Ecclesiological improvisation is most clearly enabled by submission to the greater reality of the Kingdom of God... This submission to the kingdom is taught by tradition through the language of One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic. These characteristics rightly understood, relate the Church rightly to its mission in the world and enable improvisation. Learning the language of and practices of unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity, gives us the skills and practices to adapt creatively, respond imaginatively and perform faithfully in the midst of the changing cultures of particular times and places.

## 5.2 Contours for Afro-centric Ecclesial Expressions

Wilson's call for an improvisational ecclesiology captures the essence of the quest for a post-colonial Afro-centric ecclesial vision. In our developing understanding, we concur with Kenzo Mabilia's assertion (without taking for granted Katongole's warning and concerns), that there may be some benefits in thinking about Africa in terms of postmodernism. As we have noted, Mabilia posits that postmodernism is not alien to Africa. Taking postmodernism as an ally of post-colonialism and seeing negritude (which is also a critique of the Enlightenment rationalism), as its antecedent, Mabilia (2002:341) contends that together, these paradigms may create space for particular African expression (i.e. post-colonial identity) and invariably, particular Afro-centric ecclesial vision. As Mabilia (2002:336) contends, a postmodern, post-

colonial informed theological reflection creates space for otherness and difference, which find its source in the revelation of the Trinity (i.e. a unity in diversity that expresses the manifold expression of worship and praise to One God, One Messiah and One Spirit). “To think about Africa in terms of postmodernism,” as Mabilia submits, is to “think otherwise about Africa, and to think otherwise about Africa is theologically significant because at its core our theological reflection cannot be divorced from our cultural context.”

Informed by this understanding, our discourse suggests that there is possibly an instructive parallel between the situation of the Church in post-colonial, multi-ethnic Africa and in postmodern Euro-American contexts. Therefore, affirming the exponential growth of the Church in Africa and her coming to maturity, we join a host of theologians (Western and African, evangelicals and emergents) in validating the need a theological principle that will enable space for envisioning a theologically coherent, biblically faithful and culture sensitive Afro-centric ecclesial vision. Having said that, we equally submit that this quest is one that is on one hand, refreshing and on the hand, challenging. Lara (2010:104-115) provides a helpful summation of the challenges of an Afro-centric ecclesiology, which aptly captures our present reflection. Lara posits four key significant areas that he considers important for Afro-centric ecclesiological vision as represented in the diagram below.

□

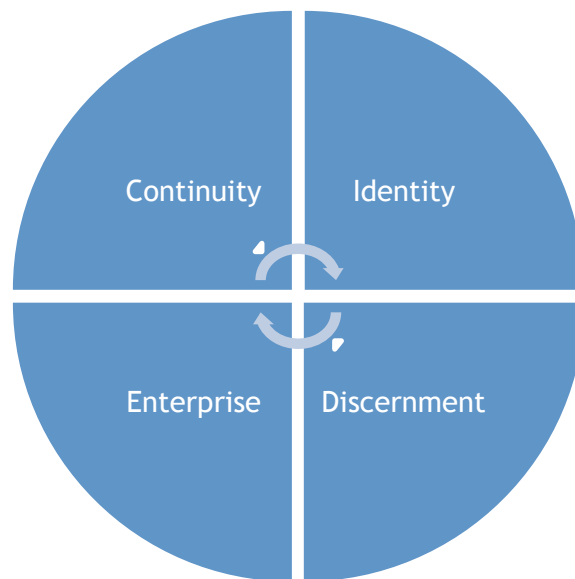


Figure 1.

On continuity, Lara (2010:109) notes that if one believes theology must always take context seriously and the Christian message is adaptable and transferable, then we need to bridge the gap between the Christian faith and the African worldview by employing relevant theological tools. In order to establish and preserve the identity of the African people therefore, theological reflection in Africa must be divorced from any “tendencies toward domination and de-humanisation. As Lara (2010:109) posits, “what is needed is the utilization of an African

epistemology as the governing factor for arriving at the meaning of the text within the worldview of the people it is presented to.” Such an approach, as Lara (2010:210) further asserts, will in essence address questions such as: What is the shape of an African Missional Church? Where should we begin? Lara used the diagram below to depict the various sources that can contribute to the epistemological core of African theology and, by implication, ecclesiastical missiology for shaping the African ecclesiological vision.

□



Figure 2.

Lara further suggests the need for a “deconstruction of the African worldview and life that will lead to reflection, movement, continuity, and discontinuity.” Lara’s point is that developing a missional African ecclesiology calls for a missional discernment in Church life that allows for an incarnational, ‘attractional’ and multicultural ecclesial expressions. As Lara (2010:111) aptly submits, this can only be achieved through the enabling of the Holy Spirit. Lastly, Lara (2010:111) asserts that developing a theology of mission must be the key to African theological

enterprise. In other words, the African Church must understand its missional identity and formulate a contextual Afro-centric ecclesiology that is improvisational. In our present understanding, we agree with Grenz's (1993:83) assertion that "rather than merely amplifying, refining, defending and handing on a timeless, fixed orthodoxy (this is not to say this is not an important task of theology), theologians speaking from within the community of faith, should seek to describe the act of faith, the One toward whom faith is directed and the implications of our faith commitment in, for and to a specific historical and cultural context." Since cultural context is continuously changing in differing times and places, Grenz (1993:83) is apt in positing that "theology is always *in transit*, and the theologian is a pilgrim thinker working on behalf of a pilgrim people." Viewed from this perspective therefore, our theological enterprise must seek to make the narrative of the cross a contextual reality. It must "articulate the thought forms of the culture of the community it serves, and show its implication, relevance and application to life in that society and that place in history" (Grenz 1993:83).

Indeed, the integration of doctrinal confession and the life-transforming experience of God as necessarily themes in evangelical identity, suggest that theology must arise out of the life of the believing community. Thus, as Grenz posits "evangelical theology is by its very nature local. Understood as such and in our present understanding, Grenz (2000:180) is apt in submitting that evangelical theology is a mosaic of local theologies (i.e. "it is the reflection and articulation of this particular group of participants in this place and time"). Evangelicalism is a big tent that encompasses a wide diversity, a patchwork quilt of variegated narratives.<sup>116</sup>

In many respects, Grenz (2000:181) confirms what hosts of African theologians have long argued in positing that in the light of the postmodern context, "no longer can one group or sub-narrative claim without reservation and qualification that their particular doctrinal perspective determines the whole of evangelicalism. Instead, the evangelical theological enterprise entails amongst other endeavours, "a never ending conversation about the meaning in contemporary context, of the symbol that as evangelicals they are committed to maintaining and that form the carriers of meaning for all." How this theological-ecclesial vision will be achieved without resulting to ethnocentrism and radical cultural accommodation, or to undermining the counter-cultural nature of the Scriptures, or relativizing the universal narrative of the cross, amongst other concerns, remains a key challenge. Nevertheless, we affirm Nkurunziza's (2007:60) assertion that Africa needs an ecclesial understanding, which enables and empowers Africans to

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<sup>116</sup> Grenz here finds insightful the postmodern social anthropological understanding that although cultures are wholes, these wholes are not necessarily monolithic rather they are internally fissured. Culture for these anthropologists is that "which aggregate people and processes, rather than integrates them". Culture is thus the outcome and product of social interaction. This contrasts with the older understanding that culture is a pre-existing social ordering force that is transmitted eternally to members of a cultural group. (See Cohen, Anthony 1994. *Self Consciousness: An Alternative Anthropology of Identity*. London: Routledge, Grenz, Stanley 2000. *Renewing the Centre*. Grand Rapids: Baker).



a life of shalom, total wellbeing in their multi-religious, multi-ethnic, social economic contexts. As Nkurunziza (2007:58) aptly submits,

The Church in Africa has no alternative but to take seriously the demands and challenges of the different African ethnic groups. Rather than trying to suppress them, they should be re-vitalized by the Gospel so that they can become part and parcel of the mystical body of Christ, new concentric centres of evangelisation and use their Christianised cultural aspirations as authentic moments towards internalised cultural evangelism.

### 5.3 Towards a nuanced Evangelical Ecclesial Vision

In our developing understanding, Grenz's nuanced communitarian theological framework provides a helpful starting point for envisioning an evangelical ecclesiology that is biblically faithful, sociologically aware, contextually transforming and theologically coherent in the light of postmodern, post-colonial sensitivities. As discussed in the previous chapter, Grenz finds promise and hope in the communitarian turn inherent in Reformed epistemology because it situates theological reflection primarily within the believing community – a “non-foundational approach that sees Christian theology as an activity of the community of God that gathers around Jesus the Christ, by the Spirit” (Grenz 2000:120-121).

Grenz's description of the evangelical identity and his constructive proposed theological framework embodies a strong ecclesiological orientation. Grenz postulates a community focused theological construct that sees theology as a conversation between a set of interconnected web of beliefs or mosaics. A conversation between the doctrinal mosaic and human experience, involving what Grenz sees as the “interplay, or perichoretic dance, of an ordered set of sources of insight. These sources of insight consist of the Bible, Church heritage and Culture. It is a conversation in which the faith community, by explicating the meaning of the sacred texts, shared cultural values, symbols and language etc. (through which it expresses specific understanding of the world), seeks to articulate “what ought to be the Christian belief mosaic.” Grenz's constructive, narrative informed, non-foundational theological framework invariably means that all theological formulation is local, community and situation specific, which opens Grenz's framework to the possibility of subjectivism as discussed in the previous chapter. Recognizing the danger of this possibility, Grenz posits that what makes any local theology Christian is that it must reflect the scriptural pattern that holds to Trinitarian structure, a Communitarian focus, and an Eschatological orientation (Grenz & Franke 2001:169-239).

#### 5.3.1 The Covenant Community

Generally as highlighted in chapter one, evangelicals have used the Greek term *ekklesia* and the biblical metaphors of the Church to delineate the nature of the Church. A more systematic theological approach relies on the classical differentiation between the universal invisible Church and the local visible church. Other evangelicals have relied on the biblical concept of

covenant in description of the true Church. Covenant ecclesiology sets the foundation for congregationalism especially among Baptist evangelicals. According to Grenz (1993:179), covenant ecclesiology holds the concept of *ekklesia*, because, covenant means that ultimately the essence of the Church lies with its people. *Ekklesia* retains the Old Testament understanding that the Church has been called out of the world to stand in covenant with God. Thus, all believers confess their allegiance to Christ and the Christ-centred community is conscious of her standing as the body under Christ's Lordship. The *ekklesia* is thus a community in covenant with God in Christ by the Spirit. This divine covenant relationship also means that believers are conscious of their shared commitment and relationship with one another. The 'church-constituting covenant' is therefore a call to journey individually together as the people of God. Having said that, Grenz (1993:179) notes that "despite the basic correctness of congregational affirmation that the Church is constituted by people who enter into covenant, we must not lose sight of the fact that the Church transcends the totality of its members at any given time." Grenz observes that through the covenant, believers enter into an historical fellowship.

This realization, for Grenz, relativizes the understanding that the believer is logically prior to the Church, which is a tendency in our evangelical affirmation of convertive piety.<sup>117</sup> Thus, focus should be on the interdependence of the Church and believers as opposed to the primacy of either. Further, while these ecclesiological understandings are helpful, Grenz argues that they are not completely adequate for a nuanced evangelical doctrine of the Church. In Grenz's perspective, the integration of tradition and context, which are two themes we can mine from Scriptures and the understanding that Community is theology's integrative motif, the Trinity is theology's structural motif, which are related to the central Reformed theme of covenant community, provides a helpful way forward.

### 5.3.2 The Concept of Community and Identity

Instead of Grenz's communitarian approach, theologians (both liberals and conservatives) have down through history worked with various integrative motifs, most prominent of which is Kingdom theology.<sup>118</sup> In Grenz's perspective, as appropriate as the theme of Kingdom theology is, it cannot sufficiently provide a unifying centre for nuanced evangelical theological-ecclesiology. Grenz (1993:148) argues that Kingdom theology suffers from at least one flaw, "it employs as an integrative motif a concept that it leaves undefined." According to Grenz, when the content of the Kingdom is left properly undefined, we would have to respond to crucial questions such as, what is the Kingdom of God that is coming, but is already present? As Grenz and Franke (2001:234) note, "without a clear understanding of the nature of the Kingdom,

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<sup>117</sup> Refer to our discourse in chapter one.

<sup>118</sup> For more on Kingdom Theology see Weiss, Johannes 1971. *Jesus' Proclamation of the Kingdom of God*. Trans. Richard Hiers et al. Philadelphia: Fortress. See Dodd, C. H. 1935. *The Parables of the Kingdom*. London: Nisbett.

Kingdom theology is inadequate to [undertake the] task of indicating what the world is like when it is transformed by the in-breaking of the divine rule.” To be sure, as Grenz and Franke note (2001:235), the Kingdom theology is still important for our understanding of the Church as scriptures teaches. Nevertheless, the theme of community forms the content of the kingdom of God. The divine reign consists of God at work redeeming, reconciling and transforming creation into God’s intended ideal – a new order. Thus, scripture pictures the new order God purposes for creation in communal dimension. Therefore, “when God’s reign is present, (i.e. when God’s will is done), community emerges.”

Furthermore, Grenz notes the possibility of a practical implication of a Kingdom theology that is not fully defined. As Grenz (1993:148) posits, in “contemporary Western context, a content-less Kingdom theology easily degenerates into an individualistic theology that exalts and under girds the extreme individualism of the modern era.” As we have highlighted in our discourse so far, Grenz (2000:314) as well as a host of contemporary scholars, have argued that “the Enlightenment brought in its wake an individualist impulse that elevates the human being as the logical *prius* of all forms of social life” and the contract between individuals as the basis for all social interaction (2000:314). Society, in turn is seen as the product of autonomous individuals who enter into voluntary relationships with each other. Thus, society becomes a “social contract in which individuals agree to give up a certain amount of their personal prerogatives to the whole for the sake of personal advantage” (Grenz 2000:314).

As we have noted above, this voluntary contractual understanding finds its ecclesiological counterpart in the view of the Church as the voluntary association of individual believers who in some way are seen to be complete spiritual selves prior to and apart from their presence and membership in the community of believers (Grenz 2000:314). Similarly, Bloesch bemoans the neglect of ecclesiology in evangelical theology. Bloesch (1983:127) argues that in part, this neglect is due to the emphasis on individual decision (i.e. personal salvation), because, evangelicals give more priority to the decision of faith rather than to nurture (1983:127). In this sense, as Grenz aptly argues, “the visible church, becomes an aggregate of the individual Christian contract with each other to form the society of Christians.” As Grenz (2000:314) observes, the concept of the visible church in evangelicalism provides the counterpart to the parallel understanding of the invisible church as the total number of the truly saved. Generally, there is a tendency within evangelicalism to speak of individual believers as being members of the true invisible Church, prior to and apart from their contracting with each other to form local congregations. As we have argued in our discourse so far, the postmodern paradigm, as the emerging church conversation suggests, is to a reasonably extent, enabling a renewed look at this individualist, contractual ecclesiological understanding. There is a growing call from a variety of disciplines for a rediscovery of community that seem intrinsic to human existence and

forms the focal point of biblical revelation. As Grenz (1993:154) asserts, we must not take “community to mean a group of persons who are merely united by shared interests and activities involving only a segment of each individual or a therapeutic conception of communities of interest who join together to maximize individual good.” Rather, a “community attempts to be an inclusive whole and celebrate the interdependence of public and private life and of the different callings of all” (Grenz 1993:154). Grenz (1993:154) concurs with Bellah in noting, “community is a group of people who are socially interdependent, who participate together in discussion, decision making and who share certain practices that defines the community and are nurtured by it.”<sup>119</sup> Similarly, Stroup (1981:101-198) in his explanation of narrative theory of personal identity and its relationship to community notes, “personal identity is not a private reality.” On the contrary, “it has a communal element that is shaped by the community in which an individual participates.” Grenz and Franke (2001:221) affirm Stroup’s conclusion that personal identity is not created merely from factual data of the events of one’s life. It requires an “interpretative scheme that provides the plot through which an individual’s personal story makes sense.”

The “interpretative framework, as Grenz & Franke (2001:219) further contend, cannot be derived from the data of one’s own life; instead it arises from one’s social context or tradition.” Thus, as Grenz and Franke (2001:221) argue, “community is oriented toward the future, the past and the present and through this threefold orientation it constitutes the ‘self’ of its members.” The past orientation speaks of a ‘community of memory,’ which keeps its past alive by retelling its constitutive narrative. Retelling the constitutive past narrative places the contemporary community within the primal events that constituted their forbears as this particular community. A community does not only remind its members of its past, nor does it only focus on the present; the community looks to the future. As such, it becomes a “community of hope.” It “anticipates its own continuation and further development in the future. The community senses that it is moving toward an ideal that is yet to be” (Grenz & Franke 2001:222).<sup>120</sup> As Grenz & Franke (2001:222) note,

“The community’s constitutive narrative that stretches from the past to the future provides an overarching cosmic narrative that enables a transcendent vantage point for life in the here and now.” As community retells its constitutive narrative, it “...functions as an interpretative community that bestows a qualitative meaning on life, time and space, and on community members.”

As members participate in communal life, the community emerges as a fusion of thought and feeling, tradition and commitment, membership and volition. For Grenz and Franke (2001:217), this sense of community should not be equated to mean unanimity and uniformity of opinion

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<sup>119</sup> See also Bellah, Robert et al 1985. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

<sup>120</sup> Also see Royce, Josiah 1901. *The World and the Individual*. New York: Macmillan.

among group members. As opposed to silent consensus, what is endemic to community, as Grenz and Franke (2001:217) aptly observes, “It is a shared interest in participating in an ongoing discourse about what constitutes the identity of the community.” This sociological insight, Grenz (1993:162) contends, provides a helpful vantage point for developing an ecclesiological framework in contemporary postmodern (post-colonial) contexts. Grenz sees the understanding that we are dependent on the communities that nurture us to indicate a move beyond the foundationalism inherent in the theology of the modern era. In addition, the concept of community, as Grenz observes, allows for a move beyond the sole focus of Kingdom theology without leaving the insights of kingdom theology behind. The kingdom of God is characterised by community and lived out in the covenantal life of the ecclesial community. As Grenz (2000:313-314) submits, “a truly helpful community-focused ecclesiology takes seriously the evangelical commitment to convertive piety, while looking to the Reformation principle of the visible church as a community gathered around Word and Sacrament.”

### 5.3.3 The Church as an Ecclesial Community

Grenz’s conclusion as has been established in our discourse is that community is an important integrative motif for theology and theological method, not only because it fits into contemporary sociological thought, or because the postmodern paradigm is enabling a renewed interest in community, but more importantly, because it is central to the message of the Scriptures. Grenz (1993:156) writes, “from the narratives of the primordial garden, which open the curtain of the biblical story, to the vision of the white-robed multitudes inhabiting the new earth with which the story concludes, the drama of the Scriptures speaks of community.” As such, we must enquire as to the sense in which the Church is a community. Put differently, what is the actual nature of the covenant community God is seeking to establish?

According to Grenz (2001:314), the evangelical voluntary contractual ecclesiological understanding opens room for “individualism that demotes participation in the visible community from essential to an optional dimension of discipleship.” Rightly understood, as Grenz and Franke (2001:314) note, a carefully-nuanced contractual ecclesiology enables a significant and beneficial advancement of the important principle of the priesthood of all believers and the direct work of the Holy Spirit in, with and through each believer, especially when we speak of the Church as a covenanting community of committed disciples. However, as Grenz (2000:315) asserts, because of the influence of individualism, the contractual view all too easily reduces the community of Christ to a “group of individuals united by their shared interest in certain practices,” or an “understanding that membership in this particular group will contribute to their personal good” (Grenz 2000:315).

In emerging postmodern contexts, as Grenz aptly argues evangelical ecclesiology will have to rediscover the sense of the Church as Community. As insight from contemporary narrative theory suggests, and as Grenz and Franke (2001:225) explain, by “mediating the communal narrative necessary for personal identity formation, a community shapes the identity of its participants and thereby functions as a community of reference, of memory and hope.” Grenz finds this sociological perspective as a helpful vantage point from which to understand the Church as community. We have in our discourse repeatedly spoken of the Church as the fellowship of believers who gather around the narrative of the Triune God, as scriptures proclaims. The vision of community, as revealed in the biblical drama begins in the narrative of Genesis where God established community (Gen 2). Central to the purpose of this community that God is establishing is the presence and fellowship of God as seen through the covenant narrative of Israel (Gen 28:13-17; Ex 20: 2 -3; 33:15).

The Old Testament covenant provides the context within which we understand the New Testament significance of Christ as the Immanuel – God with us (Matt 1:22-23). In Christ, the divine Word became flesh and tabernacle among us (Jn 1:14) – Jesus Christ being the Incarnate Son of the God with us reconciles the world and all of creation to God. Jesus promised that He will send another Comforter who will be with God’s people, abiding in and with them always. As Grenz (1993:157) notes, Jesus’ promise, understood within the context of the Old Testament hope, forms the foundation for the work of the Spirit. Indeed, from the outpouring experience at Pentecost as the Scripture proclaims, the Holy Spirit constitutes believers' individually and corporately as the temple of God. Through the Holy Spirit, God dwells in and with us, even though this experience in the presence may only be partial. Ultimately then, as Grenz (2000:315) posits, the Church is the product of the Spirit.

The Church is formed by the work of the Spirit who speaks through the biblical text and thereby creates a people “who forsake their old lives so as to inhabit the new eschatological world centred on Jesus Christ who is the Word” (Grenz & Franke 2001:225). The Spirit, by speaking through Scripture, centred as it is on the narrative of God, brings into being a new community, a fellowship of persons who gather around the name of Jesus the Christ. Consequently, as Grenz (2000:316) notes, “the Church is more than the aggregate of its members. It is a particular people imbued with a particular constitutive narrative, namely, the biblical narrative of God at work bringing creation to its divinely intended goal” (2000:316). Therefore, the Church is a community of the converted because the biblical narratives provides the faith community the interpretative framework (i.e. the narrative plot) through which believers find their individual and corporate identity and through which they find meaning in their personal and communal stories (Grenz 2001:316). It is with this sense of community fellowship that evangelicals seek to balance the importance of personal piety with the corporate dimension of the Christian life. The



journey to becoming Christ-like is not done in isolation. We journey individually together. This shared narrative enables a special solidarity within the ecclesial community and this solidarity is practically expressed in communal fellowship, support and nurture. Thus, Grenz and Franke (2001:226) affirm Migliore's (1991:192) delineation of the Church as an alternative community that gives the world reason and hope. Grenz's conclusion here also concurs with McClendon's (1986:28) apt observation that the "Church is a community understood not as having privileged access to God or to sacred status, but as sharing together in a storied life of obedient service to and with Christ."

#### 5.3.4 The Church as a Community of the Word and Sacrament

Taking the construct a step further, Grenz (2000:317) posits that while the "Spirit constitutes the Church, the proclamation of the Word is the vehicle through which the Spirit engages in this constituting work, and such proclamation is ultimately an activity of the Church viewed as a community of reference." Thus, "by proclaiming the biblical narrative of God at work in history centred in Jesus Christ," as Grenz (2000:317) notes, "the Church becomes a people focused on the Word and gathered around the Word." Grenz (2000:317) affirms contemporary community theory's assertion that a community does not only retell its constitutive narrative as highlighted above. There are certain practices or 'rites of intensification' that contribute to bringing the community together, increase group solidarity, and reinforces commitment to the norm of the group. These 'practices of commitment' defines both the community's way of life and the patterns of loyalty and obligation that keep the community alive. Through their participation therefore, members sense that they are part of a community.<sup>121</sup> As Grenz (2000:317) posits, in ecclesiological sense, these 'practices of commitment' lead directly to the Sacraments (i.e. Word and Sacrament).

This perspective, Grenz holds, provides a vantage point from which we can understand both the Church as a fellowship of the ecclesial community of God and the Reformation insight that the Church is a community gathered around Word and Sacrament. Grenz notes that the acts of baptism and the Lord's Supper are visual sermons and they constitute the Word of God symbolically proclaimed as Calvin affirms in his Institutes. Baptism and the Lord's Supper, Grenz (2000:318) affirms, are visual, symbolic embodiments of the constitutive gospel narrative of the Christian community. The sense is that by linking believers with the biblical narrative, (which is the life, passion and resurrection of Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit), baptism and the Lord's Supper function together with the "proclamation of the Word in the Spirit's identity-forming, community-building work." On the one hand, a memorial dimension to these acts as

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<sup>121</sup> Refer to Bellah, Robert et al 1985. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press. Grenz also relied on insight from Christian anthropologists Grunlan, S. & Mayers, M. 1988. *Cultural Anthropology: A Christian Perspective*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan. Also see, Nisbert, Robert 1966. *The Sociological Tradition*. New York: Basic Books.



the Scriptures proclaims, on the other hand, “participation in the acts facilitates symbolic participation in the saving events that form the foundation for Christian identity as persons united with Christ” (Grenz 2000:318). For Grenz (2000:318), the sacrament is integrally connected to Word. Like the proclamation of the Word, baptism and the Lord’s Supper connect the contemporary believing community with the biblical story that we proclaim. To state it more succinctly, Grenz (2000:318) posits that viewing the Church as community in this manner shows how the Church is essentially local and yet universal. The Church is by her nature the local fellowship of believers that gathers faithfully around the Word and sacrament. Thus, as Grenz (2000:318) notes, it is in the context of the local communal life of the believers that the biblical narrative is proclaimed and ritually embodied. Equally so however, as Grenz (2000:318) adds, the constitutive biblical narrative is not an exclusive possession of any one congregation. On the contrary, “it is a shared story by all who in every place gather around Word and Sacrament and this transcends all local ecclesial community.”

In essence, the Church, which is fundamentally the particular local ecclesial community gathered around the Word and sacrament simultaneously, transcends any local congregation and all local congregations (Grenz 2000:319). In this sense, the Church rightly sees in baptism the symbol of the new birth that represent the change of context that has resulted in our being part of the family God. As the New Testament writers proclaim, to be a Christian means fundamentally to be in union with Christ. Our lives are no longer defined in accordance with the categories of the old life; rather we have received justification by faith alone, through the Grace of God in Christ by the Spirit. We are new creatures, a new covenant community that transcends every human division, spatial and temporary boundaries. Ours is a community of people from every nation, tribe and socio-economic status (Eph 2:11-22; Gal 3:26-29).

### **5.3.5 The Church in Eschatological Perspective**

Grenz (2000:316) is apt in noting that baptism and the Lord’s Supper do not only bring contemporary believers into community with the past, they also symbolically point to an eschatological community in which God’s salvific work will culminate in history. Building on the insight from contemporary community theory, Grenz (2000:316) notes that the role of any community of reference is connected with its ability to connect the past and the future (i.e. function as a community of memory and hope). “Recalling the narrative past places the contemporary community within the primal events that constituted their forebears as this particular community” and it helps the community to bring the past into the present. As such, the “narrative reconstitutes the present community as the contemporary embodiment of a communal tradition that spans the years” (Grenz 2000:316). The contemporary community does not only look to the past, members also expectantly look to the future, an ideal and fully actualised community. Narrating a story that extends from the past into the future, “the

community constitutive narrative provides a transcendent vantage point for life in the present” (Grenz 2000:316). As Grenz further adds, the recited narrative not only enables an overarching plot through which members of the community can view their lives and the present moment in history, which transcends every particular now, it also provides the context of meaning that allows community members to connect their personal aspirations and service to the community. “The community in this manner functions as an interpretative community” (Grenz 2000:316-317).<sup>122</sup> Similarly, as Grenz (2000:317) posits, the Church is a community in this sense. Through our connection and participation in the community of God that is constituted by the biblical narrative that spans through the ages, “believers find their lives linked with something greater, something transcendent, namely, the work of God in history” (Grenz 2000:317). As believers symbolically experience the foundational events of Christ’s death and resurrection and are gathered into the vision of God’s future, “their lives are linked to God’s creative-salvific action, the narrative of which is the plotline of all of history” (Grenz 2000:318).

For Grenz (2001:235), the biblical drama that began in the Garden of Eden extends to the vision of “white-robed multitudes inhabiting the new earth,” which forms the climax of the biblical drama. Put differently, the Bible proclaims that God’s salvific vision is directed to bringing about community in the highest sense of the word (i.e. “a redeemed people, living within a redeemed creation” and enjoying the presence of the Triune God). Based on this understanding, Grenz & Franke (2001:252) submits that theology is by its very nature eschatological (i.e. always hope-filled). “Eschatology fosters a theology that becomes the teaching about the God who promises to bring creation to its divinely given *telos* in the community that God will bring and is already bringing to pass” (Grenz 2001:252). For Grenz and Franke (2001:252), the eschatological perspective that develops in the biblical communities affirms the understanding that the biblical narrative is a formative eschatological ecclesiology.

As Grenz and Franke (2001:259) further add, if we hold that Christian theology explicates the faith of the ecclesial community and that it is the teaching about God whose work is made known in the biblical narrative, then “theology must be attentive to the biblical narrative in its complete sense.” As Grenz and Franke (2001:259) posit, even the didactic texts find their significance in relationship to the story of God at work, bringing creation to God’s intended goal (*telos*). “These texts comprise the biblical faith community’s ongoing reflection on and explication of the significance of the narrative of God who journeys with us.” Grenz here points to the significance of narrative (i.e. the narrative of God’s salvific work from inception to consummation) for theological formulation and how this narrative informs our identity as the ecclesial of God within an eschatological context. As Grenz and Franke (2001: 259) assert, the Scriptures provide insights into the manner in which the Holy Spirit led the community of God to

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<sup>122</sup> Grenz here relied on Royce, Josiah 1913. *Problem of Christianity*. New York: Macmillan.

apply the one story of God to particular historical situations so as to live as an eschatological people in the world and thereby experience the presence of God in their midst. These experiences serve to augment the narrative itself (2001:259). These community reflections, as Grenz and Franke (2001:259) posit, remain

Paradigmatic for believers in all ages, for the Spirit continually speaks through the biblical text, illuminating subsequent generations to understand their present in light of the grand, *telic* narrative of God and guiding them in the task of living in their own context the vocation all Christians share, namely that of being the Community of Christ in the contemporary world.

Furthermore, as Grenz's construct suggest, there is an ontological dimension to this eschatological understanding. As discussed above, a person's identity is shaped within a social context or tradition (i.e. the historical community in which an individual participates). If we hold this perspective, ultimately then, our lives are oriented toward a communal future from which our identity (i.e. our essential nature) is derived. Consequently, the eschatological future provides the defining perspective for one's ongoing personal narrative (Grenz 2001:270). As the community of Christ therefore, our identity is bound up with a particular vision, the eschatological horizon of the biblical narrative. Being now created anew in Christ, redeemed and justified, "our continuous task is to construct our personal identities in the present according to the paradigmatic narrative of the Christian faith community, with its expectant anticipation of the eschatological future" (Grenz & Franke 2001:270). Rightly so, as believers, our new identity is in Christ (2Cor 5:17). Nevertheless, the new creation in our present understanding and as Grenz aptly observes, is an eschatological reality (Eph 2:4-7; 1Jn 3:1-3). Grenz and Franke (2001:273) contends,

As God's image bearers, we have a divinely given mandate to participate in God's work of constructing a world in the present that reflects God's eschatological will for creation. Because of the role of language in the world-constructing task, this mandate has a strongly linguistic dimension ... for through the constructive power of language we inhabit a present linguistic world that sees all reality from the perspective of the future real world that God is bringing to pass. Further, the divine eschatological world that stands at the climax of the biblical narrative is a realm in which all creation finds its connectedness to Jesus Christ (Col 1:17), who is the *logos*.... This eschatological realm breaks into the here and now as the Holy Spirit fashions our present in the light of God's future. And as culture-constructing beings, we participate in the Spirit's world-fashioning process.

This completed work of Christ and the present work of the Holy Spirit, suggest that the eschatological community that we anticipate in God at the consummation of history is already present in partial yet genuine manner. While this present reality takes several forms, its focal point is the ecclesial community of Christ. For Grenz, this understanding helps bring kingdom theology into proper perspective. As Grenz notes, the kingdom of God is present wherever two or three are gathered together in Jesus name. Nevertheless, the Church cannot be equated to the Kingdom, because the kingdom reign of God refers to God's sovereign eternal reign. The Church points to God's reign as the outgrowth of the message of the kingdom. The Church is the

eschatological community that declares by word and deeds the eternal sovereignty of God. “God’s right to rule declared and demonstrated by Jesus produces the Church, for the proclamation of the message of Jesus’ Lordship evokes obedient human response, resulting in building of the corporate community of faith” (Grenz 1993:182). Consequently, we seek in the image of the Trinity to be a community of true and holy disciples and our communal life is manifested in corporate worship and teaching, mutual edification and fellowship, mission and discipleship (Heb 12:1-2; Phil 1:4-6). Our new identity in Christ, wherein we are justified and are being sanctified as the covenant ecclesial of God, made possible by the Holy Spirit who is at work in, with and through us, carries an ethical demand that we live in the here and now for and to the Glory of God alone. And as we embody the biblical vision of God’s new covenant community we reflect the character of God; we are thus the *imago dei*.

### 5.3.6 The Creedal Marks in Missional Perspective

As our discourse suggests, a nuanced evangelical ecclesiology in contemporary contexts will entail a continued appeal to the creedal marks (one, holy, catholic and apostolic). As noted above, Grenz (2000:319) contends that ecclesiology would go astray if the “ideal status of the marks were allowed to lead to the conclusion that they are the prerogative solely of some invisible Church that is totally disjointed from the church in the world.” Having said that, Grenz affirms Whale’s (1971:28) appraisal that while the Reformers conceive of the Church primarily as the invisible company of the elect, they also (especially Calvin), viewed the Church “as the visible body of believers recognisable by their corporate participation in the preached and heard Word and Sacraments.” This focus, as Grenz (2000:312) observes, set the Reformers’ ecclesiology aside from the Medieval Roman Catholic ecclesiological emphasis on the Clergy, which often disregards the gathered fellowship of believers (i.e. priesthood of all believers).

For Protestantism, therefore, as Grenz (2000:312) affirms, the faith, worship and life of the Church is meaningless without a fellowship of those who are gathered in the Spirit and united by the one God, in love and submission to the Lordship of Christ. Grenz (2000:312) suggest that in keeping with the Reformation understanding of the creedal marks, it is helpful if we see the creedal marks as dynamic rather than static. In some sense, this dynamic understanding of the creedal marks readily enables an improvisational space for a missional ecclesiology. This missional ecclesiological understanding arises in part out of an “innovative interpretation of the Church’s apostolicity as declaring that the Church is *sent* (from the Greek *apostello*- *send out*) into the world with the gospel and thus is by its very nature a missionary church” (Grenz 2000:319).<sup>123</sup> Furthermore, Grenz affirms Van Engen’s suggestion that we will do well to read the creedal marks as adverbs rather than adjectives in order for us to fully capture the dynamic

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<sup>123</sup> Also see Tinker, Marvin 1991. “Towards Evangelical Ecclesiology” (Part One) *Churchman* 105, 1.

character of the Church's mission faithfulness and essence. In answering the question what is the Church, Van Engen (1991:70) states:

It is the unifying, sanctifying, reconciling, and proclaiming activity of Jesus Christ in the world. Mission cannot be something separated or added to the essence of the Church. The essential nature of the local congregation is, in and of itself, mission, or else the congregation is not really the Church.

For Grenz (2000:320), the missional view of the Church enables an ecclesiology that keeps the primary focus on the local community of believers gathered around Word and Sacrament, but gathered for the sake of the mission of the Church. It also allows for a missional ecumenism "whose goal is the mutual affirmation and cooperation in mission of the global network of local congregations" (Grenz 2000:320). This missional ecclesiological perspective also affirms the Gospel and our Culture project's summation that "the movement toward missional connectedness should be centrifugal, starting from particular communities and expanding to the global dimensions of the Church, the community of communities."

For Grenz (2000:312), when the universal Church is viewed as the community of communities, "unity of the Church in the world can no longer imply complete uniformity in all aspect of Church life." Grenz contends that the plurality of the one Church is a theme that finds echo in contemporary ecumenism. To support this point, Grenz appeals to Dulles' observation that the Vatican II decree emphatically stresses that unity does not imply uniformity and that there is room for an enormous variety of rites and procedures within the Catholic family.<sup>124</sup> However, the diversity of the Church displays an essential commonality that marks any ecclesial community as specifically Christian. This central feature is, as we have discussed above, community. As Dulles (1974:135-135) states:

In the community model of the Church, the marks are no longer interpreted as the visible marks of a given society, but rather as qualities of a living community. The Church is no longer exclusively identified with any one society or institution, but seen as a mystery operative both within and beyond the borders of any given organisation.

Grenz (2000:319) submits, seen from the "perspective of the Church as a community, the marks of the Church are no longer the exclusive property of any particular institution. Rather, the creedal marks set forth the shared task of every Christian community." Even more helpful to Grenz's construct is the suggestion of the Gospel and our Culture group that the four marks ought to be placed in reverse order (i.e. the missional Church is called to be proclaiming, reconciling, sanctifying and unifying community). For Grenz (2000:320) this change in order serves as reminder of the Church's missional mandate and ultimate goal. In essence, "the creedal marks paint a picture of a Church active in mission." As Grenz (2000:320) asserts, the missional Church is apostolic in the sense that it is a proclaiming community. The Church is truly

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<sup>124</sup> Dulles, Avery 1967. *The Dimension of the Church: A Postconciliar Reflection*. Westminster: Newman (40).

apostolic not only because it stands in continuity with the apostles' doctrine, but also because she takes seriously her calling in the divine program to be a fellowship that never ceases to proclaim through Word and Sacrament the narrative of God's salvific work in Christ. The Church in so doing shapes her life after Christ's example as the incarnate of God with us and also remains faithful to the apostles whom Christ sent into the world (Grenz 2000:320). Second, the Church in mission is truly catholic as long as it is a reconciling community. As reconciling community the church brings those whose differences readily occasions hostilities into wholesome relationships and as such the missional church serves as an agent of divine reconciliation. This also includes seeking fervently and untiringly to bring people in their diversity into fellowship of Word and Sacrament. Further as Grenz (2000:320) submits, the catholicity of the church as a reconciling missional church works to foster wholesome relationships among humans in every dimension of life's existence.

Holiness as a key nature of the Church, as Grenz (2000:321) posits, has several dimension. At its core, however are the twin aspects of being set apart by and for God's purposes (Ex 28:41) and shaping human life to reflect the image of God (Matt 5:43-48; 1Peter 1:15-16). This understanding, as Grenz observes, provides the context within which we can vision the Church active in mission as a sanctifying community. The Church's sanctifying mission is both internal (i.e. the ecclesia of God is continually reforming her own pattern of life by the power of the Holy Spirit as gathered community, repeatedly proclaims and lives the Word anew and celebrates the Sacrament afresh); and external (i.e. the ecclesia of God also seeks to be a people whose presence in the world as salt and light brings glory, honour and praise to God as the Scripture proclaims) (Grenz 2000:321).

Lastly, as Grenz posits, the Church is one because the mission of the Church is purposed at bringing about unity. The Church's unifying mission begins within the household of God (1Pet 4:17 KJV). The Church's quest to foster unity is to be operative primarily within the local congregation (i.e. among those who in unity come together to partake of the Word and Sacrament - Phil 2:2; 1Cor 12:13; 10:17); and by extension, among all congregations as they partake in one Word and celebrate the Sacraments. In addition, Grenz (2000:321) affirms the summation of a host of theological scholars in noting that the unifying impulse of the missional ecclesial of God extends beyond herself. "As it gathers around Word and Sacrament in this penultimate age, the community bears witness to and seeks to anticipate, in celebration as well as in concrete ways, the Spirit's fashioning of one new humanity in Christ (Eph2: 15) and the eschatological day when God will dwell with the redeemed in the renewed creation (Rev 21; 22:1- 5) (Grenz 2000:321).



### 5.3.7 Theological Ecclesiology and the Church Visible-Invisible

As Grenz (2000:321) submits, the “Church is a people mandated with a mission and this missional community is one, holy, catholic and apostolic in that it engages in a mission that is proclaiming, reconciling, sanctifying and unifying.” To paint a full picture however, Grenz asserts that we need an additional dimension, namely, “ecclesiology’s theological context.” As Grenz observes, recent reflection on the marks of the Church has led some theologians to the recognition that ultimately the Church’s character is determined by her connection with her Lord and God. Thus, “the creedal marks must be predicated first by the Triune God active in and through the Church and then by extension to the Church as the people through whom God works” (Grenz 2000:321). Grenz affirms Jürgen Moltmann’s assertion that “the Church receives the attributes from the activity of Christ in the workings of the Spirit for the coming Kingdom.” Moltmann, as Grenz (2000:321) observes, states:

If the Church acquires its existence through the activity of Christ, then her characteristics too, are characteristics of Christ’s activity first. The acknowledgement of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church is acknowledgement of the unifying, sanctifying, comprehensive and commissioning Lordship of Christ.<sup>125</sup>

In Grenz’s (2000:322; 1993:184) perspective, Moltmann’s insight stands as a reminder that ecclesiology must be rooted in theology, rather than anthropology or cosmology. Ultimately therefore, our ecclesial vision must take its point of departure from the relationship of the Church to the reality of the Godhead. Therefore, viewed as missional community, as Grenz (2000:322) posits, the Church finds its central qualities in the mission of the Triune God. In addition, as Grenz (2000:322) further notes,

The Church’s true nature as a community sent by God arises from its mandate to be a bearer of the divine mission in the world, a mission that is directed not merely toward all humankind, but toward all creation... More significantly, the church’s identity as a community must emerge out of the identity of God it serves and in whom her life is hidden, to allude to Luther’s description of the invisible Church.

As highlighted above, Grenz and Franke’s (2001:226) construct suggests that insight from sociology is enabling the understanding that the “Church is a particular people imbued in a particular constitutive narrative” (2001:226). Through the Spirit-appropriated, community-focus, biblical narrative, we are able to understand the connection between our personal stories and something greater and transcendent – the salvific work of God in history. While insight from sociology is very helpful, Grenz and Franke add a crucial caveat. They note that the appropriation of insight from sociology should not be to reduce to another form of foundationalism. Such degeneration they hold occurs when we look at community as a generic reality that can be “discovered through objective observation of the world and then proceeds to

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<sup>125</sup> See Moltmann, Jürgen 1977. *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology*. Trans. Margaret Kohl. New York: Harper & Row.



fit the church into this purportedly universal human phenomenon as if the community of Christ were a particular exemplar of some general reality” (Grenz & Franke 2001:227). As Grenz and Franke observe, sociological foundationalism of community assumes the priority of sociology, viewed as an objective science that sets both the agenda and the methodological directions for theological reflection and construction (2001:227). In the light of this observation, Grenz and Franke warn of the danger of falling into the trap of viewing our theological task as that of determining what theological insights cohere with any particular science we are inclined to. Therefore, Grenz and Franke affirm Milbank’s assertion that “no such fundamental account, in the sense of something neutral, rational, and universal is really available. Thus, theology itself should provide its own account of the final causes at work in human history, on the basis of its own particular and historical specific faith....” (2000:227).<sup>126</sup>

Theology (i.e. the doctrine of God), not sociology as a scientific reason, as Grenz and Franke contend, must emerge as our ultimate basis for speaking of the church as a community. More specifically, the Bible reveals God as the Triune God and the heart of the biblical narrative is the story of God bringing humankind, as the *imago dei*, to reflect the divine character of God, which is love (1Jn 4:8, 16) (2001:228). While there are personal aspects of our calling to reflect the character of God, however, because God is ultimately the divine Trinitarian persons-in-relationship that is characterised by a mutuality that can only be described as love, the *imago dei* is ultimately human persons-in-loving-relationship as well (i.e. “only in relationship as persons-in-community are we able to reflect the fullness of the divine character”) (Grenz 2001:228). Therefore, the Church is to be a people who in relation with each other and to all creation reflect the character of the Triune God and thereby bear witness to the divine purpose for humankind. “This fundamental calling to be the foretaste of the *imago dei*, in turn, determines the church’s proclaiming, reconciling, sanctifying, and unifying mission in the world” (Grenz 2000:322-323).

Further, as Grenz (2000:323) adds, the “divine calling to be the *imago dei* does not find its source in God’s design for humankind, but in the Church’s fundamental existence in Christ” - Christ being the true image of God as Scripture proclaims (2Cor4:4; Heb1:3). Through our new life in Christ, believers become co-heirs with and in Christ as family of God (Rom8:29; 1Cor15:49), a reality made possible by the transforming presence of the Holy Spirit (the Holy Spirit being the initiator of conversion and the new birth) (2Cor3:18). Ultimately, as Grenz and Franke posit (2001:228), “we enjoy the fullness of community as, and only as, God graciously brings us to participate together in the fountainhead of community, namely, the life of the

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<sup>126</sup> See Milbank, John 1990. *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

triune God.”<sup>127</sup> Thus, the communal fellowship believers share as the ecclesial of God goes beyond what is generated by salvation or mystical experience or even a common experience or narrative as important as they are. It is according to Grenz (2000:323), a more fundamental *koinonia*. “The community we share is shared participation or participation together in the perichoretic community of the Trinitarian persons.” In this sense, Grenz affirms J.M.R. Tillard’s declaration that

The ecclesial *koinonia* can be defined as the passing of the Trinitarian Communion into the fraternal relations of the Disciples of Christ... Seen from the human side, the ecclesial *koinonia* is none other than the fraternity of the Disciples of Christ Jesus but in so far as it is caught up, seized up by the Spirit who inserts it in the relation of the Father and the Son.<sup>128</sup>

Therefore, Grenz (2000:323) submits,

In the end, participation in the perichoretic dance of the triune God as those who by the Spirit are in Christ is what constitutes community in the highest sense and hence marks the true Church. And being a people whose life is hidden in Christ (and hence are the invisible Church) even as they live in the world (and therefore the visible church) is the present calling of those whose lives have been and are being, transformed by the Spirit

Ultimately therefore, it is only within this primary identity that we derive all other facets of our doctrine of the Church. “Our participation in the divine life forms the foundation for the mission of the Church in the world. It constitutes the link between the Church as a whole and its local visible expressions. It provides the foundation for the significance of the Church as a covenant community” (Grenz1993:188). Furthermore, this theological ecclesiology as Grenz here posits, provides helpful answers to the age-old question of the Christian universality in the face of other religions. As Grenz (2000:283) notes, the community-based construct seems to undercut any claim to universality and appears to leave us imprisoned within postmodern incredulity toward meta-narratives in which the Christian proclamation is only one among many. How then can we claim that the Christian faith is not merely a tribal ethic but is for everyone? Put differently as Grenz asks, how can we say that the Christian conception of salvation is universal in any sense of the word?

### 5.3.8 Finality of Christ and Christian Universality

As Grenz (2000: 282) aptly reiterates, the Scripture declares that the only true God is none other than the Triune God, the eternal community of the Father, Son and Spirit. In turn, the Christian community speaks of the humans as created in the image of God. God’s divine intent is that humans reflect what God is like in God’s own eternal reality. Ultimately, as Grenz further adds,

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<sup>127</sup> The works of Miroslav Volf are instructive to Grenz’s conclusion here. See Volf, Miroslav 1998. *After Our Likeness: The Church in the Image of the Trinity*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. For more in-depth exploration of the implication of the Social Trinity see Platinga Jr, Cornelius 1988. “Images of the Church” In *Christian Faith and Practices in the Modern World*. Noll, Mark and Wells, David (eds). Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

<sup>128</sup> See Tillard, J.M.R 1984. “What is the Church?” *Mid-Stream* 23 (372-373).

the goal of human existence has been revealed most completely in Jesus Christ, who in his life, death and resurrection modelled the divine principle of life, namely, “life in intimate fellowship with his heavenly Father by the Holy Spirit who indwelt him.” In this sense therefore, the Christian proclamation of the finality of Christ denotes that it is only in and through Christ that we come to the fullest understanding of God and who God is like. “Through the incarnate life of Jesus we discover the truest vision of the nature of God” (Grenz 2000:282). Wherever God is truly known, the God who is known is none other than the one who is revealed through Jesus the Christ” (2000:181). In the light of this reality, Jesus Christ mediates a more complete salvation. In and through Christ, we know God in God’s Trinitarian personhood, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, believers share in the fellowship that the Son enjoys with the Father and enter into a fuller community with God than is enjoyed in any other religious tradition. As Grenz (2000:282-283) states:

The biblical vision of God at work establishing community is not merely a great idea that God devised in eternity; instead, it is an outworking of God’s own eternal reality. As a result, the human quest for community is not misguided. At its heart, it is nothing less than the quest to mirror in the midst of all creation the eternal reality of God and thereby to be the image of God. In this manner, the Christian vision stands as the fulfilment of the human religious impulse as the early Church fathers recognised and as J. N. Farquhar reintroduced into contemporary discussion.<sup>129</sup>

Thus, regardless of whether all humans will come into relationship with Christ and participate in God’s eternal community, God desires that all be saved and come to the knowledge of truth (1 Tim 2:4) and participates in the divine goal for creation. This universal intent of God’s divine salvific work in Christ by the Spirit forms the basis on which the Christian community humbly proclaims that no other religious vision encapsulates that final purpose of God as we have come to understand it. In other words, “other religious visions cannot provide community in its ultimate sense because they do not have the highest understanding of who God actually is” (Rom5: 12-21; 1Cor15: 21) (Grenz 2000:281). While other religions may provide some form of community, the vision of community with its focus on fellowship with the triune God that Christians have received through relationship with Christ by the Holy Spirit constitutes a more complete appraisal of the human situation and the divine intention. The ultimate basis of the Christian claim to universality rests on the fact that the good news we proclaim is nothing else than God’s goal for all creation.<sup>130</sup> Thus, we are the people of the Triune God with the intention of establishing community. According to the New Testaments we fulfil this purpose through our worship of the triune God, through mutual edification as we act as community to each other, and through outreach (service to the world and proclamation in the world). As such, we must engage in the task of evangelism and discipleship unto the end of the age. In doing so, however, as Grenz (2000:281) cautions, we must avoid making the reality of judgement the sole

<sup>129</sup> For more on Farquhar, J. N. see *The Crown of Hinduism*. London: Oxford. 1913.

<sup>130</sup> For more insight see: Lehmann, Paul 1963. *Ethics in a Christian Context*. New York: Harper. Hebblethwaite, Brian 1982. *Christian Ethics in Modern Age*. Philadelphia: Westminster.

motivation of our proclamation. “It is simply not our prerogative to speculate as to the final outcome of the eschatological judgement, which will be a day of surprises” (2000:286). Rather, “we continue to carry on the evangelistic mandate, sometimes to bear truth into the realms of darkness, sometimes to bring to light the truth that is already hidden and sometimes to bring to explicit confession of Christ the implicit covenant with God already present in our hearers” (Grenz 2000:286). Ultimately therefore, as Grenz (2000:286) submits, the gospel is the greatest and only gift we offer our world and our obedience in proclaiming the narrative of God’s grace and mercy in Christ through the Holy Spirit in both word and deed is our most important act of worship and gift we can offer to God.

Grenz is apt in asserting, “Christians can engage in the conversation about the nature of true communal dimension in human social institutions or expressions only by reference to Christian theological ecclesiology” (2000:324). As the community of God in Christ by the Holy Spirit, “we declare that the touchstone of community is the eternal triune life and God’s gracious inclusion of humans in Christ by the Spirit, constituting every believer as participants in the perichoretic Trinitarian life” (Grenz 2000:324). This nuance communitarian theological-ecclesiological perspective, as Grenz (2000:324) further states, allows “Christians to view social reality in accordance with its potential for being a contribution to, prolepsis of, or signpost on the way toward participation in the divine life that God desires humans to enjoy.” Ultimately, as Grenz (2000:324) submits, as the community of Christ under the guidance of the Spirit seeks to enhance community in its various forms (in diverse contexts), we expectantly await the completion and glorious manifestation of God’s divine salvific work of bringing creation into the fullness of eternal loving fellowship as the divinely fashioned eschatological community (Grenz 2000:324).

#### **5.4 Affirming Grenz’s Theological-Ecclesiological Construct**

As our discourse suggests, Grenz’s nuanced communitarian theological ecclesiological framework points the way forward for an ecclesiology that takes seriously the postmodern and post-colonial sensitivities. Indeed, it is an attempt at seeking to develop a broader and grander evangelical ecclesiology that accounts appropriately for the multi-disciplinary and multi-contextual nature of our understanding of the Church in contemporary times. More specifically, Grenz sought to overcome the ecclesiological deficits often noted in the evangelical tradition while also upholding the evangelical affirmation of the Word of God as the organising principle of evangelical ecclesiology. Indeed, Grenz is not alone in this evangelical ecclesiological task. As our discourse suggests, other evangelicals (and others sympathetic to the evangelical tradition) have also provided instructive proposals for what an evangelical ecclesiology that takes into proper account the postmodern vis-à-vis post-colonial sensitivities. They directly and indirectly affirm Grenz’s call for a comprehensive evangelical ecclesiology that presents a bolder and more

ambitious theological and social vision, with nuanced perspective on the theological framework that informs such ecclesiology. From the array of proposals and thoughts, we shall briefly attempt to summarise Leanne Van Dyk's instructive proposal with some supporting comments from some evangelical scholars. After a brief historical evaluation of evangelical ecclesiology and brief description of the instructive proposals of the emerging church movement and the missional church movement, Van Dyk (2007:135) posits a version of a renewed evangelical ecclesiology that articulates a broad theological vision and practical fruitfulness that is in continuity with evangelical history. A renewed evangelical ecclesiology, she contends, will hold to the Word of God (not just in its Christological meaning, but also a full expansion of meaning that will include Scripture and sacrament), as the unifying motif. This understanding she holds has potential for a comprehensive ecclesiology with theological and social vision.

Such ecclesiology, she posits, would be first, an *incarnational ecclesiology*. It will be "incarnational in the sense that the Church confesses an incarnate Christ who is present to the community of faith in Scripture, preaching, worship, sacrament and service." Van Dyk contends that the practises of an evangelical congregation that lives out incarnational ecclesiology of the Word of God would include Christ-like ministries of justice and mercy that will address human concerns and felt needs, which would include a prophetic resistance to a deeply entrenched racism and sexism in church and society, calling to repentance and reconciliation when these sins have marred the community. Furthermore, Van Dyk (2007:133) affirms the missional theological emphasis that the church is the people of God, called by God to "embody a particular way of life that exemplifies the ontological reality of the eschatological future brought into the present by the incarnational reality of Jesus Christ." The mission of the Church is to participate in God's mission for the world.

As Van Dyk notes, seeing that the Church is now in a cultural context, radically different to the old paradigms of Christian cultural hegemony, a missional understanding of the Church will better allow for an articulation of a vision of the Church that challenges old assumptions and enables the Church to be a truly alternative community, a gospel community, an authentic witness to contemporary cultures (2007:134). Guder (2005:125), affirms Van Dyk's perspective in stating that to be "authentically evangelical, our ecclesiology must necessarily be missional." Guder states, "The divine strategy for the healing of the world is the calling, setting apart, formation and sending of a particular people whose witness has, as Newbigin puts it, universal intent" (2005:125). God's incarnational action in history, Guder states, "... provides the Church the content of its witness and defines how it is to be carried out." As such, our ecclesiology should pay particular close attention to the 'as' and the 'so' in John's missional summary (John20: 21) (Guder 2005:125).

Second, such an ecclesiology will be a *Trinitarian ecclesiology*. As Van Dyk notes, “It would be an inadequate ecclesiology that does not focus on one or another divine person.” Van Dyk (2007:136) notes that although a certain Trinitarian reductionism is often displayed in evangelical worship practices, sometimes tilted towards Jesus, or towards the Father, or the Holy Spirit, evangelicals will understand the Word of God to exist in full Trinitarian mutuality and unity. Thus, the Church exists as a people of the triune God and participates in the ultimate plans and purposes of the triune God.” Therefore, the practices of an evangelical community that lives out a Trinitarian ecclesiology will pay close attention to worship structures and music, “keenly interested in how worship structures reflect and honour the richness of the divine community” (Van Dyk 2007:136).

Furthermore as Van Dyk (2007:136) adds, in keeping with the evangelical tradition, the authority and inspiration of Scripture will be understood in richer context. The bible will no longer be seen as a litmus test of orthodoxy or an object to be guarded. Rather, the bible will be the “dynamic means of God’s presence and activity in the community of faith, the means by which the Spirit of God forms the people of God” (Van Dyk 2007:136). Informed by her evaluation of the Celtic Christian tradition, Dearborn (2003:67) also echoes the need for an evangelical ecclesiology that reflects more faithfully the nature of the Triune God. Dearborn contends that having our ecclesial identity in the Triune God would lead us to be less mono-ethnic in our congregations and more ecumenical. She notes that this is “especially pertinent because we are in the midst of a major shift in global Christianity from a predominance of northern Christians to that of Christians from the Southern Hemisphere” (2003:68). She contends, “Evangelical churches would be able to offer great hope in the midst of the world’s many fractured communities and reflect their identity in Christ more effectively by manifesting unity in the midst of diversity in local gatherings” (Dearborn 2003:68). She submits that the Celtic ecclesial tradition offers guidance for our quest to reflect more faithfully the nature of the Triune God in ways that are profoundly relevant for contemporary evangelicals. If our own identity is firmly anchored to our Triune God as Dearborn (2003:68) contends, we will be able to integrate deep centeredness in the Triune God with respect for those who believe differently.

Third, a renewed evangelical ecclesiology for contemporary times would by its very nature be a *sacramental ecclesiology*. As Van Dyk contends, in the community of faith, sacraments as well as Scripture present Christ. Van Dyk (2007:136) emphasises Calvin’s point that the “office of sacraments and the office of Scripture are one and the same – both set forth Christ and the grace that comes to us through Christ”. The practices of an evangelical ecclesiology that lives out a sacramental ecclesiology, as Van Dyk notes will include frequent celebration of the Lord’s Supper, which is a gift of God to the people of God that should not be spurned. Also, such ecclesiology would continue to lay emphasis within worship and congregational life to our



identity-shaping baptismal promises to each other. As Van Dyk (2007:137) submits, “because God is pleased in the sacraments to nourish and support us through the Spirit by means of common earthly elements (i.e. water, wine, bread), evangelical ecclesial practises shaped by the Word of God in a sacramental sense will also include tender attention to the common and earthly.” Nkurunziza (2007:51-56) provides helpful insights here. In African perspective, as Nkurunziza aptly notes, the nerve that holds all things invisible and visible is life, the vital union, which transcends the merely visible and biological and reaches out to the invisible world. As Nkurunziza explains, the essence of life in African context is vital union and the basic concept associated with life is symbol. Through symbol the duality between the visible and the invisible, the spiritual and the material are overcome; this enables a vital participation and union of all. Within this symbolic relationship between the spiritual and the material, as Nkurunziza notes, the African searches for life in fullness. The sacraments, Nkurunziza notes make concrete and actual the symbolic reality of the Church; the sacraments are sacred signs, symbol and expression of God’s grace. Thus, as Nkurunziza (2007:549) contends, “The Church, the family of God to be worthy of its name and mission in Africa, has to be the symbol, the primary sacrament that signifies and communicates life and vital union.”

Fourth, Van Dyk (2007:137) posits that a nuanced evangelical ecclesiology would continue to be *a proclamatory ecclesiology*, “because the Word of God, Jesus Christ, is present in the event of preaching through the power of the Holy Spirit.” While this is a mark of evangelical ecclesial practice that is already well attested, yet as Van Dyk (2007:137) contends, “the connection in the divine economy between the written word in Scripture, the preached word in sermon, and the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ, needs to be clearer so as to avoid a mechanistic biblicism or idolatrous charismatic focus on the preacher.” Although a constructive evangelical ecclesiology can be organised by the motif of ‘Word of God,’ “the persistent, gracious action of the Holy Spirit”, Van Dyk (2007:137) notes, must also be recognised and integrated at every level. The practices of a proclamatory evangelical ecclesial community would include a tangible commitment to Scripture, preaching and communication the gospel. This will be seen not only by the care and skill with which the Scripture is proclaimed, but also by a willingness to be corrected by the broader Christian community of interpreters and eagerness to proclaim Christ as Lord of all. Indeed, as Hunsberger (2003:128) observes, even if there is no clear consensus about how to define the nature of authority, biblical authority is essential to being evangelical. Hunsberger (2003:129) affirms the place of narrative in our evangelical propositional proclamation in stating:

Evangelicalism’s conviction on biblical authority will be important for the Church’s recovery of its missional identity, but evangelicalism will be able to contribute in this way only if it takes seriously the actual character of the biblical materials and responds with a hermeneutical approach and apologetic method conducive to narrative. It will also need to show how the Bible as narrative is community-formative.



Therefore, as Hunsberger (2003:129) notes, evangelicals will have to understand that biblical narrative renders meaning. In a precise sense, "... it renders the actions, character and purposes of God. The biblical narrative casts a fundamentally reoriented sense of the meaning of the world's life and by doing so draws the community attached to the story into its meaning so that the community imbibes and finally embodies that meaning." The normative way we have dealt with the biblical text, (wherein we determine its meaning in the original setting and then determine how it is to be understood and applied in the contemporary setting), subtly leaves us largely in charge of the transaction. The danger in this method, Hunsberger notes, is that our judgements are dominant. Instead, Hunsberger (2003:130) suggest a

Reading of the text that is missional in character and recognises that the text is in reality reading us. God through the text is engaging us and as readers our responsibility includes welcoming that reading of our world and circumstances. We will recognise that the Spirit asks new questions in the process: How does this text send us? How does it read us? How does it evangelise us? How does it convert us? How does it orient us to the coming reign of God?

Fifth, such an evangelical ecclesiology as Van Dyk (2007:138) posits will be *eschatological ecclesiology* because, "the church is sent by God to embody and proclaim the Word of God to a world that will be brought into 'life in the world to come' as the Nicene Creed says." And because "God's future has already illuminated the Church's present through Jesus Christ, the Church need not live in fear and anxiety. Rather, the Church has every reason to be confident in God's promises for the restoration of shalom" (Van Dyk 2007:138). This trust in God must be evident in our ecclesial practices as the eschatological community. In Van Dyk's estimation, an evangelical ecclesiology of the Word of God that is incarnational, Trinitarian, sacramental, proclamatory and eschatological, will give contours to an ecclesiology that has continuity with the evangelical tradition. In essence therefore, we can for the moment note that Grenz's nuanced communitarian theological ecclesiology is at its core evangelical. This is evident because Grenz:

- Envisions our being and becoming the ecclesial community in Trinitarian perspective
- Upholds the centrality and universality of the narrative of the Cross
- Seeks to hold to the evangelical affirmation of our being a people who gather around the Word and sacrament in fellowship and mutual edification
- Expounds that our core nature, as the ecclesial of the Triune God is to be a missional and incarnational community in every local context
- Visions the Church local and universal as an apostolic and proclaiming community, a catholic and reconciling community, a holy and sanctifying community and a unified yet diverse community
- Intrinsically, seeks to balance our proclamation of the propositional truth of Scripture within the community-constituting narrative of God's salvific work in history

- Visions the Church as the ecclesial community of reference and hopes that in the power of the Spirit it provides a taste of God's Kingdom in the here and now to the world and a witness to the coming eternal reign of Christ.

Therefore, in our present understanding, we submit that Grenz's promising proposal while remaining faithful to the evangelical tradition also provides contours for a contemporary evangelical ecclesiology that takes seriously the postmodern paradigm. Further, while it may not be directly intended, the theological, incarnational, missional, sacramental and communal ecclesiology Grenz seeks to expound may perhaps give a somewhat more coherent construct to the emergents postmodern ecclesiological vision. (As it were, a promising and helpful balance between the emergents emerging theology and ecclesial understanding and mainstream evangelical theological and ecclesiological conviction). Furthermore, if we view postmodernism as an ally of post-colonialism with the resulting challenges and opportunity as our discourse suggests, we presently hold that Grenz's communitarian theological ecclesiology may enable a Spirit-inspired innovative space in which we can begin to think otherwise about African evangelical theological enterprise, and articulate a communitarian ecclesial identity and expressions that are in tune with the songs, and narrate the story of the people of God within African communities. We will, therefore be better enabled to make the narrative of the cross a cultural and contextual reality in a particular place and time.

## Concluding Reflection

### Towards an emerging Afro-centric ecclesiological framework

While evangelical theologians vary on how we should envision theology in contemporary postmodern and post-colonial contexts, all agree that there is something emerging, shifting, changing in our understanding as the ecclesial community of God in Christ by the Spirit, vis-à-vis the need for a theological framework/method that informs our understanding of our being and becoming the ecclesial community. In many ways, the emerging church movement by its continuous questioning, reflection and re-visioning has opened up the possibility for these conversations not just in the Euro-American contexts, but also in Africa, Asia and South America. Sometimes, the quest is for a return to the old with new appropriation and application; other times, it is a call for innovation under the continued inspiration of the Spirit, faithfulness to the Scriptures and the narrative of the cross. In whatever way we respond to the present realities, it seems safe to say that the people of God are again living in interesting times in history.

As our discourse suggests, African theologians are agreed as to the need to develop a theological framework/method that will enable space for an Afro-centric ecclesial understanding that may not necessarily be determined by Euro-American presuppositions, (i.e. a more context sensitive theology). The approaches inherited from the West are regarded as inadequate, both because they do not deal with the kind of questions that are relevant to the African contexts, and because they sometimes lack the means of engaging African realities at a deeper level. This fact has now been made even more expedient by the ongoing postmodern and post-colonial challenge as discussed in our thesis. Western theological method is seen as not completely able to take up African socio-cultural, political and economic challenges from a theological perspective. In a more specific sense, we would probably be right in stating that the age-old question remains, how are we to be Christians, and yet Africans?

In our present understanding, for evangelical ecclesiology to be Afro-centric, should not necessitate an effort at crafting new doctrines. On the contrary, our theological-ecclesiological task should be to proclaim the Bible in thought forms and languages that are understandable and can relate to African contexts, as most African theologians have argued. In addition, we presently hold that Afro-centric ecclesiology should itself not be a mixture of Christianity, African cultures, traditional religions and held beliefs, which the Bible clearly opposes. (We here note the challenge to our efforts at missional ecclesial incarnation, contextualisation and inculturation). It is, therefore, only by returning to the Scripture again and again, as the Reformation fathers admonished us, that we have the hope of cutting away unfortunate cultural accretions to biblical faith, of condemning cultural elements that defy the Word of God, or are

inconsistent with God's gracious self-disclosure in our proclamation as the ecclesia community of God in Christ by the Spirit. Therefore, it is simply not enough to ask how African Christians can remain authentically African. We must equally ask how African Christians remain faithfully Christians (Vanhoozer 2007:26). To this end, contemporary Western theological perspectives should not be too easily dismissed. To label something as Western does not necessarily equate it to being invalid for Africa. After all, if Augustine influenced Luther, Calvin or Barth, perhaps there is no great danger in the latter influencing contemporary African theological reflections. Having said that, it is important, as many African evangelicals have argued, that we critically discern with appropriate modification, what is relevant and helpful in Euro-American theological perspectives, while leaving aside those that are not so helpful. It is our hope that the contribution of African theologians to enrich the theological trajectory (which will be and should be informed by their own contemporary contexts) should be taken seriously as a vital contribution to the apostolic faith. Katongole (2002:243) fittingly states that the "serious challenge facing us is how theology and biblical scholarship in Africa can help Africa voice its distinctive history and unique challenges, instead of being reduced to just another merely different, neat or beautiful chorus in the endless cacophony of inconsequential differences."

Informed by the emerging postmodern turn, emergents in dialogue with mainstream evangelicals have stressed the urgent need for a re-visioned ecclesiology that genuinely and authentically embraces the story and experience of the communities within which the Church exists. Proponents in their quest to take the far-reaching implications and opportunities of the emerging postmodern paradigm seriously posit that theological reflection is provisional, local and community specific. Emergents hold that ecclesial dialogue should be an open, earnest, not defensive conversation that binds both historical and contemporary communities of faith together in diverse yet united narrative as the ecclesial of God in Christ by the Spirit. The Church is thus a transforming missional community that proclaims a generous orthodoxy that is intrinsically connected with her orthopraxy within particular communities.

As our discourse suggests, emergents are advocating for a humble hermeneutic, which they argued should not be equated with apathy or relativistic pluralism. For emergents, therefore understanding theology as local, conversational, and provisional does not necessarily mean that we cannot hold the Christian doctrine with conviction. However, emergents argue that the bible depicts a beautiful, messy, incarnational truth. Truth is not just timeless and transcendent, but also time bound and imminent, and affirms the cultural and contextual influences inherent in our human quest to understand and proclaim the narrative of the cross. The generous orthodoxy and praxis-oriented ecclesiology emergents seek to develop, has, amongst others, the following factors:

- Embraces belonging before believing or becoming
- Understands the task of theology as not necessarily to ascertain correct conclusions, but rather as the right process in reaching new and better conclusions
- Sees informational-creedal understanding and right doctrinal articulation of Scripture as secondary and pietistic transforming experience of the Spirit as primary
- Affirms transcultural truth, while also affirming the cultural embeddedness of us who seek the truth
- Sees truth not just as timeless and transcendent, but also as time bound and imminent, and more significantly
- Affirms a scripturally faithful ecclesial expression that is missional, incarnational, sacramental, communitarian and contextual.

Furthermore, the missional impulses of the emerging church movement cannot be separated from the sense of community the proponents are seeking to foster. For emergents, therefore, the Kingdom of God vision ought to be the missional focus of every local ecclesial community. In our present understanding, and as our discourse suggests, we submit that we can begin critically and appropriately to model ecclesial identities and expressions that take seriously both the emerging postmodern situation and post-colonial realities along these categories. Having said that, we do not in anyway suggest that we should necessarily adopt everything the emerging church movement stands for. We here note the significant importance of our being an ecclesial community of resistance and hope, as discussed above. Very likely, as we have highlighted above, the emergents' theological intentionality may well be the ECM's most important strength. In our present understanding, there is something redemptive, refreshing and enriching in the on-going ECM conversation. It is a commitment to a refreshing pursuit of God and an invitation to a dynamic and sometimes challenging conversation. To be sure, emergents are bringing to the fore the significance of bible, tradition and culture vis-à-vis contemporary social sciences for contemporary evangelical ecclesiological visioning.

Indeed, Grenz (200:287) as our key evangelical discourse partner fittingly notes that community plays a formative role in shaping not only one's personal conviction but also one's conception of rationality. Being a Christian, as Grenz argues, also entails membership in a specific community, which is the fellowship of those who have come to know the God of the Bible through Jesus Christ by the Spirit. Viewed from this perspective, Grenz (2000:287) posits that theology emerges as the disciples of Jesus seek to understand the faith they share. "Christian theology, in other words, entails the determination and articulation of the belief-mosaic of the Christian faith." Ecclesial being and becoming is thus a conversation between, the **Bible** – as the primary voice in the theological conversation, **Tradition** – the hermeneutical trajectory of the theological conversation and **Culture** – the wider context of the theological conversation. It is important to state that any particular ecclesial community in whatever expression will be

Christian if it holds to a biblical **Trinitarian** motif, a **communitarian** integrative motif and an **eschatological** orienting motif. Grenz, in positing a more contemporary theological framework seeks to provide a biblical focus, theologically coherent and culturally sensitive understanding of theology and the Church. The extent to which he has achieved this in an evangelical manner is open to debate in the evangelical community, as we have highlighted above. Amongst others, the key concerns raised include: the place Grenz gives to the authority of Scripture in the theological task, the universal and unique nature of Christian truth claims, the role of reason and experience in our understanding and appropriation of what is revealed, and the essential nature of the ecclesial community as it relates to the salvific story of God in the here and now and the future to come.

As we continue to reflect on the nature and purpose of the ecclesial community of the Triune God in contemporary times, we are comforted by Migliore's assertion that theology arises from the freedom and responsibility of an ecclesial community to inquire about its faith in God. And, in our theological construct we cannot emphasize reasoned right doctrine at the expense of our transformational experience of the Cross. As Migliore (2004: 9) states, "If Christian faith causes us to think, this is not to say that being Christian is exhaustive in thinking, even in thinking about the doctrines of the Church. Faith sings, confesses, rejoices, suffers, prays and acts." To focus strictly on correct doctrinal affirmations seems seriously deficient in the light of the emerging postmodern and post-colonial paradigms. To be sure, many evangelical theologians have also affirmed this understanding. The extent to which it has been reflected in our ecclesial proclamation is a question we continue to ponder. Thus, in our present understanding, we should not take an either/or approach to propositions and narratives in the theological construct.

In the end, our theological reflection must not be divorced from ecclesial life and practice. As Migliore (2004:9) asserts, "If theory without practice is empty, practice without theory is blind. How are Christians to know whether this or that action is for the sake of Christ and the coming Kingdom?" "If faith is the direct response to the hearing of God's word of grace and judgement, theology is the subsequent, but necessary reflection of the Church on its language and practice of faith. And this reflection happens at many levels and in many different life contexts" (Migliore 2004:10). Further, our theological construct should not divorce historical Christian traditions from the contemporary context. In visioning the path(s) for the future we must keep in proper perspective where the Church has been. In envisioning the Church today, we stand on the shoulders of giants who have gone before us. Our continuous challenge in being and becoming the ecclesial community is consistently and faithfully to proclaim and live the truth of Scripture (and its tensions), without neglecting the wisdom of culture and contemporary realities. After all, all truth is God's. The Spirit continues to speak to us today as the Spirit did

then and the cross of Christ continues to makes us partakers of one body with manifold expressions. In our present understanding, therefore, the narrative of the cross remains the same and true; the methods employed are contextually conditioned! No matter how that ecclesial identity and expression is contextually coloured it does not mean that what is beneficial in one context could not be significantly relevant for another. Yet, particular contextual ecclesial expressions should not automatically be made universal for all contexts. As such, we should in our theological reflections seek to be global and local in keeping with the Scriptural description of the Church as a body comprising of many parts— the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. We should proclaim unity without the loss of enriching diversity! As such, we affirm Migliore's (2004:11-15) assertion that four central questions must be asked in our systematic theological task of articulating evangelical ecclesiology in contemporary times. As Migliore asserts, we must ask:

- Do the proclamation and practice of the community of faith remain true to the revelation of God in Jesus as attested in Scripture?
- Do the proclamation and practice of the community of faith give adequate expression to the whole truth of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ?
- Do the proclamation and practice of the community of faith represent the God of Jesus Christ as a living reality in the present context?
- Does the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ by the community of faith lead to transforming practice in personal and social life?

In our present understanding, even though not necessarily directly, the constructive framework Grenz proposes for a renewed evangelical theological perspective does address and clarify these queries. In our present understanding, we affirm that Grenz may indeed have enabled a Spirit-inspired innovative space for visioning an evangelical ecclesial identity and expression that is theologically coherent, biblically faithfully, culturally and contextually informed. In essence, therefore, we submit that the quest for a contextual ecclesial identity and expression in Africa is also a similar challenge to Euro-American contexts (and any other context for that matter). Simply put, it is a shared effort at interpreting and translating the revelation of the Triune God as revealed in Scripture, testified to and lived in history, into wisdom for everyday living for contemporary times, generation after generation.

We are presently convinced that evangelicals in all contexts should continue with a renewed sense to reflect with nuanced perspective on the Protestant vision of *Sola Scriptura*, *Sola gratia*, *Sola fide*, *Sola Christus*, *Soli Deo Gloria* that has thus far under girded our evangelical theological formulation and ecclesiological vision. Ecclesial being and becoming in whatever form and expression, with increased sensitivity to the diversity of culture, should be informed by continued contemporary reflection on the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church, while also keeping in mind that the one Church could also be seen as many, charismatic, local and



prophetic. Our vision therefore, is for an ecclesiological understanding that is constantly forming and reforming as inspired by the Holy Spirit— holding this to be true that all theological musings are in one sense or the other, contextual. In the end therefore, our conscience should always (in the words of Martin Luther) remain captive to the Word of God. Ultimately, our hope is for Afro-centric evangelical ecclesial identity(ies) and expression(s) that are biblically faithful, sociologically aware, contextually transforming and theologically coherent. Informed by our discourse in this thesis and in our developing understanding, we propose that nuanced reflection on the following ideas, may offer a promising point of departure. We note that our intent here is briefly to highlight our present thoughts with the hope of unpacking, qualifying and expounding on them as our understanding gets more grounded. The Afro-centric evangelical ecclesial construct will thus include nuanced reflections on:

- A. The Trinity - as the structural motif. Such musing will entail reflection on the perichoretic union the Triune God and on the perfection of God, the centrality of Christ, and the work of the Holy Spirit. This will include how the Trinity speaks within and to African reality.
- B. The concept of Community - as the integrative motif (i.e. what do mean by community in an African sense). This reflection will entail our participation in the Triune nature of God as the Church of God in Christ through the Holy Spirit. It should be an evangelical ecclesial vision that
  - Enables participation (i.e. no either or approach to believing before belonging or belonging before believing)
  - Visions the Church in Africa as the Family of God (i.e. God honouring), the Community of Disciples in Christ (i.e. a Christ-centred community saved by grace through faith in Christ), and the Temple of the Holy Spirit (i.e. a Spirit empowered community that lives, ethically reflects and proclaims the holiness of God).
  - Visions every local church as a loving Community that faithfully fellowships, worships and prays and is socially sensitive (i.e. allows for God's image to shine in the narrative of the local community – a community that journeys individually together).
- C. The Spirit speaking through the narrative of Scripture. The African evangelical ecclesial Community will be a community of the Word. It will be
  - A Community that lives and proclaims the Word and upholds the centrality and universality of the narrative of the Cross
  - An ecclesial people that individually and collectively live in Christ-likeness as empowered by the Holy Spirit
  - A sent community of disciples making disciples in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit
  - A reconciling community that invites the world into the Triune communion of Love
  - A community where preaching and teaching is foundational

- D. Our being a Missional and Incarnational community. This will entail an African understanding of our being a missional ecclesial community that affirms Contextual Evangelism, **and** relational Discipleship – An incarnational community of God that seeks to incarnate Christ in every local community in the power of the Spirit (i.e. contextual and value sensitive).
- E. Our being a Liturgical and Sacramental Community that
- Uphold baptism by immersion in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit
  - Continue to celebrate the Lord's Supper...
  - Enable space for contextual (and perhaps innovative and creative) ecclesial practices and Spirit-inspired worship expressions
  - Enable liturgies of holistic and passionate spirituality
  - Constantly keeping in proper perspective the fear of the Lord and the challenge of being relevant
- F. Our being an Apostolic and Prophetic community that
- Plants contextual and missional churches in the power of the Spirit
  - Upholds the Apostolic, prophetic, pastoral, evangelistic and teaching ministry
  - Affirms the priesthood of all believers (i.e. every member a minister)
  - Proclaims the infallible truth of Scripture with missional boldness and humility
- G. On the need for an Afro-centric ecclesial vision that is Improvisational
- Afro-centric ecclesial vision should celebrate and develop on the wisdom of both systematic and narrative theology
  - Not hold an either or approach to Scriptural propositional truth claims and the community-constituting narrative of Scripture,
  - Enable an Afro-centric contextual yet biblical hermeneutic (i.e. a Hermeneutic of Inculturation)
  - Always in conversation with contemporary paradigms and thoughts
  - Continue to provide a Scripturally holistic response to the supernatural and mystical in African reality
- H. On the need for an Afro-centric ecclesial identity that is Global and Local
- Affirm the Church as Universal, One and Catholic
  - Provide an adequate response to the challenge of globalization and contextualization
  - Always affirming our being a historical and contemporary Community
  - As Historical community we should hold to
    - The work of God in and through Israel
    - The narrative of Christ and the Cross
    - All of Church History
    - The Apostles Creed
    - The Nicene Creed

- The Athanasian Creed
- We should also put in perspective our African History
  - Colonial and Post-colonial
  - African Church History
  - Contemporary African Communities (i.e. a contemporary ecclesial community of reference, hope and resistance)

In the light of the variety of people and cultures in Africa, the Church in Africa has an incredible advantage of demonstrating how ecclesial unity in diversity is possible and how this variety may indeed be a blessing. Therefore, the Afro-centric evangelical ecclesial vision must enable space for unity in diversity, contextual ecclesial expressions with emphasis on local and particular expressions, without compromising our being the people of the one God, one Lord, one baptism and Holy Spirit. In essence, pluriformity and variety may perhaps be true essence of catholicity and ecumenicity.

- I. On our being an eschatological ecclesial community that celebrates our already and not yet essence and serves in the power of the Spirit, as witness, sign and taste of the coming Kingdom of God in Christ.

Perhaps we can term our developing construct an emerging post-colonial Afro-centric evangelical ecclesiology?

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