

Restoring Hope to the Church in Western Culture:

*Exploring the Relationship
Between Culture, Theology, and the Church*

Take care that you do not forget the LORD your God... When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery... If you do forget the LORD your God and follow other gods to serve and worship them, I solemnly warn you today that you shall surely perish.

~ Deut. 8: 11-19 ~

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Introduction

A Personal Introduction

In fashion befitting the goal of my project, I begin with a confession and a story. The confession is that I do not truly know from where I begin, but only from where I find myself. Where I find myself is in the midst of serious questions regarding the church in Western culture and its understanding of the God it claims to worship. I find myself a member of a minority group within the church of Western culture which believes that, moving beyond some of the trappings of modernity, we ought to be engaged in serious work in terms of rethinking issues of theology, ecclesiology, and missiology. I find myself a young theological student, disenchanted with his experience of the church's witness in a hurting world, desperate to find expression for something which might give God's people vision and hope for the future.¹

All these places I find myself are of course inseparable from my larger life story, but the particular part of that story which bears significance here is rather brief. Shortly after I decided to use my remaining eight units toward a Master of Arts in Theology degree at Fuller Theological Seminary to work on a masters thesis, I decided to visit one of my professors to talk through some of my ideas. As we began to talk he asked me, "So what do you think you'll be writing about?" I told him that I'd like to explore the ways in which our approach to theology and theological education shape pastors and

¹ We must not be fooled. Simply because Jesus promised that the Gates of Hell would not prevail against the church (Mt. 16:18), we ought not be so arrogant or naive so as to think that it cannot become disconnected from Jesus as its Lord and therefore in danger of rebuke (like the churches in Revelation), destruction (like Israel before the exile or Jerusalem before its destruction in 70 AD), or worse, a subtle apathy and mediocrity (like many other contexts within the Western and non-Western world). *God has always* and seemingly *always will* work through the people he saves for himself, the remnant. I suppose, in some small way, this paper is an attempt to help the church in Western culture not force God's hand in that way. May we save God from resorting to the last ditch effort of remnant mission by humbling ourselves, repenting of where we have gone wrong, and, like Nineveh of long ago, ask God for mercy that we might live and live for the sake of the world.

leaders who then shape the lives of churches and their members.” He leaned back and looked up toward the ceiling as he thought about what I just said. After a brief pause, he came back with, “Well that’s right backwards isn’t it?” “Oh no,” I thought, “there goes my whole thesis.” He continued, “After all, it’s the church which shapes theology not the other way round.”² He is a good professor – he got me thinking.

A Problem to Address

The fact of the matter is that it is both. There is a reciprocal relationship between the church who does and shapes theology and the way that theology comes to shape the church. It was God’s initial action within history that created human beings and ultimately a special covenant community which would, in turn, forever shape theology. In this sense, theology is created by people based on God’s action within history. It is our attempt to make sense of who God is and what that means for us.

However, once this process was begun, it became true that the theological reflection done by God’s people would forever continue to shape them as a people. Once we make theological decisions we attempt to live our lives accordingly. In this sense, theology shapes us as a people. It is the result of our submitting to our understanding of who God is what that means for us. The sentiment I aim to express here is the same as that of Winston Churchill when he said, “We shape our buildings; thereafter they shape us.”

But this is not what I, and many people like myself, have been led to believe. We have grown up and been educated in a (church) world where it was assumed that ones theology was developed in the classroom or in private study. The search was for an objective understanding of God (or perhaps Scripture) that could be stated propositionally

² Conversation with Dr. John Goldingay at Fuller Theological Seminary, summer ’06.

and translated into the life and practice of the church like a recipe or strategic plan.

Theology was done first and church life was its result. Here's what my professor was on to. That it is the church, as it lives its life, which comes to espouse theology, not merely theology which creates and shapes the church.

And more than this, the move from modernity to postmodernity has also disclosed to us the inevitable way in which we are influenced by context and culture. It is not merely that the Church shapes theology, which in turn shapes the Church, but also that the unique context and culture in which this takes place further affects this relationship. Not only did foundationalism within modernity serve to separate theology from the life of the church, but it also sought to overcome that which I will argue is not only not able to be overcome, but also stands as a vital component of faithful Christian theology, church witness, and spiritual formation – culture.

It is here that we return to my initial confession. I do not truly know from where I begin. Perhaps I am beginning with theological insights and working out implications for the church. Or, on the other hand, maybe I have come to believe certain things about the church and they have driven me to rethink the corresponding theology. The two are forever (and *purposefully* as opposed to hopelessly) intertwined with each other and with the culture from which they emerge.

The Aim of This Project

What I aim to show in this paper is *not* the we need to know from where we begin, but quite the opposite, that there is no real way of knowing and that this is quite the way it ought to be. The life and mission of the church shape its theology and at the same time its theology shapes its life and mission. Culture affects them both. It is when

we accept and cultivate this understanding that spiritual formation, in its truest sense, occurs. I suppose then that the thesis of this paper may be stated as simply as this: That on account of the Church's adoption of a foundationalist approach to epistemology in Western modernity which ignored the cultural responsibilities of the people of God, the practices of theological education and ecclesial participation were separated, grievously damaging both, thus changing our *understanding of* and *drive toward*, spiritual formation.³ I further hope to show that narrative approaches to theology and missional forms of ecclesiology provide the correctives to this illusory separation and hence hope for the church in Western culture as it regains a faithful understanding of spiritual formation.

In order to best understand the hope I believe these approaches to understanding God and His mission in the world hold for the Church in Western culture,⁴ it will be necessary to begin by investigating (1.1) the dynamics of the Church's relationship to culture. Specifically, we will concern ourselves with (1.2) the church's relationship to modern culture and the rise of foundationalism as an epistemology the church (too uncritically) adopted. From here, we will be in a better position to discuss (1.3) the cultural shift from modernity to postmodernity and how the church might choose to address this shift and not repeat the same mistakes as our modern predecessors. In the

³ The damage has come because this separation can only ever be an illusion. We have been fooling ourselves into believing that we can in fact separate these practices. We need to wake up to the reality of their inevitable relationship to one another.

⁴ I do not mean to imply that approaches to theology and ecclesiology in and of themselves are the hope of the church in Western culture – this role belongs to God and God alone. It is God and not our gropings after him that is our one true hope. What I am suggesting, however, is that narrative approaches to theology and missional forms of ecclesiology help us to recover just this distinction. I own this important distinction to a three-part series of messages (<http://www.desiringgod.org/Events/RegionalConferences/2006/>) delivered by John Piper at a 2006 Desiring God Regional Conference entitled, "God is the Gospel."

conclusion to this section I will both summarize my arguments as well as suggest that on account of modern characteristics, our understanding of and value for spiritual formation were, if not lost, badly marred..

After exploring these relationships and changes, we will move more directly into an understanding of narrative approaches to theology. First, it will be necessary to (2.1) provide a guiding definition and explanation of what is meant by narrative theology.

After doing this will we consider (2.2) the practice of communal discernment and its role as a connection between narrative theology and missional ecclesiology. Finally, we will (2.3) survey the three-volume work of non-foundationalist⁵ theologian, James McClendon: *Ethics, Doctrine, and Witness*, as an example of a narrative approach to theology and its connection to missional ecclesiology. In my conclusion to this section I will address what implications I believe narrative approaches to theology have for theological education and spiritual formation.

From here our focus will turn to what is meant by missional ecclesiology. My aims in this section will be to explore (3.1) how missional ecclesiology understands and seeks to overcome the cultural and theological crises described in the previous two sections and (3.2) what some of the distinctives of missional churches are. I will summarize this section in the conclusion by way of (3.3) commenting on the relationship

⁵ There is a worth-while discussion between those who consider themselves non-foundationalists and those seeking what they call a post-foundationalist option with regard to epistemology. In preparing for this project I read both J. Wentzel van Huyssteen's, *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology* as well as F. LeRon Shults's, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*. Besides McClendon's three-volume theology, I also read *Theology Without Foundations* by Stanley Hauerwas, Nancy Murphy, and Mark Nation. It seems that the primary charge leveled against non-foundationalists by post-foundationalists is that they end up as either relativists or fideists. I believe the non-foundationalist authors noted here have good responses to these charges. In the end, it seems that both these groups understand the need to move beyond foundationalism and that in many cases their approaches are more similar than some give them credit for. Thus, since we are here primarily concerned with the work of James McClendon, I will defer to the term he uses, non-foundationalism.

between missional ecclesiology and the emerging church discussion/movement.

In conclusion, I hope to both summarize and illustrate the aims of this project by suggesting how three central church practices might be understood given their narrative and missional significance. I will also argue that it is through understanding and participating in church practices in this way that we may ultimately recover authentic spiritual formation and that all this contributes to what I will be arguing constitutes a hope for the church in Western culture.

1.1 - Church and Culture

There is no separating Church and culture, nor should there be. To speak of a Church outside culture is as non-sensical as speaking of a waterless sea or a treeless forest. As water comprises the sea and as trees collect into forests, so too the church is inseparable from culture. The clothes we wear, the words we use, the buildings we construct, our rhythms of life, our traditions and habits, where and how we eat and drink – these are all cultural phenomena. They are only cultured people who comprise congregations, cultured and contextualized ways of speaking and acting that mark church members and communities. I will attempt no exhaustive definition of culture, but will submit that it is as inescapable as the air we breathe.

In 1951, H. Richard Niebuhr wrote what was to become a classic text on the relationship between the Christian church and culture, *Christ and Culture*. The primary criticism leveled against Niebuhr's work is his monolithic treatment of culture as though it were one, fixed and immovable thing to which Christ (and therefore Christians) might relate. His five options were; Christ against culture, Christ of culture, Christ above culture, Christ and culture in paradox, and Christ the transformer of culture.⁶ Culture, however, is not monolithic, some uniform way of being that Christ and Christians may for once and all choose how to relate.

What will primarily concern us in this section will be the philosophical and epistemological trends which developed within modernity and were translated into the field of theology, greatly effecting the Western church, its practice and witness, and the notion of spiritual formation. However, before moving into a more detailed discussion of

⁶ Richard H. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1951).

some of the unique elements of modern Western culture, I wish to suggest that, narratively speaking, the Church is called to relate to culture(s) in two primary ways.

Church as Creator of Culture

The first is that the church, or more broadly, the covenant community of God, has always been called to be a creator and sustainer of culture in its own right, a culture centrally marked by the character and nature of the God who created the community in the first place. If we think through the people and groups of the older testament such as Abraham, Moses, David, the patriarchs, kings, judges, and prophets, we see constant effort of God's part to help Israel increasingly become the kind of people that God intends for them to be. They are called to be a holy people (Deut. 7:6), a Kingdom of priests (Ex. 19:6), a light to the Gentiles (Isa. 49:6). These are all cultural ways of being and living. Over and above these examples stands the giving of the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20) which, perhaps more than anything else, set God's people apart as those who would create a kind of culture predicated on their allegiance to Yahweh.

God continues this trend into the era of the newer testament. Jesus calls his disciples to see, think, act, and live in a certain way. He reminds his followers of their calling to be the salt of the earth (Matt. 5:13) and a light to the Gentiles (Luke 2:32). Like the Ten Commandments before them, The Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount stand out as a primary New Testament examples of what it means to be the people of God (Mt. 5-7). The apostle Paul, as he ventured across the known world, labored to create messianic communities around the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth. His admonitions to them to live lives worthy of their calling (Eph. 4:1) and to be transformed in the renewing of their minds (Rom. 12:1) also display the sense in which the covenant

community of God has always been expected to create and shape culture based on the character and nature of the God whom they worship.

I would say that it is the unique honor of God's people that they get to embody what we might call a "Kingdom culture." By this I mean that it is the Church, as God's covenant community, which takes upon itself the responsibility of demonstrating what life in God's Kingdom looks like. In recognizing Jesus, and not any other person or group, as Lord, the Church seeks to live its life and engage in its mission with respect to this relationship. In addition to drawing on the metaphors of God as husband and God's people as bride (Isa. 62:5), and Christ as head and Church as body (Eph. 5:23), we add a third - that God is King and the rest of the creation is addressed as God's Kingdom (Mark 4:26-31). The Church, as the community who seeks to live within this reality, witnesses to it by its particular way of life, its culture.⁷

Church as Discerner of Cultures

There is yet another sense in which the church is called to relate to culture – that of discernment. As the people of God have gone about their unique task as a covenant people, they have always also had occasion to look at and relate to others made in the image of God and addressed by God's Spirit in attempt to identify what could be embraced and what stood in contrast to God's design. More subtly, there are quite certainly multitudes of instances in which there is no easy way for followers of God to say a simple "yes" or "no" to certain cultural elements. Instead, they have needed to nuance the situation by saying, "yes, but" or "no, unless."

⁷ Beyond the scope of our discussion here, but with regard to the notion of "Kingdom," is the "political" dimension of the church's relationship to culture. I highly recommend the works of John Howard Yoder and Richard Horsley with regard to this issue. Also, see Appendix A – *Church and Empire: Toward an Understanding of the New Testament in the Context of Roman Empire and Present Day Implications*.

Again, turning to the narrative of Scripture, we may be reminded of all three of these sorts of interchanges between God's covenant people and the various dimensions of other cultures. We have positive instances like Abraham's encounter with Melchizedek (Gen 14:20) or Peter's experience with Cornelius (Acts 10). We also have more negative instances like God's command to the Israelites to utterly destroy those in the lands they were to possess (Deut. 7:2) and Jesus' refusal to compromise with the groups like the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Zealots (Mt. 23). Finally, we also have examples of the more nuanced ways of relating church and culture in the stories which depict Cyrus as a messiah (Ezra. 1:1), Jonah, a prophet evangelized by the people he longed for God to destroy (Jonah 4), or Paul's engagement with the Athenians as he pointed out the One True God in the writing of their own poets (Acts 17:28). In these instances there is no simple "yes" or "no" to be said from one culture to another, but rather only a humble recognition that the others are indeed on to something.

Church and Culture Today

The church's tasks today are no different. The primary callings on the church with regard to culture are offensive and not defensive ones. The church is to be proactive in creating and shaping culture, not separatist or sectarian. Additionally, the church needs to be actively discerning God's presence and the work of the Holy Spirit within cultures and ought to expect to be surprised. We must not operate out of fear or arrogance. We are yet called to be the creators and sustainers of a certain kind of culture, one still marked by the character and nature of God, but more explicitly, the character and nature of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. The church's culture then is to be incarnational, cruciform, and resurrectional.

The church is called to relate to culture incarnationally by its willingness to be present with those we aim to bless, to go and live amongst rather than stay and call out, and like Paul, to become all things to all people that by all possible means we may save some (1 Cor. 9:22). That the relation between the church and culture is to be cruciform means that are willing to suffer and die at the hands of the very people we mean to bless. It means that we relinquish all concern for the things of this world, including our very lives, for the sake of others. It means that, like Jesus, we understand our lives as kernels of wheat to be scattered to the ground in the hope of reproduction (Jn 12:24). Finally, we are to have a resurrectional sort of relationship to culture. We are to be the proclaimers and embodiment of the new which comes in Christ. Our lives and witness are to point beyond us, beyond the here and now, to God's future. To be part of the community of the church is to devote oneself to life within this kind of culture and all this entails.

And we are yet to be discerning of the other cultural dimensions which surround us. There is no monolithic culture to which we can relate in any particular way. The church will at times find itself needing to relate to various elements of different cultures in all of Niebuhr's ways and probably still others. In and through Christian community, Christians are called to seek the wisdom and guidance of the Holy Spirit as they engage culture in attempt to listen and look for the that marked by God. Paul's advice in 1 Thessalonians remains wise, "Test everything. Hold on to the good." (5:21) It is only when the church does this that it is able to be holistically spiritually formed. If it merely seeks to create its own culture it loses its incarnational witness. If it overly indulges its host culture it fails to be cruciform. And if it does neither, as is the case with far too

many churches today, it offers no new life and forfeits its resurrectional dimension. This, I believe, was largely the case within modernity.

1.2 – Church and Modern Culture

Modern Culture

People often mean different things when they speak of modernity or modern culture. For our purposes here, this definition will suffice for a starting point.

Modernity is the name given to the most influential way of understanding the vast changes that have happened to western culture during the past two centuries or more. It speaks of a cultural condition that has permeated every aspect of human life... Modernity is characterized by the rise of capitalism, by confidence in the power of reason, by the triumph of liberal democracy over other political systems, by a decline in the public importance of religion, and by belief in progress.⁸

There is no shortage of opinions regarding when the modern age in Western culture can be said to have begun. Probably the most convincing time to which the modern era can be traced is the age of the Enlightenment which began in the seventeenth century in Europe and traveled to the United States shortly thereafter, mainly in the eighteenth century. Within this period there came to be marked change in virtually all spheres of thought; philosophical, astronomical, governmental, psychological, and of course, theological. As Westerners made great sociological and technological advances people became increasingly skeptical about all the ideas, customs, and traditions that they had inherited from their predecessors.

It is with regard to this modern culture that I am claiming the church in the West, in large measure, failed in its responsibility to carry out the twin cultural tasks of creating and discerning that I described above. How the church failed will become more apparent

⁸ Andrew J. Kirk and Kevin J. Vanhoozer, eds., *To stake a Claim: Mission and the Western Crisis of Knowledge*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1999), xiv.

in the sections on narrative and missional ecclesiology which are to follow. Here, I simply want to begin by commenting on how modern culture contributed to the divide between theology and the church and how this has changed how we understand what it means to be spiritually formed.

Drawing from the work of Bruno Latour, Nancey Murphy notes that “the first modern move was to distinguish nature from culture. Nature is transcendent, always ‘out there’ to be discovered, not created. Culture, or society, however, is what we freely make; thus we know it immanently.”⁹ This illustrates the modern predilection for distinguishing between the objective and the subjective. “The double irony is that the laws of nature are known only as they are *fabricated* in the laboratory by the new *social order* of scientists, whereas society turns out to transcend the humans who created it – it has an *objectivity* of its own.”¹⁰ Murphy’s point here is simply to show that although modernity sought and claimed it, there is no such thing as true objectivity.

She goes on to note another hallmark of modernity, “the attempt to free intellectual pursuits from the influence of religion.”¹¹ Since what was most important in modernity was the pursuit of objective truth every attempt was made to free ourselves of those things which could taint and influence thought and work, religion was seen as chief among those influential factors. Murphy quotes Latour who says,

Spirituality was reinvented: the all-powerful God could descend into men’s heart of hearts without intervening in any way in their external affairs. A wholly individual and wholly spiritual religion made it possible to criticize both the ascendancy of science and that of society, without needing to bring God into either. The modern could now be both secular and pious at the same time.¹²

⁹ Nancey Murphy, *Anglo-American Postmodernity*, (Colorado: Westview Press, 1997), 173.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 173.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 173.

¹² *Ibid.*, 173-174.

“To recognize such a state of affairs,” Murphy says, “is to begin to transcend it... It calls into question the compartmentalization of reality – God, nature, society – but it does not tell us how to reunite them.” We will attend this matter in due course, but we have already gotten ahead of ourselves. To more fully understand these modern yearnings for objectivity, certainty, and a reductionistic (compartmentalized) view of reality we need to understand what gave rise to them - foundationalism.

Foundationalism

“Foundationalism is a theory about knowledge. More specifically, it is a theory about how claims to knowledge can be justified.”¹³ Using the image of a building as a metaphor, foundationalists submit that there must be some solid foundational belief upon which all others rest for their justification – thereby avoiding the seemingly paralyzing pitfall of infinitely regressing or circular reasoning. French philosopher, Rene Descartes is largely regarded as the father of foundationalism.

Nancy Murphy notes, “It was a fateful day when Descartes, forced by cold weather to stay in a warm room in Germany, examined his ‘ideas,’ while meditating on the architecture visible through his window.”¹⁴ It was on this day that Descartes made it his business to doubt all that he possibly could until he arrived at a foundational truth which could not be rationally doubted and therefore would be universally valid as a starting point to establish subsequent truth claims. It needs to be noted that Descartes believed his project to be in the service of the church and humanity in general. Racked by the painful reality of the thirty years war, it seems that Descartes’ hope was to help people once and for all avoid ideological differences by appealing to reason and

¹³ Ibid., 9.

¹⁴ Ibid., 9.

rationality. His thinking seems to have gone, “Given that reason and rationality are universally available, shouldn’t we all be able to arrive at the same conclusions about the nature of reality and what is best for humanity?”

Descartes is perhaps most famous for the dictum, “*cogito ergo sum*” - I think, therefore, I am. Since he found no rational way in which he could doubt it, this was the foundational truth which served Descartes as a foundation for the rest of his conclusions. In this one phrase, we can see the beginnings of the distinctives we explored above and how it is at odds with Christianity.

“I think, therefore, I am,” is stated as an objective truth claim. There are no qualifiers with regard to context or culture; it is simply an objective fact. The problem is whether or not it is wise or even adequate to develop theories of knowledge based on these sorts of facts or if our faith ultimately rests in the hope that our beliefs can be truly objective, unaffected by anything outside of our own minds.¹⁵ It is also an exercise in certainty. This sort of expression or foundational belief leaves no room for faith;¹⁶ one simply must be convinced based on the reasonableness of the claim. Christians are those who believe, hope, and trust by faith, not by certainty.¹⁷ Finally, it is a reductionistic assertion. It begins (and perhaps ends) with the individual. It communicates that if we are to understand anything we must begin with ourselves. This wars against the biblical notion of understanding oneself by virtue of the community, context, and culture one is a part of.¹⁸ Nevertheless, foundationalism as a means through which people came to

¹⁵ Nevermind how our minds may already be affected. See Romans 1-2 as well as Rom. 12:1-3.

¹⁶ Or, perhaps it would be better to say that it overlooks or ignores exactly what it is placing faith in, namely, one’s ability to trust their own personal conclusions and convictions.

¹⁷ Rom. 5:2, Gal. 5:5, Col. 1:23.

¹⁸ I am thinking here of the way that God addresses Israel as a nation, the church as the body of Christ, and believers as “one” with each other. This is not to discredit the personal dimension of how we relate to God,

understand and interpret their world came to dominate Western culture, and the church, by and large, followed suit.

The Church in Modern Culture

To see the ultimate connection this part of our discussion has with the church in modern culture, we need to note that foundationalists have been divided into two general categories. Within modernity, “foundationalist philosophers have pursued two broad strategies in seeking categories of beliefs suited to serve as justification for the rest of knowledge.”¹⁹ Empiricists seek to advance foundationalist knowledge based on sense-data, trusting that which we sense and perceive as reliable and therefore counting as knowledge. The other strategy was a rationalist one. Rather than trusting in senses and experience to provide knowledge, this strategy emphasized reason and logic. This was the strategy which Descartes seemed to employ. Descartes relied on his cognitive capacity to arrive at what he concluded to be objective and universally accessible truth.

Because the church had become civilized in its wedding to the state under Constantine in the fourth century, it is not all that difficult to see how it would have merely gone with the flow in terms of the trends of history within the period of the Enlightenment and in the age of modernity.²⁰ As Descartes foundationalist understanding of epistemology²¹ took hold in various spheres of life, the church, in both its theological

just highlight that throughout the biblical account it is assumed that peoples identities are wrapped up in external circumstances.

¹⁹ Nancey Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*, (Pennsylvania: Trinity International Press, 1996), 90.

²⁰ Space does not permit, but here would be an excellent place for an excursus on the idea of Christendom (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christendom>). We may simply note that once Christianity became a state-sponsored religion, it gradually lost its ability to fulfill either of the above-mentioned cultural responsibilities and its apostolic mission and witness. The effects of Christendom in modernity on the church in Western culture are amazingly imbedded and pervasive.

²¹ I understand there is a difference between strong Cartesian foundationalism and others. Unless otherwise noted, when I refer to foundationalism, it is Cartesian.

and practical endeavors, followed suit.

In the modern period, theologians far too uncritically adopted this foundationalist system and operated out of it as they went about their task. Following the philosophical split between empiricists (those who looked to sense-data) and rationalists (those who looked to cognition), Christianity was bifurcated into two main groups, conservatives and liberals.

Foundationalism has had a powerful influence of the development of modern theology. Theologians have been captivated by the picture of their theology as a building needing a solid foundation. But what is that foundation to be? The short answer is that there have turned out to be only two options: Scripture or experience. Conservative theologians have chosen to build on Scripture; liberals are distinguished by their preference for experience. This forced option has been a major cause of the split between liberals and conservatives.²²

Though constructing different theologies, both camps have done so using the same, foundationalist, method which has, in turn, influenced their understanding of the gospel and discipleship, perhaps the two most prominent categories for trying to understand the relationship between church and theology.

Conservatives have tended to emphasize personal devotion to prayer and Bible study and featured a gospel which entails something of a here/there sort of dualism whereby salvation is seen primarily as securing ones place in Heaven by confessing Jesus as Lord and Savior. Discipleship then is reduced to managing sin in ones life and finding various ways in which to serve and evangelize. Liberals, on the other hand, have tended to emphasize personal devotion to acts of civic duty and social justice. The gospel for them entails more of a now/then sort of dualism whereby salvation is best understood as creating the best possible society (Heaven?) here on earth. Discipleship for liberals then

²² *Anglo-American Postmodernity*, 89.

is more focused on addressing societal and social sin and going about the task of lobbying for legislation that makes for a more just society. The question at hand is, “Must these remain the only options for Christians as we move into an increasingly postmodern culture?”²³

1.3 – Church and Postmodern Culture

Deconstructing Modernity

Culture is always in transition. Certain shifts within Western culture have come to be seen as markers of what some are referring to as postmodernity. Without launching into lengthy explanations or definitions, we may simply note that whatever else postmodernity is (or isn't), it is what comes after (hence *post*) modernity. Though the shifts from modernity to postmodernity are as extensive as were those between modernity and the age before it, here we are primarily concerned with epistemological shifts in philosophy and theology. However, before we can begin investigating postmodern approaches to epistemology, we must understand how and why they have come about. To do so, we will briefly discuss some of the reasons why philosophers and theologians alike have begun to see problems with foundationalism as an adequate theory of knowledge.

Descartes' project was predicated on his ability to doubt everything so as to arrive at a firm foundation upon which nothing else rested. His aim was to arrive at what we might call “basic beliefs.” These basic beliefs were to have been the kind of beliefs that any “reasonable” and “rational” person would have given assent to and upon which then other beliefs could be logically deduced from prior conclusions. However, we are forced

²³ Some of what I have articulated here is reproduced from a paper I wrote entitled, *Christianity in a Postmodern Context*. See Appendix B.

to note that there are always assumptions behind our most basic of beliefs. For Descartes to suppose that he could trust in his foundation, “I think therefore I am,” he must have assumed other things, things which would also need justification and would assume other things as well. But what did Descartes assume and fail to doubt?

Context may be the first of these. As Stephen Toulmin has pointed out, Descartes undertook his project in the wake of the Thirty Years War. “The bloodshed and chaos that followed upon differences of belief lent urgency to the quest for universal agreement; the epistemologist could render a service to humanity by finding a way to produce such agreement.”²⁴ And so, Descartes, motivated and influenced by this reality went about his project seemingly giving no thought to the way his culture and context motivated or affected him.

Language was another thing that Descartes could not doubt. Words are tricky – meaning one thing in one culture and context, but meaning something different in other contexts and cultures. More than this, as only a descriptive tool, language often fails us in providing a perfect picture of reality. Philosophical linguists following Descartes have shown us that language itself is contextually, culturally, and communally contingent.

Postmodern philosophers have also noted problems with both empirical and rational approaches to foundationalism. For empiricists, who rely on the sense-data as their foundation to knowledge, the problem comes when two people (or groups) attempt to speak about the same things but convey different sense-data, different experiences. If we do not have agreement about what is being perceived then it would seem that we can make no objective claim to knowledge based on sense-data. Rational approaches to foundationalism are also problematic. Philosophers have rejected Descartes’ strategy

²⁴ Quoted in Murphy, *Anglo-American Postmodernity*, 10.

simply because, in the passage of time, it has turned out that what is indubitable in one intellectual context is all too questionable in another...²⁵ With regard to both these critiques, more and more philosophers are coming to recognize the inevitable way in which culture, context, and community come to bear on both how we interpret sense-data as well as our particular forms of reason and rationality. Realizations such as these constitute philosophical objections to foundationalism. After briefly discussing a few of the hallmarks of an emerging postmodern culture, we will turn to the more specifically theological objections.

Postmodernity

As Western culture becomes increasingly postmodern, the church faces, not a new challenge, but the same challenge in a new context – how to be those who, for the blessing of others, create a culture uniquely their own as well as discern God’s presence and activity in the various cultures they inhabit. Faithfulness to the first of these callings requires that the church continue to seek hard after God. Faithfulness to the second requires serious engagement with postmodern culture on the part of the church, not merely from a distance, but by inhabiting it.

Currently, postmodernity seems to be largely a reaction against modernity – a necessary, but only first, step. Jean-Francois Lyotard has described Postmodernity as incredulity toward metanarratives. Having born witness to the false metanarrative of modernity, that society as a whole was on a path of success and progress, postmoderns seem to have rejected the idea of metanarratives altogether (ironically, something that could be understood as its own metanarrative). Also, for many conservative Christian denominations and organizations, Postmodernity is seen as a threat because postmoderns

²⁵ *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*, 91.

seem to have no regard for truth (by this they mean objective, foundational truth which their theological systems are built on and crumble without). This postmodern distinctive follows on the previous one. If there is no guiding metanarrative, then no one has a lock on truth. The two distinctives dovetail into a third. With no metanarrative to live out, and no access to objective truth, there is no sense in reducing things to their smallest parts or compartmentalizing. Instead, postmoderns, with an ease that is maddening to moderns, lump everything together with little or no regard for how it fits together or makes sense of the world. These are each postmodern responses to some of the ills of modernity, but they are not “Christian” in the sense we mean to discover here.

Christian Alternatives

Why not content ourselves with the philosophical objections already raised and proceed from there? The answer is that that this would be to make a modern mistake all over again. To differentiate between the two, philosophical and theological objections, is already to move beyond modern categories of thought as the two are not seen as “rationally” linked. Because we are here proposing that Christian theology, though connected at points to philosophy, is not dependent on philosophy to be true to itself,²⁶ it is necessary to proceed in a way that has in view a theology with no other “foundation” than Jesus Christ himself and looks to Scripture, the tradition of communities who have sought to be guided by Scripture, and the current context and culture which currently influences us.

²⁶ See McClendon’s comments on this matter with regard to the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein on pgs. 269-270 of *Witness*.

From this perspective, Christians, cannot be “postmodern” in the ways described above and in any meaningful way remain tied to Jesus.²⁷ Christians *do* believe in a universal metanarrative. It is not that there is no all-encompassing story of which everyone is a part, it’s just that it simply isn’t the one propagated by Western modernity. In fact, the culture they are commissioned to create only makes sense in light of this grand, God-story. How else would the church be able to discern God’s presence and activity in the world unless there was some driving narrative which enabled us to make sense of things?²⁸

Followers of Jesus also cannot reject objective truth. Though we may humbly admit that all our attempts to articulate and grasp it come short, we nevertheless place our faith in it, or rather the Triune God to which these objective truths relate. The faith of Christians rests in a God who *objectively* exists, a savior who was *objectively* crucified and literally raised to life, and a Holy Spirit who is *objectively* present in the lives of believers and the church. But, the point here is that our faith is in the persons to which these truths are tied, not our ability to understand or prove them objectively. These truths are important for they contribute to our understanding of the character and nature of the persons of the Trinity, but it is in the Triune God, not our weak (potentially idolatrous) attempts to formulate doctrines and creeds, that our faith rests. The culture Christians aim to create and the ability they have to discern others is finally tied to our faith in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit not our constructs of this Trinity.

Finally, Christians are not reductionists, but neither are we relativists. By lumping truth claims and worldviews together which are mutually exclusive or

²⁷ For more on this see Appendix C, *The (not-so-new) Problem of Postmodernity*.

²⁸ I highly recommend the works of pastor and author Brian McLaren (www.brianmclaren.net) on matters of postmodernity and the Church’s relationship to that culture.

contradictory we are not thereby being inclusive of all, we are actually excluding all those who would hope for a unified way of understanding and interpreting the world. The ways in which Christians are called on by God to embody a Kingdom culture and to point out its features in the world are neither reductionistically exclusivistic (born from arrogance) nor relativistically inclusivistic (born from fear), but relationally and missionally particularistic (born from a proper confidence).²⁹ Lesslie Newbigin is extremely helpful at this point. He says,

There is no rationality except a socially embodied rationality. That rationality which can lead to a true understanding of reality as a whole will necessarily be a rationality embodied in a particular society. The Christian community, the universal Church, embracing more and more fully all the cultural traditions of humankind, is called to be that community in which a tradition of rational discourse is developed which leads to a true understanding of reality, because it takes as its starting point and as its permanent criterion of truth the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ. It is necessarily a particular community among all the human communities. It cannot pretend to be otherwise. But it has a universal mission, for it is the community chosen and sent by God for this purpose. This particularity, however scandalous it may seem to a certain kind of cosmopolitan mind, is inescapable.³⁰

Conclusion

The relationship between God's people and culture is as old as creation itself (Gen. 1-3). The driving question being, how are people whose allegiance is to the God of the Bible to go about living their lives in the world? There is no simple or easy answer. I have proposed that there are at least two callings. First, that the people of God are called to embody a particular and alternative sort of life and that they are to do this both for their own good, not because they fear God, but because they trust God with regard to what it means to be fully and truly human, and also for the sake of others, that all may come to

²⁹ I highly recommend Lesslie Newbigin's book, *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, and Certainty in Christian Discipleship*.

³⁰ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, (Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), 87-88.

share in life as God intended it. The second part of this calling is for the church to be a community of discernment in whatever context and culture it finds itself a part. Here, the role of the church is to serve as something of a conscience – saying “yes” to some things, “no” to others, and a qualified “yes, but,” or “no, unless” in many others. I have tried to show how I think the church in Western culture got off track with regard to these callings within Western modernity, what some of the postmodern reactions have been, and what I believe are more appropriate and faithful Christian responses.

My contention has been that on account of the dichotomies created by foundationalism and modernity, a holistic understanding of Christian spiritual formation was lost or at least severely damaged. Because of the dichotomy between reason and experience, theology and the Christian life came to be separated by the academy and the church. On account of the driving assumption that knowledge was power and that the more knowledge one had the better they could equip others, prospective church leaders were sent to seminaries and universities to be academically trained before returning to the church to serve as pastors and leaders. The result has been churches which elevate the role of teachers, doctrine which assumes that Christian faith is either about believing the right things or doing the right things, and a distorted understanding of Christian mission. The sort of holistic spiritual formation required for the church to engage culture in the ways described above cannot result from this sort of cycle, a radical shift is in order. In the section that follows I will be exploring narrative as an approach to theology that I believe helps to rejoin theology and the church toward a more holistic sort of spiritual formation.

2.1 - Understanding Narrative Theology

If you were to ask ten different theologians what is meant by the expression, “narrative theology,” you would get ten different definitions (if they were to attempt a definition at all!).³¹ It will be important, then, for us to be very clear what is meant by the use of the term here. A quote taken from one of the volumes we will be considering below may serve well as a precursor to understanding what is meant by narrative theology here and in what follows.

Our lives are shaped by stories: the ones we heard at our parents’ knee as children; the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves; the stories of our American (or African, or South Asian, or Soviet) culture; supremely for Christians the story of Jesus with its prologue in Israel and its sequel in the historic church. By these stories our lives are shaped; their narrative logic controls our use of rationality; they are the stuff of our convictions.³²

Ultimately, what narrative theology is after is a way to communicate the Christian faith so that it becomes the story through which we derive our identity.³³ Rather than dichotomizing between theology which aims at either right belief (orthodoxy) or right living (orthopraxy), or even trying to find an elusive middle ground, narrative theology takes a different aim. The aim of narrative theology is helping people and communities (re)interpret reality and (re)identify themselves around the risen Christ, the community of the Spirit, and the Bible as a narrative authority. Narrative theology assumes that while people may change what they say they believe or will themselves to act in certain ways without having their identity truly changed, those who undergo a shift in identity, who come to see and understand reality differently, necessarily change both what they believe

³¹ See Appendix D – A Literature Review surveying the significant volumes by authors commonly thought of as standard in the field of narrative theology.

³² James Wm. McClendon Jr., *Ethics: Systematic Theology, Volume I*, (Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2002), 313-314.

³³ Identity involves several factors, at least how we live, what we believe, and how we see, interpret, and engage with the world around us – factors that are analogous to McClendon’s ethics, doctrine, and witness, yet to be discussed.

and how they behave.

Narrative theology acknowledges the Triune God alone as the source of all authority and acknowledges three primary sources that contribute to our understanding of who God is and what that means for us. First, it acknowledges the sacred Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the primary source for disclosing the nature of both God and reality.³⁴ Second, narrative theology looks at the history and tradition of those who have sought to be guided by these sacred Scriptures. Finally, it recognizes the way in which things like culture, experience, and tradition factor into understandings of both Scripture and tradition.³⁵ In and through the process of communal discernment, Christian communities who practice narrative theology attempt to take these three sources into consideration as they go about life and mission.

Source 1: Scripture

Scripture is understood in many different ways. Some have called it a love letter from God, others treat it as a rule book, certain groups treat it as a book filled with hidden messages and meanings, and still others use the Bible as a text from which to abstract doctrines and principles. To do theology narratively, however, means seeing Christian

³⁴ Many would submit that Scripture itself stands as the lone source of authority for Christians. Not only does this run the risk of making an idol out of a text, sacred though it may be, it also fails to answer the question of whose interpretation of Scripture should be acknowledged as the “right” one to accept authoritatively. Precisely because we have been created as relational beings in the image of God, we need one another, in all our diversity of opinion, to keep us humble and seeking.

³⁵ This 3-source emphasis of narrative theology bears similarities to the postmodern epistemological work of philosopher, Alastair MacIntyre. For more on his work see, *After Virtue* and *Whose Justice, Which Rationality*. It is also similar to the 4-source Wesleyan Quadilateral which said that scripture, tradition, experience, and reason combined to contribute to our understanding of God. However, as Lesslie Newbigin has pointed out in, *Truth and Authority in Modernity*, “It [is] mistaken to think of reason as a parallel source of authority. No one grasps or makes sense of anything in the Scriptures or in the tradition of scriptural interpretation except by the use of reason... All rationality is socially and culturally embodied.” (50-51).

Scripture as a divine drama or narrative.³⁶ This does not mean wrongly assuming that the Bible provides us with one, coherent, story. Indeed, “Scripture has not been given to us as a dogmatic outline, neither has it been given to us as a single, unified story. It is a collection of narratives, which not only complement one another, but also overlap and stand in tension with one another.”³⁷ To see this we need to look no further than the two accounts of creation in Genesis, the two accounts of the Davidic monarchy, or the fact that the church chose to include four gospel accounts rather than just one. We rejoice in the diversity of Scripture, but we also see in that diversity a common plot, God’s action within history to save and restore that which was lost. At its core, the Bible tells the story of God’s relationship to creation, more specifically to a covenant people called to be true and faithful to him for the sake of the world. Narrative theology, then, believes that we do well to approach Scripture as *The Story*, and as such it becomes the lens through which we interpret our world rather than the other way around.³⁸

Source 2: Tradition

The tradition and history of the people of God is long and diverse. Ranging from incredible stories of love, forgiveness, martyrdom and the miraculous to murderous atrocities, awful divisions within the body of Christ, and deplorable behavior on the part of Christian leaders, there is no shortage of vantage points from which we may consider the nature of God and his relationship to his people and the world.

³⁶ This, in no way, overlooks the fact that not all of Scripture is narrative in form. The Psalms and Proverbs, the Levitical laws, Paul’s instructions to churches and so forth do not tell stories. Nevertheless, these other portions of Scripture are part of the story, they have a narrative setting and context which gives them meaning and significance. As we would be remiss to only concern ourselves with narrative segments of Scripture, we would be equally remiss to not see that the non-narrative segments lose their significance apart from their place within the divine drama.

³⁷ Mark A. Seifrid, *The Narrative of Scripture and Justification by Faith: A Still Fresher Reading of Paul*. 2006 Symposium on Exegetical Theory. Concordia Theological Seminary, January 17, 2006, 6.

³⁸ I discuss and expand on this idea in, *A Living Theology: Issues of Exegesis, Theology, and culture in Urban and Suburban Contexts*, Appendix E.

Perhaps beginning with Moses, those who have named YHWH as the God they worshiped have done their best to understand and relate to an infinite God out of their own finitude. Though in countless ways God has condescended to humankind in seeking to make himself known, ultimately in and through Jesus, we remain limited, sinful, and captivated by our own inevitable subjectivity. This has led to an overwhelming multitude of understandings of the divine, interpretations of Scripture, and suppositions of the implications of each for what it means to be human, what the role of the church is, and how to understand and interpret reality.

One of the tasks of the church in each and every age, in each and every culture, is to try and interact not only with Scripture, but also to look at the history and tradition of those who have sought to be guided by Scripture. The church asks, how have those who have gone before us understood who God is, what this passage means, how life is to be lived, and so on. It is the nature of biblical Christian faith itself which bids us engage in this very process. The narrative of Scripture tells the story of the success of those who sought to remember the history of God and God's people and the failure of those who forgot. In seeking to identify itself today, the Christian Church looks both to its successes and its failures as well as its various historic expressions. Narrative theology does not stop with Scripture and tradition, however; it also looks presently to its own unique situation.

Source 3: Experience

Though I am using the single word, experience, the final source of narrative theology is a composite one. Experience is quite a loaded term considering how it has been used (and misused) in Christian theology, but it is necessary nevertheless. Here we

should think of experience in its broadest sense. By saying that experience contributes to the shaping of narrative theology I am simply pointing out that our experiences, including our culture, context, family, friends, language, and even the traditions of which we are inescapably a part, shape how we see, understand, and interpret the world. This being the case, our experience informs our theology as well. This will be a troubling statement for some so perhaps a brief explanation is in order.

Modern theology was predicated on our ability to transcend our experience through reason and rationality so that we could arrive at pure, unadulterated, objective truth on which to stand and which would be universally available. What I am saying here is not only that this is not possible, but also that is not a good thing. That we are inevitably shaped by our experiences does not mean that we cannot learn to reinterpret them or that we are never capable of understanding what others have to say who have been shaped by their own experiences. Though we may be stripped of our ability (or at least our hope) to have the objective truth and certainty we thought was necessary, we are at the same time happily resigned to the task of being dependent on others, a state, which Lesslie Newbigin insightfully points out, is in accordance with our created nature. He says,

Interpersonal relatedness belongs to the very being of God. Therefore there can be no salvation for human beings except in relatedness... But if the truly human is the shared reality of mutual and collective responsibility that the Bible, envisages, then salvation must be an action that binds us together and restores for us the true mutual relation to each other and the true shared relation to the world of nature. This means that the gift of salvation would be bound up with our openness to one another.³⁹

If salvation is something that God intends to be mediated through our relatedness

³⁹ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, (Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 70.

and openness to others, how much more our theology? The fact of the matter is that we are better, not worse, off when we need others to help us rethink, refine, and reinvent our theology.

Back to the point at hand. Taken in conjunction with our first (Scripture as guiding narrative authority) and second (history and tradition of people seeking to be guided by Scripture) sources, we can now see the inevitability, even benefit, of how our experiences shape our theology. Lest we think that this ultimately ends in a vicious cycle of interpretation, never allowing us to come to any kind of clarity about the matter of who God is and what it means for us, we now turn our attention to the matter of communal discernment, a largely neglected hallmark of those whose faith rests in the God of the Bible.

2.2 - Communal Discernment

Discerning Through Relativism

With regard to this three-source type of narrative approach to theology, many worry that only relativism can result. The concern is that if we cannot attain an objective and verifiable understanding of God revealed in Scripture, if we are limited by our interpretations, by tradition, and our own experiences, how will we ever know for sure that what we believe is true? This charge is answered in two ways. First, it is noted that biblical faith is just that, faith. To be the people of God, to be a follower of Jesus is never biblically understood as an exercise in certainty. Indeed, there may be reasons for faith, but more than this there is hope and trust. Second, Nancey Murphy has noted that this approach to theology can only be guilty of relativism if in fact foundationalism is true.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Stanley Hauerwas, Nancey Murphy, Mark Nation, *Theology Without Foundations: Religious Practice and the Future of Theological Truth*, (Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1994), 268-269.

But, if there really is no foundation on which all other knowledge rests, then we are perhaps left with a soft relativism, or what James McClendon calls “perspectivism,” – never having complete and objective knowledge with regard to the matters of Christian faith, but never a hard relativism – that all truth is relative, as this claim is self-refuting, being itself a truth claim which must *not* itself be relative.⁴¹

What are we left with then? If our apprehension of truth, what may be known about God and the nature of reality, is never completely objective or complete, why bother? Why not simply remain agnostic? The Christian answer is that we have faith in God, the Holy Spirit, to lead and guide us into truth (Jn. 16:13). But again, we have *faith in*, not *objective certainty about*, this promise. It is truth which guides the lives of believers and communities of faith, not scientific data to be proven that others maybe proven wrong.

But where has this Christian practice of communal discernment gone? Much like modernity’s unwillingness to treat Scripture as a divine drama or its ability to see the impossibility of completely transcending our context, cultures, and experiences, the notion of seeking to interpret and discern things within community remains anathema to the modern mind. The individualism latent in Descartes’ dictum, “I think therefore I am,” ultimately led to the elevation of the autonomous individual as the primary means for discernment and the need for communal discernment came to be seen as arbitrary at best, oppressive at worst. However, from the perspective of narrative theology, and like the other two sources, the notion of discerning things in a communal context seems more in keeping with the biblical witness of the character and mission of the people of God in the world.

⁴¹ For more on this matter see pgs. 49-55 of McClendon’s, *Witness*, to be addressed below.

Communally Discerning the Three Sources

Here's what this means with relation to the three sources discussed above. With regard to Scripture, the Bible tells the story of persons, but more poignantly of a people, the people of God who were and are uniquely called to serve the world. As a people they were called to derive their identity from their history together, the way God had interacted with them and told them to live together. Scripture for them was basically what we are proposing here, identity-shaping stories that guided and interpreted their life together. As a continuation of this people of God, the Church does well to act likewise by remembering and rehearsing the narrative of Scripture together.⁴² Tradition may also be communally discerned. Not all Christian or biblical tradition is in line with God and reality. It is the task of Christian communities to day to look back at our long and complicated history and ask, "Where was God in this?" Finally, the same applies in terms of experiences which shape us and influence how we understand and construct theology. Unless we seek to discern together, in the context of a community of the Spirit, how we should interpret our lives in light of Scripture and how our experiences shape us, we are merely left to our own inescapable perceptions. In the truest sense of the phrase, we need each other. It is only by sharing our lives with each other, by letting others really get to know us through communal practices such as accountability, confession, brokenness, and forgiveness that we are able to gain the kind of perspective on our own narratives that we can be truly open to allowing the biblical narrative to illuminate them.

Finally, there is a sense in which the act of communal discernment, more than

⁴² This does not mean that there is no place for personal study and reflection on Scripture, it simply means that all personal study is done with a view toward communal incorporation and discussion. More than this, it means that communities gather and participate in practices which afford them the opportunity to discern together what the Spirit of God is saying to them through the Bible in their time and place.

helping with understanding Scripture and our own narratives, shapes theology in and of itself. While Scripture is clear that the Holy Spirit is a gift given to believers on a personal level, it is also true that the Spirit of God dwells in the midst of Christian community, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”⁴³ When believers gather for worship, service, or any other sort of practice, they are more than a collection of bearers of the Holy Spirit; something new exists, a whole which is greater than the sum of its parts.⁴⁴ It is often when Christians gather communally that God reveals things and speaks in unique ways. Like the ancient gatherings of Israel, the disciples in the upper room, or the fledgling community of believers gathered at Pentecost, we too may expect to hear and experience God in otherwise unimaginable ways. The upshot of this is that there is a way in which our theology remains deficient if we only emphasize Scripture, tradition, and experience, even if they are understood communally. We need to gather communally to discern things which will only be revealed once we have gathered.

Communal Discernment: Connecting Narrative Theology and Missional Ecclesiology

Narrative approaches to theology aim neither at getting people to believe the right things (orthodoxy, emphasized in evangelicalism), nor at getting people to do the right things (orthopraxy, emphasized in liberalism), but rather at helping people to re-narrate their lives and experiences biblically and therefore theologically and missionally. At the same time, when we examine how God’s Spirit is at work in the lives of believers, church communities, and even the world at large, we also have an opportunity to test and reformulate our theology base on what can be communally discerned.

⁴³ Mt. 18:20

⁴⁴ For more on this see Nancey Murphy’s work on the notion of supervenience in *Anglo-American Postmodernity* and elsewhere.

It should be clear then that narrative theology cannot be done apart from interaction with people, experiences, traditions, and practices within communities. This stands in contrast to systematic approaches to theology which tend to be confined to the academic world. More than that, when theology is understood as a discipline most adequately practiced by developing systems of belief and understanding from Scripture alone, it becomes a practice quite divorced from church practice. When theology is systematized, it is easy to see how one could hope to study and understand the systems before ever being introduced to the life of the Church and how they could hope to build churches based on these systems. On the other hand, when we take a narrative approach to theology the practice of communal discernment becomes imperative and this requires a community of faith to do the discerning. In the final section of this project we will explore the field of missional ecclesiology and it is here that I will propose that just any community of faith will do, but only a community committed to participating in the *Missio Dei*, the mission of God in the world.

2.3 – The Narrative Theology of James W. McClendon Jr.

James William McClendon Jr. was nothing short of a pioneer when in 1986 he began writing a non-foundationalist, narrative treatment of theology. Greatly underappreciated in its day, I believe this author has a tremendous amount to offer the church in Western culture as it struggles to maintain (or perhaps reclaim) its true identity in an increasingly post-Christian context and culture. After discussing how I believe McClendon's theology overcomes the trappings of modernity, I will seek to summarize his three-volume work: *Ethics, Doctrine, and Witness*, in terms of its narrative approach to theology and its relationship to missional ecclesiology.

Introduction to McClendon's Theology

McClendon's three-volume theology is unique in both its method and aim. Many if not most systematic theologies move from apologetics (why we must or ought to believe certain things), to doctrine (how those things should be understood and communicated), and finally to ethics (what the necessary implications for Christian life are). Indeed, on account of the manner in which theologians adopted foundationalism as a valid epistemological category, theology was understood as *needing* to proceed in this rational order as each category served as a foundation for the next. Not so with McClendon's theology. In *Ethics*, McClendon's asks how the church must live to be the church. Similarly, in *Doctrine*, McClendon discusses what the church must teach to be the church. And finally in *Witness*, what he is after is how the church must live in the world to sustain its character and calling. Philosophically, McClendon approaches all three of these projects as a non-foundationalist. As a theologian, he approaches them with a deep appreciation for the role of narrative. Before moving to a more detailed discussion the works in particular, it will be helpful to comment on how these two distinctives influence McClendon's project in terms of its method and aim.

First, since McClendon is writing as a non-foundationalist, he sees no need to begin with traditional proof or defenses of truth claims. His project is not one intended to "prove" the Christian faith to be true or even that it is the most rational or logical belief system. McClendon understands and defines theology as "the discovery, understanding or interpretation, and transformation of the convictions of a convictional community, including the discovery and critical revision of their relation to one another and to

whatever else there is.”⁴⁵ This understanding of theology itself discloses that what McClendon is after is not proof but discernment, not certainty of objective, propositional, truth claims, but an understanding and engagement with those convictions which mark Christians and the Church.

Consequently, readers do not find McClendon attempting rational proofs or philosophical arguments for the conclusions he comes to. This does not equate his findings with idle speculation or haphazard conclusions, rather it means that the only way to test the adequacy of his claims, to justify them if you will, is to ask whether or not they are in accord with Scripture, tradition, and lived experience. This leads to McClendon’s second distinctive.

Second, McClendon is writing as one with a deep appreciation for the importance of the way narrative(s) influences how we know (epistemology) and who we are (character formation). He says, “...the recovery of the primacy of narrative in theology, while not solving all the difficulties, may show more clearly how experience and Bible can be related to one another without making a philosophical foundation of either.” In saying this, it is imperative that we note that what McClendon is doing is *not* arguing for finding a middle way between emphasizing Scripture and experience (classic conservative and liberal categories, both foundationalist), but is suggesting another way forward, one which does not start with foundationalist assumptions and could potentially then be embraced by both groups on either end of the spectrum as a new starting point in hopes of unity!

Another aspect of the primacy of non-foundationalist, narrative approaches to theology, has to do with its inseparability from the life and witness of the church. As a

⁴⁵ James McClendon, *Ethics: Systematic Theology, Vol. 1*, (Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2002), 23.

theologian, McClendon would have us see that “every theology is linked to some narrative; successful theology, knowing this, discovers and reclaims its proper narrative base.”⁴⁶ He explains by saying, “...the narrative the Bible reflects, the story of Israel, of Jesus, and of the church, is intimately related to the narrative we ourselves live. Thus that vision functions as a hermeneutic. Constructing out experience by way of Scripture, it shows how the two are properly joined.”⁴⁷

So, as a non-foundationalist theologian, McClendon is not out to rationally prove truth claims, but rather to descriptively illustrate what the Christian faith entails. As a narrativist, he aims to do this through joining the witness of Scripture with the narratives of Christians (across traditions) and church communities (across cultures). What we have in these three volumes then is quite rightly understood as a narrative theology of the sort described above, in that it hopes to sustain the rightful marriage between theological reflection *within* and *about* actual ecclesial practice. We are now in position to reflect on each of McClendon’s volumes in turn.⁴⁸

McClendon’s Volumes

McClendon begins his theology with a volume on ethics. As was stated earlier, McClendon is writing as a non-foundationalist, which is to say (at least) that his theology is not primarily concerned with epistemology.⁴⁹ Therefore, he is not out to *prove* the Christian faith, but rather to *identify* what that faith looks like. McClendon’s ethical

⁴⁶ Ibid., 37.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 36.

⁴⁸ See appendices F, G, and H for a more detailed synopsis of McClendon’s work in *Ethics, Doctrine, and Witness*. Here we are only able to offer a brief account of his task in each and its relationship to narrative theology and missional ecclesiology.

⁴⁹ This corresponds with what Scot McKnight has to say in a paper entitled, *What is the Emerging Church?*, “...the center of the movement [the emerging church movement, which, as he says later, is based on a missional ecclesiology] is about ecclesiology not epistemology. For more on Scot McKnight, see www.jesuscreed.com.

question again is, “How must the church live to be the church?”⁵⁰ For McClendon, Christian theology begins with Christ. Of his task, McClendon says, “Starting with Jesus (and ending with him as well) is the plan, then, yet it is all too easy to disconnect Jesus from the biblical way of life the he fulfilled... Christianity is Christ.”⁵¹

As far as ethics are concerned, McClendon asserts that they are comprised of three strands. First, there is “the way.” This is understood as both “morality and destiny: It is God’s command become highway directions for life; it makes sense of suffering; it holds out a hope longer than history.”⁵² Next is what the author calls “watch-care.” Here is the sense that “God sets the travelers on this way in relation to one another.”⁵³ Thus, truly Christian ethics are not merely how *I* am to live, but also how *we* are to live, with, and in relation to one another – how we are to care for one another. McClendon’s third strand is witness. He says, “God’s Israel is a circle of care, but never a closed circle... So the way for Israel, Jesus’ way, was to be a way for all the earth.”⁵⁴

In light of these three-strands identified by McClendon as inherent to Christian ethics, we may put forth a general answer to McClendon’s question of how the church must live in order to truly be the church. Ethically, the church must be a people marked by the way of Jesus, who watch over and care for one another, and who aim to witness to the world God’s way of life intended for all.

More than being three-stranded, the ethics McClendon is arguing for, he calls, “narrative ethics.”

⁵⁰ *Ethics*, 46.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 50-51.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 53-54.

Thus this three-stranded ethics is a narrative ethics, a part of narrative theology, not because it sometimes tells illustrative stories (though these are not ruled out), and not merely because it emphasizes the long continuities of the moral life expressed by ‘character’ or by ‘virtue’ or by ‘practices’ (though these still come nearer the mark), but because its task is the discovery, understanding, and creative transformation of a shared and lived story, one whose focus is Jesus of Nazareth and the kingdom he claims – a story that on its moral side requires such discovery, such understanding, such transformation to be true to itself. To be true, Christian theological ethics must know this story, must understand this story, must give a lead for the appropriation of this story; when it does so, it thereby constitutes itself a ‘narrative ethics.’⁵⁵

The author’s point here seems to be that Christian ethics lose their significance apart from the story from which they emerge. To truly understand and appreciate Christian ethics necessitates knowing and living as a part of this story. To say it another way, “commands presuppose practices that presuppose stories, so that biblical morality always requires its narrative setting.”⁵⁶

McClendon’s second volume takes up the issue of doctrine within the Christian faith. Of this book’s relation to the former, McClendon says, “Christian ethics grasps the live flesh of Christian existence; Christian doctrine traces its live skeleton, the bones within that flesh that give stability and coherence to its life. Without Christian life, the doctrine is dead; without Christian doctrine, the life is formless.”⁵⁷ In keeping with the twin distinctives of *Ethics*, McClendon offers a discussion of Christian doctrine that is both non-foundational philosophically speaking, and narrative in its explanation.⁵⁸

Another similarity is the question he seeks to answer, this time, “What must the church

⁵⁵ Ibid., 330.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 48.

⁵⁷ James Wm. McClendon Jr., *Doctrine: Systematic Theology, Volume 2*, (Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1994), preface.

⁵⁸ Though the author lacked the space to offer entire biographical chapters as he did in ethics, he nevertheless offers smaller sections which serve the same function. More than this, the narrative dimension to his theology entails not only biographical illustration, but also approaching Scripture narratively as described above.

teach in order to be the church now?”⁵⁹

We might also deduce that McClendon is after something of a Trinitarian doctrine. Like *Ethics*, he offers three main sections in this volume; *The Rule of God*, *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, and *The Fellowship of the Spirit*. Stanley Hauerwas has said of Karl Barth, “The heart of Barth’s theology is the presumption that is we get God wrong – we get everything wrong – our politics, our science, our art, our very lives.”⁶⁰ This is the same impression I get from McClendon and his approach to doctrine – the sense that if we would only shift our attention to the character and nature of God, that everything else would begin to fall into place.

To summarize the relationship between McClendon’s work in this volume and the link between narrative theology and missional ecclesiology, we will make note of a three helpful anecdotes from his initial chapter on his understanding of what doctrine is. First, we must observe that for McClendon,

...doctrine (the church *teaching*) is the first-order task; doctrinal *theology* is necessarily second-order. Understood as convictions shared, doctrine constitutes communal existence... There is no ‘thing-taught’ without *teaching*; no Christian doctrines apart from the practice of doctrine.⁶¹

Doctrine therefore does not exist in a vacuum, nor is it objectively discoverable if only the methods are right. Rather, it is a communal enterprise, and communities are always products of culture and context, they are narrative shaped – hence the appropriateness of humility and the desire to be embracing of others. Second, McClendon says, “...the church teaches by what it is and what it does. All its practices interact with its

⁵⁹ *Doctrine*, 21.

⁶⁰ www.firstthings.com/ftissues/ft0003/articles/barth.html

⁶¹ *Doctrine*, 24, 29.

teaching.”⁶² Thus, a focus on right doctrine as of supreme importance is mistaken - so too is a focus on right living. Instead, the two are inseparably joined through the formation and cultivation of Christian convictions.⁶³ Lastly, McClendon points out that “there is a strong link between the plain sense of Scripture and the church’s self-understanding as a continuation of the biblical story.”⁶⁴ This means that doctrines are, in a sense, unchanging. Though how they are applied may vary from time to time and culture to culture, there remains an important way in which, if indeed doctrine is primarily about understanding the character and nature of God and what his people ought to teach in order to sustain a community that reflects these things, Christian doctrine is a constant linking the people of God in the pages of Scripture to the people of God around the world today. Thus, for McClendon, Christian doctrines, like Christian ethics, are narratively understood as they are missionally lived out

In the final volume, *Witness*, the author says, “*Witness* is something like Christian missiology (the theory of mission and missions) and something like a theology of culture,” says McClendon of his third and final volume in this trilogy.⁶⁵ If the question guiding *Ethics* was, “How must the church live to be the church?” and the question guiding *Doctrine*, “What must the church teach to be the church?” the guiding question of this third volume is, “where and how the church must stand to be the witnessing church; that is, what must be the relation between the culture that is the church and those cultures the church indwells, evangelizes, serves?”⁶⁶

⁶² Ibid., 38.

⁶³ See another helpful book by McClendon, *Convictions: Defusing Religious Relativism*.

⁶⁴ *Doctrine*, 44.

⁶⁵ James Wm. McClendon Jr., *Witness: Systematic Theology, Volume 3*, (Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2000), preface.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 34.

This volume, surprising to some, offers no foundation for what has preceded it. The author has already stated that while his three volumes are tightly related, none depends on the others. What we have here, then, is not a logical or rational conclusion based on what has come before, but a parallel account of what the Christian life entails – not only living Christianly or teaching Christianly, but developing a Christian vision of the world and of culture.

Put simply, the witnessing church is a by its nature narratively shaped and missionally focused. By way of summarizing his conclusions in the major sections of the volume, we may say that he answers his own guiding question by stating that the Church, whose identity is shaped by its understanding of history, its current witness, and its hope and vision of the future, and whose only foundation for knowing is the risen Jesus himself, must learn and relearn how to interpret cultures, including its own, in light of its ever-increasing understanding of the gospel, so that it might engage culture by offering itself as an alternative, Kingdom community.

Conclusion

In this section I have aimed at exploring and providing a guiding definition of narrative theology. I have argued that a narrative approach to theology takes seriously the primacy of Scripture as guiding narrative for Christian life and that it reflects on Scripture in light of both biblical tradition and history as well as present experiences of culture, context, and so forth. For narrative theologians and communities, this is not an exercise in the pursuit of objective and certain truth, but rather engagement with three central sources of consideration as they practice communal discernment, a vital hallmark of authentic Christian life and mission. I have also set forth a brief exploration of the

theology of Dr. James McClendon, whose theology is postmodern in that it is both non-foundational and narrative. It is this sort of theology which I believe *begets* and *necessitates* a missional ecclesiology. I would finally like to offer just a few thoughts on what sort of implications all this has for the matter of spiritual formation, which I claimed was badly damaged, if not lost, in modernity.

Narrative theology, because it emerges from ethical, doctrinal, and witnessing *practices*, as opposed to *theories* or *systems*, cannot be separated from the life of the Church in general, and local expressions of church community in particular. Theological education, in this view, is positively crippled apart from ecclesial participation and mission. At the same time, ecclesial participation and mission lose their biblical/Christian character apart from theological reflection of the sort supported here. Spiritual formation is thus rightly understood as participating in “theological mission” and “missiological theology.” The inherent relationship between narrative theology and missional ecclesiology give rise to this understanding of spiritual formation.

This affects both churches and theological institutions. If what is being proposed here is to provide hope and a vision for the church in Western culture churches in general will have to take the responsibility to theologically educating their congregations incredibly seriously.⁶⁷ Likewise, theological schools and seminaries will need to transition in such a way as to make bring their resources to bear more directly and integrally on local church communities.⁶⁸ No more would people be sent out from congregations to receive theological education at a remote and disconnected institution to

⁶⁷ For more on this see Appendix I, an integration paper written with regard to Teaching for Christian Formation.”

⁶⁸ Dr. Ryan Bolger of Fuller Theological Seminary has provided some helpful insights on this matter. http://thebolgblog.typepad.com/thebolgblog/2006/04/dreams_for_my_s.html and http://thebolgblog.typepad.com/thebolgblog/2006/06/training_cultur.html

be taught primarily through lectures and then to return to the church world. Rather, with holistic and integrated spiritual formation as the goal, disciples of Jesus (again, removing the dichotomy created by modern categories between aspiring church leaders and everyone else) would seek to be equipped from within their own church community by seasoned, mature, godly leaders, who walk beside them in life and mission. Narrative theology is one side of unpacking this necessary transition. Missional ecclesiology is the other and we turn our attention to that topic now.

3.1 – Missional Ecclesiology - Overcoming Modern Crises

Toward a Definition

Like narrative theology, missional ecclesiology is not something easily defined. Not only is it variously understood by authors, pastors, and others, but it is also misunderstood by countless others because in order to truly understand it we need to reinterpret out culture and context. Inasmuch as our focus here is a missional ecclesiology for the church in Western culture,⁶⁹ one of its hallmarks is its critique of and movement past a Christendom mentality. In seeking to understand what is meant by missional ecclesiology and how it differs from other forms of, our main task will be to explore what has become a defining text on the matter, *Missional Church*.⁷⁰ As we explore what these authors have to say about what constitutes a missional church, I will attempt to point out how this sort of church community differs from currently dominating forms. We will first note the fact that a missional ecclesiology arises from attempting to overcome the two crises already discussed with regard to culture and theology. Next, we will explore some key distinctives of missional ecclesiology as it seeks to reorient itself after acknowledging these crises. Finally, I hope to provide some clarity with regard to the increasing confusion over the emerging church conversation/movement and what will be said with regard to missional ecclesiology.

Overcoming the Cultural Crisis

We begin with the thesis of the book, “that the answer to the crisis of North

⁶⁹ I do not mean to imply here that missional ecclesiology is only valuable for the church in Western culture. Indeed, as a narrative kind of ecclesiology, missional approaches to the church can and will find expression in whatever context and culture they are located. But, inasmuch as our focus here is on the church in Western culture, its understanding of Christendom is central.

⁷⁰ Darrell Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, (Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 1998).

American church will not be found at the level of method and problem solving... The real issues in the current crisis of the Christian church are spiritual and theological.”⁷¹

And thus, at two points, we begin to see the connection between what has already been said above and what we are about to explore below. First, we note that the church in the West is indeed in a crisis. This was the point of the first section on the transition from modernity to postmodernity and the epistemological shifts included therein. We are living in a time where we are waking up to the failure of so much that we put our hope and faith in, and this is as true for the church in the West as it is for Western culture at large. On account of our foundationalistic assumptions, the very character of the church has been compromised – from its conception of the gospel and the nature of salvation, to its understanding of Scripture and the purpose of the Church in the world. Like an alcoholic who cannot make any headway in dealing with their problem until they have first admitted and embraced it as a problem, much of the church in Western culture remains drunk and in denial.

As a result, two problems arise, both unfortunate, but the second more subtle and dangerous. The first problem is that many people remain unconvinced of the great need for the kind of theological reflection and reformation that is suggested in this volume and we are stuck with what we currently have. The second is that missional ecclesiology gets interpreted as one option among many - it is understood and approached consumeristically. Thus, some claim to embrace it, but since they don't really understand it or because they are not truly willing to sever ties with their Christendom conceptions or their deep-rooted, foundationalistic assumptions, it becomes distorted and those who

⁷¹ Ibid., 3.

purport to operate out of it end of doing more harm than good.⁷² The task then is a difficult one. It is a task which may come at significant cost to those who have built their lives around and derived their identities from theologies and ecclesiologies bound by modern patterns of thought. Nevertheless it is a necessary task, if, as McClendon would say, the church is to truly be the church.

Overcoming the Theological Crisis

I said there were two points of connection between what we will explore about the thesis of *Missional Church* and what has already been said. The first was the belief that the church in Western culture is in a state of crisis. The second is that the problems the church faces are indeed spiritual and theological and not methodological. This connection should be easier to see. If McClendon's non-foundational and narrative approach to theology is understood as better suited to a life of discipleship and to the recovery of authentic spiritual formation, we should be in a great place to see just how far reaching the implications are. What we need, in this case, are not new or better programs, not new or better models and tactics, not more cultural relevance, not even increased piety. No, what we need is the courage to admit and repent of our theological, and therefore spiritual (or spiritual and therefore theological) misgivings. We need to regroup and move into a future, not thinking that we now *get it*, or *have the answer* (these would be to make modern mistakes all over again), but rather to say that there is indeed a more biblical and faithful way to understand and engage in theology and mission.

Perhaps some of this will become more apparent as we move forward in our discussion.

⁷² I am both thankful and skeptical of modern mega-churches attempting to shift to missional forms of church. It can be difficult to discern whether the motivation is genuinely theological or merely methodological. Appendix J is an example of what a mission statement for a mega-church wishing to make this sort of shift might entail were it to be a truly theologically catalyzed conversion. It addresses a church I was previously on staff with.

Missional ecclesiology begins with reinterpreting the missional task of the church.⁷³ Traditionally understood, mission entailed the church “sending” people or groups out from the church into the world.⁷⁴ Here, however,

Mission is understood as being derived from the very nature of God. It is thus put in the context of the Trinity, not of ecclesiology or soteriology. The classical doctrine of the *missio Dei* as God the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and the Son sending the Spirit is expanded to include yet another “movement”: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world.⁷⁵

Primarily, mission is not the church sending people (though this is part of the church’s larger missional task), but God who sends the church. We may note with the authors that “the church of Jesus Christ is not the purpose or goal of the gospel, but rather its instrument and witness.”⁷⁶ Theologically, this means understanding that election and salvation, while being personal gifts of God to us, always entail a forward movement. As Abraham was blessed *in order to be* a blessing (Gen. 12), as Israel was loved *that they might be* a light (Deut. 10), as the disciples were chosen *to bear* witness (Acts 1:8), so the church is called *for* and *to* mission (Mt. 28:19-20).⁷⁷

3.2 - Missional Distinctives

So far we have seen that a missional ecclesiology is patently theological and that it readily contends with cultures and the state of the church within those cultures. We must now consider its distinctives – what makes a missional church missional? Here, I intend to summarize what the authors have to say to this question and then unpack it a bit.

We may understand the role or vocation of a missional church as that of *being a sent*

⁷³ For a more detailed discussion of this see Appendix K – *A Trinitarian Missional Ecclesiology*.

⁷⁴ And typically to non-western countries as western countries were understood as already Christianized. This is the Christendom mentality.

⁷⁵ *Missional Church*, 5. Quoted from David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991), 390.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁷⁷ See Appendix L for a more detailed discussion of mission and election.

people who incarnate the good news of the reign of God as its community, its servant, and its messenger.

Being a Sent People

The very first descriptor in this definition should stick out. Most are accustomed to defining the church by what it *does* as opposed to who it *is*. Churches, in the opinion of many, hold services, offer the sacraments, teach Bible classes, host weddings, and so on. But, the church which emerges from missional ecclesiology derives its identity not from what it *does*, but by what it *is*. By emphasizing the vocation of the church as that of “being” as opposed to “doing,” we are compelled to remember that it is God who calls all things, including the church, into being.⁷⁸ It is to God and God alone that the church owes its existence – never to get lost in the self-sufficient world of *doing*. To use Jesus’ metaphors, the church is to *be* salt and light. True, salt and light *do* things, but they do them by virtue of their nature. It is the state, not the function we are called to (Mt. 5:13-14).

The missional church is also a *people* as opposed to a place, an event, an entity associated with a particular person, or an organization which offers programs or services.⁷⁹ To illustrate, simply think how frequently we might ask or be asked questions like, “*where* do you go to church?” “*when* do you attend church?” “*how did you like* church today?” All these questions and countless others like them betray the fact that we are greatly accustomed to conceiving of the church as something other than the people. Though we may *say* that we understand that the church is a people and not a place, our

⁷⁸ For more see Appendix M, *The Church: Being a People of Missional Engagement*.

⁷⁹ I benefited here from a paper entitled, *What is a Missional Community?*, written by Jason Zahariades, pastor and theologian. The paper can be found at www.theofframp.org.

language discloses our reality.⁸⁰ A missional ecclesiology seeks to recover the vital distinction between Church as people as opposed to church as place. What is at stake is nothing less than the very identity of the church.

Not only are missional churches set on reclaiming the notion of church as people, but more specifically a *sent* people. Places, events, programs and services, and personality driven organizations cannot be sent, only people can be sent. Here the difference between missional churches and other sorts comes to a head. Missional churches have a “go-to-them” mentality while other churches, those who refer to church as place and so on, tend to have a “bring-them-here” mentality. The bulk of church staff, finances, time, and energy go into making weekend services happen on account of the bring-them-here mentality, while missional communities invest their resources in areas which assist the members of the community in their mission in the world. Most important for missional churches then, is being so spiritually formed that we are able to faithfully re-present Christ in the world.

Who Incarnate the Good News of the Reign of God

Incarnation is the main method by which missional communities endeavor to be a sent people. As God incarnated Himself in Jesus to fulfill his mission in the world, so too missional churches desire to be incarnational in terms of their mission within their particular context and culture. This means finding culturally appropriate ways to communicate and embody the gospel.

And what is this good news? “The gospel is Jesus himself... If this is true, however, we must also hear what Jesus himself said, what he himself called the ‘good

⁸⁰ These realities are especially dangerous in America where the powers of consumerism, individualism, and materialism are so pervasive that church becomes, as place, event, etc., becomes but another commodity.

news.”⁸¹ As Mark tells us, “Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe the good news.’”⁸²

The central aspect of the teaching of Jesus was that concerning the Kingdom of God. Of this there can be no doubt... Jesus appeared as one who proclaimed the Kingdom; all else in his message and ministry serves as a function in relation to that proclamation and derives its meaning from it. The challenge to discipleship, the ethical teaching, the disputes about oral tradition or ceremonial law, even the pronouncement of forgiveness of sins and the welcoming of the outcast in the name of God – all these are to be understood in the context of the Kingdom proclamation or they are not to be understood at all.⁸³

Thus, a missional church aims at being an incarnationally focused sent people not for the sake of cultural relevance, but for the sake of its desire to exhibit a Kingdom culture.

Convicted that Jesus was who he said he was, did what we read he did, and lives to relate to his people today, missional churches understand the Kingdom and reign of God to be a present, but not ultimate or fulfilled reality. It is on account of this Kingdom reality that the church exists and lives its life.

As a Community, Servant, and Messenger

The Church lives this Kingdom life as the community, servant, and messenger of the King of Kingdom, Lord Jesus. “Like Jesus, the church is to embody the reign of God by living under its authority. We live as the covenant community, a distinctive community spawned by God’s reign to show forth its tangible character in human, social form.”⁸⁴ More than being a community which witnesses to the reign of God by its life together in the world, the community of God exists as a servant. As the authors say, “the

⁸¹ *Missional Church*. 87-88.

⁸² Mark 1:14-15.

⁸³ *Missional Church*, 89. Quoted from Norman Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 54.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 103.

church represents the reign of God by its deeds as the servant to God's passion for the world's life. Like Jesus, it exhibits by numerous signs the reign of God, thereby exercising its authority."⁸⁵ We are co-laborers with God, but not his equal. We serve because we have been incomparably and graciously served by Jesus, The Servant. Finally, the community of God serves as a messenger of God's reign. Jesus said, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father."⁸⁶ Through his actions, his words, and his very being, Jesus was God's messenger – he spoke and ministered with God's authority. In a similar way, missional ecclesiology envisions a Church who continues this missional task of bearing the message of God and God's reign to the world – a Church who, like her Lord, ministers with God's authority. As the authors remind us, "Announcing the reign of God comes as a spontaneous expression of gratitude, humility, and joy when it occurs in the context of being the forgiven community that embodies the divine reign and signals its character in actions of compassion, justice, and peace."⁸⁷

A missional ecclesiology envisions apostolic communities of the Holy Spirit. With the theology of McClendon, the missional ecclesiology we are dealing with here recognizes the place of principalities and powers at work in the world. Also with McClendon, these authors admit, "In themselves, the powers are neither wholly good nor wholly bad. God has created them; they have roles ordained by God."⁸⁸ Nevertheless, many of these powers are fallen and still others, if not all from time to time, are in need or redemption, hence the need for apostolic communities. As apostolic (literally, sent out) communities, churches which operate out of a missional ecclesiology accept the role

⁸⁵ Ibid., 105.

⁸⁶ John 14:9.

⁸⁷ *Missional Church*, 107.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 111.

of being in the world but not of it (Jn. 17:16), of conformity to the will of God rather than the world (Rom. 12:2), and of being “a royal priest hood, a holy nation.”⁸⁹ Unlike churches who attempt to pull people out of the world into the safe confines of the church community, the missional church identifies with Jesus in risking itself as it marches forth into a world in the hopes of providing a radical alternative (life in the Kingdom). Not all will embrace this life and still others will wage violence against it. The fate of Jesus will be the fate of many churches and Christians, but such is the call of apostleship.

Missional churches are not merely apostolic communities, but communities of the Holy Spirit. “Through this [dynamic and life-giving] power of the Holy Spirit a ‘people sent’ are cultivated through the practices by which they are formed, trained, equipped, and motivated as missional communities.”⁹⁰ It is through a community’s openness and sensitivity to the Holy Spirit that they experience forgiveness, healing, reconciliation, and new creation. It is the Spirit of God which bestows gifts, guides discernment, illuminates hearts and minds, and works in and through community practices to form and shape a missional people. The Holy Spirit, in the most literal sense of the phrase, forms Christian community. A central difference of all this within a missional ecclesiology is just this; “The community-forming activity of the Holy Spirit challenges us to move beyond the contemporary assumption that the Spirit’s actions center exclusively, or even primarily, on the individual soul.”⁹¹

3.3 – Missional and Emerging

Nothing has been said yet about the relationship between the emerging church

⁸⁹ 1 Pe. 2:9.

⁹⁰ *Missional Church*, 142.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 142-143. See also Appendix N, *An Emerging Spirituality*.

movement/conversation⁹² and missional ecclesiology. Commenting on this relationship here in the conclusion to this section will serve us well, however. Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger, in their book, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures*, define emerging churches as “communities that practice the way of Jesus within postmodern cultures.” Distinctively,

emerging churches identify with the life of Jesus, transform the secular realm, and live highly communal lives. Because of these three activities, they welcome the stranger, serve with generosity, participate as producers, create as created beings, lead as a body, and take part in spiritual activities.⁹³

It should be fairly easy to see overlap between what these authors report about their study of emerging churches and what has been said about missional ecclesiology. Scot McKnight has said that to be “missional is first of all theological and then it is ecclesiological.”⁹⁴ Though I would agree with this conceptually, as God, in his character and nature, is prior to the church and is to be the source of her identity, I have been attempting to show throughout the paper that we can never make a realistic distinction about our starting point. Emerging and missional churches then represent two sides of the same coin, the first ecclesial and the second theological. Thus, all emerging churches are, in some sense, missional and all missional churches are, in some sense, emerging.⁹⁵

⁹² Neither of these should be confused with the group known as “Emergent.” More information about this group is available at www.emergentvillage.com.

⁹³ *Emerging Churches*, 44-45. I would contend that if the hallmark of traditional evangelical churches is teaching, the hallmark of emerging churches will be hospitality. I provide an extended discussion on this in Appendix O, *Hospitality: An Essential and Transformative Practice*.

⁹⁴ Scot McKnight, *What is the Emerging Church?* Paper delivered at Westminster Theological Seminary: Fall Contemporary Issues Conference, October 26-27, 2006, 20.

⁹⁵ Both missional and emerging churches tend to be more organic and focus less on traditional models of paid, professional staff. This has particularly interesting implications for churches wishing to combat consumerism, materialism, and individualism with in affluent and suburban contexts. I have provided two appendices (P & Q) that deal with these matters. The first is entitled, *A Proposal for Missional Engagement of Affluent Culture: Reflections on Ecclesiology, Context & Leadership*, and the second, *Affluence and the Kingdom of God*.

Both groups and movements are aware of the crises discussed above and both are seeking to identify themselves differently than traditional church forms. McKnight says,

if you are serious enough to contemplate major trends in the Church today, at an international level, and if you define emerging as many of us do – in missional, or ecclesiological terms, rather than epistemological ones – then you will learn quickly enough that there is a giant elephant in the middle of the Church’s living room. It is the emerging church movement and it is a definite threat to traditional evangelical ecclesiology.⁹⁶

Whether it be balled “emerging, “missional,” or something else, it does indeed seem that there is a growing population of believers and church communities within western culture willing to ask hard questions with regard to the church, its mission in the world, and the theology which binds them. As a result, new expressions of what it means to be the body of Christ are popping up all around. Only time will tell if this phenomenon is a passing fad, the outbursts of a frustrated generation, or the work of God in an attempt to restore his people to a faithful witness for their sake and the sake of the world.

⁹⁶ *What is the Emerging Church?*, 9. I wish that he hadn’t used the word “threat” here. It should be our aim to neither threaten our brothers and sisters, nor to allow them to feel threatened. Instead, may we hope that if indeed this is a movement of God that it will be experienced as such, not threateningly, but restoratively and redeemingly.

Conclusion

Summarizing

The aim of this project has been three-fold. First, we sought to explore the nature of the Church's relationship to culture. I submitted that the Church has at least twin callings in this regard. On one hand, the people of God are to be an *embodiment of* and *witness to* a particular kind of culture, a Kingdom culture, and that it does so for the sake of the rest of the world. On the other hand, the Church, as God's missionary people in the world, are also called to discern God's presence and activity within the world and in the various cultures they inhabit. Our second aim was to show that the Church within modernity, adopting all too uncritically the philosophical trends of the day, lost its bearings with regard to its character, nature, and purpose. The final aim was to explore the relationship between narrative approaches to theology and missional forms of ecclesiology and how they might serve to restore hope to the Church in Western culture as it envisions a future of faithfulness to its calling. All of this was done with the intention of showing that it is spiritual formation, becoming a certain kind of people, as opposed to believing or doing the right things, that is most important for the church in Western (or any for that matter) culture.

Much work needs to be done with regard to moving forward in these matters. I would submit, against the grain of our culture, the first steps we need to take, if we are to ever move forward at all, need to be backwards. It is with things like reflection, repentance, and asking forgiveness that we need to begin – these remain essential and unique characteristics of a people in a covenant relationship with God. If we are to spare ourselves and others the pain of making the same mistakes all over again, just in new

ways, our time and energy need to be spent reflecting not on what makes for a successful Church, but what makes for a faithful one.

Following on all that has been said above, I would submit that faithfulness, in part, entails the rejoining, in theory and practice, theological education and ecclesial participation – developing a theological missiology and a missiological theology. Part of what this means is envisioning a Church and churches who are committed to practices aimed at the spiritual formation of believers and communities. Again, in light with what I have presented, I would suggest that these practices will be emerge from a narrative understanding of theology and a missional understanding of the church. To round off these project we will consider three historically pivotal church practices and how they might be transfigured in light what has been offered here.

Transforming Practices

1. Preaching and Teaching

To greater and lesser extents, preaching and teaching have been constant features of the church of Christ and the people of God throughout history. Though variously understood and practiced, the verbal passing on of the faith has found expression in rabbinic schools, Sunday school classes, evangelistic crusades, missionary encounters, conferences and seminars, synagogue and temple assemblies, mentorship, and so on. There are didactic and dynamic forms of preaching and teaching. There are monological and dialogical forms of preaching and teaching. There are distant and relational forms of preaching and teaching. My point here is not that preaching and teaching need to take place in any one of these forms, just that in whatever form they do take place, they ought to serve the same narrative and missional ends.

What are the narrative ends of preaching and teaching? They are two-fold. First, all Christian preaching and teaching ought to serve to illuminate the narrative of Scripture. If the Bible is primarily to be seen as a narrative authority as has been suggested here, then everything we have to say and pass on about the Christian faith ought to emerge from and connect to that narrative in its unbroken plot. If it is the world of the Bible that we are invited into as participants, then we must always direct our preaching and teaching so as to highlight the reality of that world. Narrative preaching and teaching is never *primarily* concerned with proving facts or defending points of doctrine. Rather, as with the teaching of Jesus, it is invitational, illustrative, and thought provoking. With regard to its scriptural dimension, narrative preaching and teaching aims to bring the story of Scripture to life.

Narrative preaching and teaching has a second dimension, that of *our* narratives. More than simply illuminating the narrative of Scripture, it aims to help people, communities, and cultures, reconfigure their understanding of their own narratives around the story of the Bible. Again, like Jesus, those who preach and teach narratively are deeply concerned about the people they are preaching and teaching and they therefore labor to connect the Scriptural dimension of their preaching and teaching with the life and story of their hearers. It is as though they were saying, “I know you understand your life or reality like this, but because of the way in which Scripture discloses the really real, here’s what your life and story actually mean.” Holistically, narrative preaching and teaching aim at the reconfiguration of all narratives around the metanarrative of Scripture.

Preaching and teaching also have a two-fold, missional dimension. It is *by* preaching and teaching in the manner described above that we *are* missional. We embark on the mission of God in the world, in part, by preaching and teaching about the nature of God and reality based on the Bible. By presenting people and communities with this reality and to reconfigure their own stories and reality around it, we are inviting them to participate in God's salvific activity in the world which extends into all eternity. In and through preaching and teaching we ask people to respond in faith, to cross from death to life, to receive as a gift the Kingdom of God and to live as a part of it. Narrative preaching and teaching *is* mission.

But it also forms us for mission. The illumination of the biblical story and the invitation to reconfigure our own lives around it is not a one-time-deal. We repeat and rehearse this story so as to not forget and to continually be formed more and more in to the people God made us to be. We increasingly become missional people and missional communities as we preach to and teach one another about the story of which we consider ourselves a part. More than this, we need one another's preaching and teaching if we are to have trusted perspective as to how we ought to understand our stories and lives based on the reality disclosed by the Bible. Narrative preaching and teaching *equips for* mission.

2. Baptism

A second historically recognized Christian practice we may consider is baptism. Some of the controversy and division over this practice begins to fade when we choose to consider it with regard to its narrative and missional dimensions. As with all other church practices, there is a beautiful convergence of narratives in baptism. The story and

life of God intersects with the story and life of an individual and joins them with the story and life of others. The explicit narrative significance of baptism is that of a visible sign whereby a person physically demonstrates their desire to take the story and life of God on themselves, to join the story and life of a particular church community, and to reimagine their own life and story (past, present, future) based on those two things.⁹⁷

The act of baptizing and being baptized is something that joins us with the narrative of God as he was “baptized” with his people in the crossing of the Red Sea (Ex. 14), literally through Jesus, by John in the Jordan river (Mt. 3:13), and again figuratively through the trial of the cross and resurrection (Lk. 12:50). Inasmuch the community which performs baptisms takes responsibility for the spiritual care and formation of the one baptized, it also joins those baptized with those who baptize. Finally, as a symbol of dying and rising to new life, the act of baptism performatively recreates the personal narrative of the one baptized. All these factors disclose the narrative significance of the practice and act of baptism.

We must also note the missional component of the practice and act of baptism. Like preaching and teaching, there is a sense in which it *is* missional and another in which it *equips for* mission. First, it is missional, not because we can add another number to our roles or even because we can feel satisfied in ensuring that one more soul will be in heaven. This is where we have gotten off track. Instead, the act and practice of baptism is missional is that it contributes to spiritual formation, hopefully, of both individual and community alike. Baptism reminds us of our need for the other. A person cannot baptize him or herself without losing the intrinsic meaning and a community

⁹⁷ I am here assuming an “adult” baptism whereby the one being baptized is making a personal, conscious decision toward the things I mention. I believe as well that infant baptism carries its own narrative and missional significance.

centered around Jesus Christ cannot remain vibrant and alive unless it participates in the act of baptizing others who will influence the community in their own right. More than this, it is an act of demarcation in the lives and stories of people and communities. The act of baptism remains a fixed point in time to which we can refer as a point of reference. It is an event and events are what make stories possible and intelligible.

Baptism also equips for mission. Jesus was baptized and was immediately sent into the wilderness (Mt. 3-4). Thousands were baptized upon the Holy Spirit being poured out at Pentecost and were radically changed in their relations to others and the world (Acts 2). As baptism joins us with the people (universal and local) of God, it ushers us into a community aimed at the reconciliation of all things to God through the cultivation of a spiritually formed community. It is in these ways that baptism not only *is* missional, but also a practice which *equips for* mission.

3. Holy Communion

Variouly named the Lord's Supper, Eucharist, communion, the Passover meal, etc., Holy Communion corresponds to Jesus' practice of table fellowship, climactically, the meal he shared with his disciples before being handed over to the authorities. It is sad that this practice, in most instances, has been reduced to the mere distribution of emblems, usually a sip of wine (or grape juice) and a wafer or piece of bread. These sorts of token actions persist on account of the reductionism, individualism, and dichotomist style of thinking spawned by modernity.

Holy Communion gleans its narrative significance from the Passover as a defining event in the life of God's people, the life and ministry of Jesus, who scandalized the religious establishment of his day by his patterns of table fellowship, embracing all those

treated as outcasts, and the meal shared by Jesus and the disciples in the upper room. Through these three points of narrative connection, Holy Communion ties those who share in it to the Old Covenant, the New Covenant, and that which ties the two together, Jesus and his way of living. If any of these three aspects are lost, the narrative significance of this action and practice is diminished.

Were this to be the case for the church in Western culture, far from getting distracted over issues of con, non, or trans-substantiation, we would instead focus our energies and attention on the inclusive dimension of the practice of Holy Communion. Instead of merely featuring emblems of Christ's body and blood, important thought these are, we would engage more holistically in festive meals of inclusion and embrace where Christ's presence exists as a unifying force. This leads us to the missional significance of Holy Communion.

To commune, to share our tables, with those who can't repay us (Lk. 14) or those typically understood as "enemies," as Jesus did, this is the missional thrust of Holy Communion. Lives are shared over meals together, narratives converge as we break bread together. To turn something so characteristically relational and other-focused into something private and self-focused is to miss the missional significance of this vital Christian practice.⁹⁸

Thus, to participate in Holy Communion as I am arguing here, is also missional in the sense of being spiritually transformative. We not only engage in mission by practicing Holy Communion, but we become spiritually transformed as individuals and

⁹⁸ I am in now ay saying that there is no place for private, personal reflection and introspection, in Christian practice. These are also important practices. I only mean to argue that Holy Communion is not the practice which corresponds with these Christian values. That we have allowed it to become so is owing to poor (modern) interpretations of Paul's advice in 1 Cor. 11:28 to examine oneself before participating in the Lord's Supper.

communities by doing so – we become more and more the kind of people and communities God intends us to be. Holy communion is an event of forgiveness, this much we know. Many take communion each Sunday in remembrance that they have been forgiven. But to participate in the sort of Holy Communion which has in view the sort of narrative significance noted here is to embrace a broader view of forgiveness. Here, forgiveness “is knowing that he who is our body and we, forgiven and forgiver, are all one. In this sense, to forgive is to learn a new and truer story about myself by discovering how fully my life is bound up even with those whose sins are also sins against myself.”⁹⁹

Our Hope in God

It should be clear by this point that in the view of what is presented here participating in the mission of God is spiritually formational and being spiritually formed is rightful aim of all theology. This being the case, we do well to structure our lives in such a way that everything we do orients us to life and mission in God’s Kingdom. This is no easy task and requires a community. Not just any community will do, but only one given to the notion that as we shape our theology, so too it shapes us.¹⁰⁰

Our hope is not in our theology or even in the lives we attempt to live in correspondence with it. Our hope is in God. God and God alone is the hope of the Church in Western culture and wherever else God’s people dwell. It is into God’s story and God’s mission in the world that we are invited. It is God’s Kingdom that we are offered as a gift. This project, in its exploration of the relationship between the Church and culture and between narrative approaches to theology and missional forms of

⁹⁹ *Witness*, 228.

¹⁰⁰ See Appendix R for an example of a church community whose statement of faith is a narrative attempt to do just that,

ecclesiology is offered in the hopes that, as faithfully, perhaps as childlike, as we know how, we will accept the invitation and receive the gift – for our sake and for the sake of the world.

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