

1-1-2013

Funny uncles and sons of Hell: gospelling in a persistent postmodern world

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Recommended Citation

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

FUNNY UNCLES AND SONS OF HELL: GOSPELLING IN A PERSISTENT
POSTMODERN WORLD

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF GEORGE FOX EVANGELICAL SEMINARY
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

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PORTLAND, OREGON

MARCH 2013

George Fox Evangelical Seminary
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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

DMin Dissertation

This is to certify that the DMin Dissertation of

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has been approved by
the Dissertation Committee on March 15, 2013
for the degree of Doctor of Ministry in Leadership and Spiritual Formation.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There is not enough space in this section to give thanks and gratitude to all that have provided space for me to study at George Fox Seminary. First, to the faculty and staff at George Fox Evangelical Seminary, you are all amazing people and made this learning environment my favorite educational experience, ever.

Next, to all of my comrades in Cohort L of the Leadership and Spiritual Formation program, you are some of the most courageous and thoughtful Christian leaders I have ever met. May we continue to be knit together long after we walk across the stage together in May 2013. In particular, I want to thank Terry Clees for his friendship that has been established through study, through travel, and through sharing tight living quarters throughout this program. Also, to Cary Peterson, one of the first “elder” leaders in the church to say that he believed in me.

To my advisor and first reader, Phillip “Philly C” Carnes, for your honest oversight, your passionate prayers, and your friendship made this dissertation process more than an academic exercise, but also a laboratory of formation and grace. I still owe you a steak dinner and hope to make good on that promise in the near future.

To my brother, Dr. Matt Skillen, for editing the manuscript and providing charitable feedback in the final phase of the assignment. Also, to Mike, Nathan, Josh, Mark, and Aaron for reading the rough draft and giving me encouraging feedback and helpful suggestions.

To the congregation of Faith Community Church in Wichita, KS for your courage to call a young pastor, with a wife and young children, who also taught as an adjunct

professor two days a week, and was finishing a dissertation. Your patience, love, and support carried me through the last few months of this process.

To the baristas at the Starbucks, for their kindness in allowing me to occupy the only desk-sized table in your store for all of those hours and for keeping me properly caffeinated during this writing process. May the kindness that you showed me be returned to you.

To Avery and Ezra, who allowed your dad time and space to finish what he started. I owe you an enormous debt of attention after the completion of this project, especially Ezra, for leaving you and your Mom at home just three days after you were born in order to finish this program. Avery and Ezra, may you both grow up to be eager to share the news of Jesus's resurrection.

To my lovely wife Ginger, for your patience in allowing me to take on my dream of a doctoral degree. I am not sure how you were able to keep the whole household together, with all that we had going on in the past few years. Thank you for being there to help me put to words things we were both feeling in our ministry context. Thank you for your honest critique and your unending confidence. I promise that this will be my last educational endeavor, for now. *Blepo Su.*

ABSTRACT

There is more than a bit of anxiety concerning the relationship between the American Church and the twenty-first century culture. Pastors and leaders from every stream of Christianity are concerned with the future of the church and fear that America has entered into a post-Christian environment. Along with these observations, one wonders if the current ecclesiology of American churches “fits” within an environment shaped by pluralism, secular humanism, and indifference towards the Christian religion.

In the midst of this anxiety, there are creative and fresh expressions of Christianity that are attempting to exhibit vibrant faithfulness to Jesus in the midst of a new environment. Instead of diagnosing the world outside of the Church as a problem or a project, churches are engaging the cultural context with compassion, love, joy, and service. It is the aim of this project to define ways local Evangelical congregations can be passionate in faith while engaging their own local contexts that are increasingly unfamiliar with the Christian narrative.

Chapter One will provide a short narrative of two characters that are in Evangelical churches today in order to introduce the problem for the assignment. Chapter Two will provide a general overview of the philosophical differences between Modernity and Postmodernity, highlighting the significant changes that this philosophical turn creates for the American cultural context. Chapter Three will provide a short historical sketch of Evangelicalism within the twentieth and twenty-first centuries to show Evangelicalism as a movement has the “flexibility” for adapting to cultural change. This chapter will elevate the profound challenge that this group has with its politic in the twenty-first century and will also examine two ideas that are provoking the Evangelicals

to undergo significant adaptations. Chapter Four will examine “gospels” that are common among Evangelicals. This chapter will also discuss the main ideas that will help a local church become a “gospelling” community. Chapter Five will provide biblical material that illustrates how Jesus trained his own disciples to inhabit a faithful presence for their own cultural moment. This chapter will also provide a section on how faithful readings of Scripture can share similar space within this particular cultural moment. Chapter Six will provide an overview of two Emerging ecclesiologies, namely the Missional-Incarnational and Emergent Church movements, and how each movement is providing helpful values for contemporary Evangelicalism. The conclusion in Chapter Seven will provide this writer’s own applications as a local church pastor seeking to lead a local community in the way of missional-incarnational faithfulness within their own local context.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

“If your vision is for a year, plant wheat. If your vision is for ten years, plant a tree. If your vision is for a lifetime, plant people.” – Chinese Proverb

As I approached my car after worship services one Fall Sunday morning, I was surprised to see that Sarah had been there as well. I was surprised because she had expressed the desire to begin an intentional process of spiritual formation. As a pastor, I had heard this desire shared by parishioners many times before; a few followed through with their decision while others found ways to back away from their attendance. Sarah’s plea, however, had a hint of determination and commitment.

I had met Sarah nearly five years earlier at church. She was struggling to get through college and, upon discovering that she was pregnant, knew that finishing her college education as a single mother was going to be a great challenge. Sarah was also aware that life as a single mother in a suburban Evangelical church would also be difficult. After giving birth to a beautiful daughter, she remained in the church for a few months and then eventually moved on with her life. She assumed that she would give church another chance when her circumstances were different. Now, Sarah was a mother of two daughters, still single, and still searching for a place to belong in the body of Christ.

A few days after our meeting in the church parking lot Sarah and I met for coffee to discuss ways for her to inspire growth in her faith. The tenor of these ideas involved learning new information about the Christian faith. I encouraged her to follow the “Faith

Development” path that our church had designed for people wanting to grow spiritually. The path included regularly attending church, a small group Bible study, Sunday school, and Wednesday night lecture classes while her daughters attended the children’s ministry.

Sarah ascertained that the main idea behind our spiritual growth efforts; learning more information will lead to behavior change and, ultimately, a deeper relationship with God. Success, then, was measured by the content that she could retain, her attendance at church activities, memorizing Bible verses, and the familiarity she gained with Christian belief and doctrine.

I followed up with Sarah to discuss her progress after one month on this path. Sarah shared that, after reading from the book of Acts, Sarah wanted to facilitate a ministry that could connect people with tangible needs with those who could provide for those needs. As a single mom, Sarah had a few children’s car seats that she no longer needed. Sarah wanted to give the car seats to a new mother instead of donating the car seats to Goodwill. In this way, she could give the car seats to someone she knew, to someone from her church who needed them, rather than to a stranger.

As she told me the story, I was torn. Sarah’s idea was great and it was a sign that Sarah was trying to find ways to live out her faith. However, I knew that the church would not donate the resources to begin her project. The church had limited resources to invest in new ideas. So, after bringing the idea up in a few planning meetings, I gave up. Sarah became discouraged. I imagined that she wondered how she would ever get a chance to grow when her ideas were not going to be considered. I imagined that she wondered if she could actually put her faith into action.

Sarah eventually drifted from the life of the church and only attended Sunday morning worship services once per month. However, I was surprised to connect with her later through Facebook and to discover that she was developing in spiritual maturity (emotional health, vibrant friendships, Christ-centered mission, etc...) as she found a new, local church to join. Her new Christian community, though smaller in size and unknown by many Christians in our city, actively reaches out to the poor and meets for worship in an urban part of our city.

Character #2: Dale

Dale is a Sunday school teacher and vibrant member in his local church. Members of Dale's church consider him a person that knows the Bible. His friends frequently ask him for suggestions for books that they can read so they can grow in their faith. Dale meets frequently with the pastors on the staff of his local church for mutual encouragement.

However, Dale's co-workers have a difficult time approaching him, especially during times of conflict. Whenever a conversation concerning politics emerges, Dale is easily agitated, often making remarks with raised voice about the political parties that he opposes. Although his co-workers believe that Dale has a strong faith, they are too timid to approach Dale because they are nervous that they may say something to agitate him.

Dale's children love their father. At times, however, they admit that Dale's anger is out of proportion to the given situation. Dale's wife feels that he is distant while at home but more alive at church functions. Dale's children barely know their father; and the favorite moments with their father have been at their baptisms or when they have

helped in the church service on Sunday morning. If those in Dale's family were honest, they would say that Dale lives in two different worlds. Dale has a "church world" where he thrives because he can help someone learn about the Christian faith. Dale also has a "private world" outside of the church where he is easily angered. These two worlds do not seem to coherence into a whole, vibrant, Christian faith.

The Problem

These stories led me to begin to examine the current framework that I had as a pastor in a local church for developing discipleship environments. In general, discipleship environments have the aim of developing Christ followers who will also seek to make other Christ followers, i.e. engaging in the work that the church has traditionally called "the Great Commission." Dale represented everything that I thought a church should provide for someone who wanted to become this type of disciple. In my mind, learning more information about the Bible or the Christian life inspires spiritual growth and equips one to win others to Jesus Christ. This was the framework that I learned during my seven years of theological training. It was the method which I was comfortable with and that was easy to plan and to measure success. What this experience, and others, has led me to believe is that a spiritual formation model must consider how one is able to represent Jesus Christ in the midst of the wider world, not only inside of the church environment.

The dissonance between the public postures of Sarah and Dale provoked me to consider different ways one can develop environments for spiritual formation, specifically, spiritual formation environments that also lead to missional-incarnational engagement by its participants. In the light of significant cultural change, perhaps there is

also a space to re-imagine spiritual formation in the light of the current American culture setting, i.e. a spiritual formation environment that helps disciples of Jesus engage the American cultural context with a vibrant missional-incarnational impulse.

The title of this assignment, *Funny Uncles and Sons of Hell*, is a general sketch of two characters among our churches today. As the church drifts from the center of society, once operating as American culture's "chaplain," to now becoming one of many religious options, the church needs to re-invent itself as a new character within American culture. However, some of God's people will continue to assume the church's dominance. This assumption can potentially prevent Jesus's message from being considered "good news." One of Jesus's main critiques of the Pharisees was they were making their disciples "twice a son of hell" as they were.¹ Instead of leading their followers to God, the Pharisee's "brand" of discipleship led their new adherents away from the living God. Instead of participating in God's cosmic renewal of all things, the Pharisees and their followers were tearing God's world apart. I propose this type of discipleship or branding happens in our culture and time when the church continues to convince itself, and those on the outside, it is still in the center of culture. The church's message becomes a resounding gong and clanging symbol, or it is simply ignored. Being ignored or even being considered irrelevant by the surrounding culture causes faith groups to compromise Christlike character and posture in the name of seeking to "be right." The need to be right constructs an acute martyrdom complex that justifies the use of any means necessary to recover a more desired past. In the end, a significant antagonism prevents faithful presence and mission within culture.

¹ Matthew 23:15.

In contrast, there is an opportunity for the church to embody a different type of character altogether. Robert Farrar Capon, commenting on the parable of the Ten Virgins from Matthew 25, notes that the arrival of Jesus and the fulfillment of God's dream are often imagined in a celebratory manner. Capon describes the anticipation of God's reign upon the earth as a party that is gathering, a party that is near, a feast while the religious leaders are concerned with a fast. "God is not our mother-in-law, coming to see whether her wedding-present china has been chipped," Capon says, "He is a *funny Old Uncle* with a salami under one arm and a bottle of wine under the other. We do indeed need to watch for him; but only because it would be such a pity to miss all the fun."² Disciples and faith groups that engage their world, celebrate God's arrival and reign in all places where they find it, and who call all others who have yet to join in to God's cosmic renewal will not only more vibrantly embody the calling as "gospel people," but will also be salt and light within this cultural context.

Claim

Although the attractional and educational formation model was useful in the past American Evangelical context, I claim that the Church must consider new opportunities to promote spiritual formation because the twenty-first century American context is a new environment with new, distinct philosophical ideals. Evangelicalism is in need of recalibration for missional-incarnational faithfulness, because the gospel that the Church rehearses must be "good news" in its particular cultural moment, and because a

² Robert Farrar Capon, *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 501. Emphasis mine.

contemporary Evangelical ecclesiology must be emerging in its makeup—one which rises up from the soil of the culture with which it is engaged.

Chapter Two will provide a general overview of the philosophical differences between Modernity and Postmodernity, highlighting the significant changes that this philosophical turn creates for the American cultural context. Chapter Three will provide a short historical sketch of Evangelicalism within the twentieth and twenty-first centuries to show Evangelicalism as a movement has the “flexibility” for adapting to cultural change. This chapter will elevate the profound challenge that this group has with its politic in the twenty-first century and will also examine two ideas that are provoking the Evangelicals to undergo significant adaptations. Chapter Four will examine “gospels” that are common among Evangelicals. This chapter will also discuss the main ideas that will help a local church become a “gospelling” community. Chapter Five will provide biblical material that illustrates how Jesus trained his own disciples to inhabit a faithful presence for their own cultural moment. This chapter will also provide a section on how faithful readings of Scripture can share similar space within this particular cultural moment. Chapter Six will provide an overview of two Emerging ecclesiologies, namely the Missional-Incarnational and Emergent Church movements, and how each movement is providing helpful values for contemporary Evangelicalism. The conclusion in Chapter Seven will provide this writer’s own applications as a local church pastor seeking to lead a local community in the way of missional-incarnational faithfulness within their own local context.

For the purposes of limiting the scope of this assignment, the author will consider the issues of spiritual formation among the Evangelical landscape of Christianity in America, the general environment within which this author is currently engaged.³

³ Note: The author refers to “Evangelical” in the sociological sense, leveraging the work of David Bebbington whom described Evangelicals with four terms: “Crucicentrism, Biblicism, Conversionism, and Activism.” For more, see David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s*, (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 1-17. Mark Noll affirms the sufficiency of this definition in his book *Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield, and the Wesleys*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 19.

Roger Olson and John Stackhouse Jr. add “interdenominational” to Bebbington’s list in, Andrew David Naselli, Collin Hansen, Kevin Bauder and R. Albert Mohler, *Four Views on the Spectrum of Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003).

CHAPTER TWO

PERSISTENT POSTMODERNISM

We do not see things as they are; we see them as we are. – Jewish Talmud

North America has undergone a significant, cultural shift. Although there is disagreement among the Evangelical world concerning whether or not this cultural change is positive or negative for the Christian faith, leaders from across the spectrum affirm that a significant shift has occurred. As William Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas posit, “Sometime between 1960 and 1980, an old, inadequately conceived world ended, and a fresh, new world began.”¹ These cultural shifts appear to be relatively routine occurring nearly every few hundred years when Western culture undergoes “sharp transformation. Within a few short decades, society rearranges itself – its worldview; its basic values; its social and political structure; its arts; its key institutions. Fifty years later, there is a new world.”² Contemporary Evangelicalism appears to be in the midst of another one of these profound transformations where an older world gives way to a new emergent reality. I will refer to the philosophical underpinnings of the old world as “Modernity” and the new world as “Postmodernity,” or, more plainly, the critique of the Modern philosophical worldview.

¹ Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989), 15.

² Peter Drucker, *Post-Capitalist Society* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 1.

Modernity: A Brief Sketch

Stephen Toulmin suggests a dual origin for Modernity, the Renaissance, with its emphasis of a new humanism, expressed primarily through the revival of non-sacred literary sources. The second event, the Enlightenment, was the “scientific and philosophical phase” of the development of Modernity and served as a reaction to the Renaissance, which occurred only a century and a half prior. Both of these movements were reactions and critiques of unrest in Europe during the Protestant Reformation. Philosophical thinkers sought a more “cool-headed and humane way to settle disputes,” distinct from religious discussion and to develop a way to view reality aside from “Revelation” or the assumption that humans could ascertain the thoughts of God. Modern philosophers insisted that knowledge could be known with absolute certainty without mystery, and was “objective, universal,” and “timeless,” rather than controlled by or relegated via religious authorities. The idea of practical knowledge inspired by the Renaissance was replaced with the “importance of the written over the oral, the universal over the particular, the general over the local, and the timeless over the timely.”³

Three Convictions of Modernity

Robert Webber distills the Modern mood into three basic categories. First, Modernism was ascribed to philosophical Foundationalism, or “beliefs or experiences that are in themselves beyond doubt and upon which systems of belief and understanding

³ Charles J. Conniry Jr., *Soaring in the Spirit: Rediscovering Mystery in the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs, CO: Authentic Media, 2007), 81. For a broader treatment of the panorama of Modernity, see Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 22-44.

can therefore be constructed with certainty.”⁴ Next, Modernity affirmed Structuralism or the “belief that societies construct texts to make meaning out of life and that the meaning which is in the text can be commonly agreed upon by its interpreters through the use of reason.”⁵ Finally, Modern philosophy embraced the construction of metanarratives, or “the stories of the text. These stories make sense out of life by providing an interpretation of the world from its beginning and to its end.”⁶

Christianity and Modernity

The theological quest during the new age of Modernity after the Enlightenment asked, “How do we make the gospel credible to the modern world?” Nearly all of Christian theology was under scrutiny after Copernicus’s cosmological discovery pulled the Western world forward in its understanding of the cosmos. This new view of the cosmos left the Church with the difficult task of trying to harmonize a Premodern, Biblical story and way of thinking with a Modern, rationalistic context, or as suggested by Paul Tillich, “how to relate the ancient world of the faith to a modern world of disbelief?” Two main reactions resulted from this quest and, over time, separated American Christianity into two distinct groups, Liberal/Progressive and Conservative/Traditional.

⁴ Robert Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith: Re-Thinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 19.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid. See also Grenz, Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 22-38.

The Liberal/Progressive thinkers, using major philosophical ideals from Modernity, sought to make Christianity palatable for modern American people. American culture developed into a multi-faith environment, where it was assumed that “believing in something reasonable was acceptable.” Christianity seemed irrational within the Premodern framework, so theologians such as Tillich and Bultmann asserted that the existential realities of the Christian faith, those things that could be separated from the Premodern myth, could be believed.⁷

Christians from the Conservative/Traditional perspective also adopted helpful Modern ideals in order to communicate Christian truth to the American culture. Instead of removing the extraordinary elements such as miracles, resurrection, revelation that their Liberal/Progressive counterparts suggested, Conservative/Traditional Christians changed the way the faith was presented, defended, and distributed. Webber contends that Evangelicalism was influenced by Modern philosophy in many ways,

Evangelical Christianity has also developed a worldview based on the modern paradigm. While reason is placed under revelation, evangelicals insist revelation can be interpreted through the use of reason, resulting in foundational truth. Following the line of structuralism, evangelicals argue that “meaning is found within the biblical text.” Evangelicals also insist that a single authorial meaning of each text is discoverable through the use of the grammatical-historical and theological method. This is the notion of propositional truth... The Bible is the foundation of truth, the tools of reason uncover that truth, and truth is emphatically, if not entirely, propositional.⁸

By the middle of the twentieth century, it was apparent that the Modern project to provide a rational framework to understand all things had ultimately failed to create the consensus of a common, universal truth by way of reason. The advent of the

⁷ Ibid., 19-22.

⁸ Ibid., 20.

Liberal/Fundamentalism controversy in the early twentieth century was only one of several serious, out-in-the-open confrontations that Christians had with each another. The general public began to take notice, leaving many within culture to begin to reconsider faith affiliation and practice.

Postmodernity: Deconstructing Modernity

In the midst of this re-thinking of religious life a philosophical critique of Modernism, what some would call Postmodernism, began to work its way into cultural life. Briefly stated, Postmodernism challenges the ability for one to discover truth apart from his or her own context, or to communicate truth without bias. Stanley Grenz and John Franke find the Postmodern mood as one that, in a healthy way, brings rationality to a more reasonable function, referring to Postmodernism as “chastened rationality.”⁹ In short, Charles Conniry suggests that the difference between Modernity and Postmodernity is simply how one can comprehend truth. Postmodernism claims that human beings cannot encounter the world with “clear lenses.” One’s perception is not limited to empirical observations, but individuals are also shaped by the sociological, philosophical, geographical, and theological influences in their own particular location or as Conniry provides defends, truth is “socially comprehended.”¹⁰

Philosophical Postmodernism rejects the idea of the “metanarratives” or “our ability to float free of the grand narratives we find ourselves in and to view things from a ‘God’s-eye view.’ In this sense, Postmodernism is a rejection of what is at the heart of the Enlightenment ideal, that is, “the dispassionate, unbiased, and transcendent ego grasping

⁹ Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 22.

¹⁰ Webber, *Ancient-Future*, 76, 81.

reality by use of unvarnished reason.”¹¹ Kevin Corcoran suggests that a healthy form of Postmodernism is “epistemic humility” or the idea humans are, “frail, fallible, finite creatures... our grasp of reality – including God – will never rise above the frailty, finitude, and fallibility.”¹² Postmodern theologians seek to communicate the task of theology in the place of narrative, rather than in systematic, doctrinal, objective categories. Clark Pinnock, and others, view theology itself as “secondary language that reflects on the meaning of the primary story.”¹³

As one could anticipate, the transition from Modernity to Postmodernity was not welcomed by everyone. There have been many who have feared that the embrace of all of the claims of Postmodernism would lead to the complete displacement of truth. Many have suggested that if Christians embrace Postmodernity as a whole, it could lead to pluralism and erosion of orthodoxy.¹⁴ Kevin Corcoran suggests that this fear originates from an extreme view of Postmodernism, or what he calls, “creative antirealism,” or the idea that not only is truth uniquely situated in one’s experience, but that language can

¹¹ Kevin Corcoran ed., *Church in Present Tense: A Candid Look at What’s Emerging* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2011), 11.

¹² Corcoran, *Church in the Present Tense*, 12. James K A Smith contends that Lyotard’s contention with meta-narratives was more concerned with the nature of the telling of meta-narratives. Meta-narratives seek to not only provide a big story of all reality, but to also contend that the meta-narrative can be legitimated by pure reason, a modern phenomenon. (See James K A Smith, *Who is Afraid of Postmodernism*, pg. 62-65) “Epistemic Humility” is akin to Lesslie Newbigin’s “proper confidence” idea of being deeply Christian without the imperial posture of certainty. See Lesslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, and Certainty in Christian Discipleship*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995). Brian McLaren calls this mood of postmodernity, “humble confidence.” See Brian D. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity: Ten Questions that are Transforming the Faith*, (New York: Harper One, 2010), 8.

¹³ Clark Pinnock, *Tracking the Maze: Finding Our Way through Modern Theology from an Evangelical Perspective* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), 182.

¹⁴ See D.A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), D.A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005).

actually create concepts and categories, like God, faith, etc. Corcoran believes that one does not have to embrace creative antirealism in order to be influenced by Postmodernism. Rather, as stated above, one can come to a place of “epistemic humility” or to understand our “creatureliness” in the process of knowing.¹⁵

Stanley Grenz suggests that Christianity cannot follow all of the claims of Postmodernism, especially the claim of the loss of metanarratives. Even though there is a struggle over competing metanarratives, "they cannot all be equally valid."¹⁶ The biblical message of the gospel is not just good news for Christians who receive the message but also for the entire world. Grenz considers that Christianity must allow the Postmodern critique to help the church to be released from Modernity's influence, but cannot accept Postmodernism as a whole.¹⁷ At the heart of the Christian usage of Postmodernism is not a wholesale rejection of the pervasive truth claims of Christianity, but simply to evaluate what the church may have left behind through the age of Modernity, which is something James K.A. Smith believes is the validity of the Postmodern critique.¹⁸

¹⁵ Corcoran, 8-12.

¹⁶ Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 164-165.

¹⁷ Grenz notes that as Modern Christianity is allowed to be critiqued by Postmodernity, it can develop advances in the way the gospel is presented. Grenz notes four specific ways: post-individualistic, post-dualistic, post-rationalistic, and post-noeticentric. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 167-174.

¹⁸ James K.A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?: Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 23.

Cultural Postmodernism

These new ideas of re-examining religious involvement, the skepticism of metanarratives, and the ability to determine reality for oneself, regardless of traditional rhetoric did not stay within academic circles but began to influence culture. Examining the cultural ramifications of the shift from Modernism to Postmodernism is the crucial piece to the setting of this assignment. Americans considering spirituality will not evaluate the finer points of French philosophy. However, ideas and philosophies have consequences; one perceives the world through philosophical lenses if examined or not. As one seeks to engage the cultural setting that has been shaped by Philosophical Postmodernism's ideals, one should ask, "What are the cultural ramifications of Postmodernity? What are unique cultural characteristics that Postmodernity could construct?"

Carnival-esque Setting- The Desire for Identity

Brian Walsh and Sylvia Keesmaat would describe the affect of Postmodernism as creating culture that represents a carnival of "fragmentation, numbness, and boredom. Final decisions based on rational analysis give way to the undecidability of keeping all options open and the spiritual promiscuity of pop religion."¹⁹ Walsh and Keesmaat find that all of life is potentially shaped by capitalism, where the self is commodified and the answer to the pain of the individual is consumption.²⁰ The unsteady nature of reality and the rapid mobility that is in our world has many concerned, while others are optimistic.

¹⁹ Brian J. Walsh and Sylvia C. Keesmaat, *Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 25.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 32-33.

William Knoke predicts a unique opportunity for religion as the culture enters into a “bold new world,” or the “the age of everything-everywhere... a placeless society” that eliminates the distance between “here” and “there” and it is plausible to believe that people will seek religion to cope with the uncertain times.²¹ Deep within this yearning to be found and to be a part of a larger narrative is the merger of two major philosophical themes of Cultural Postmodernism that have significant ramifications for religious discussion. These categories are Epistemology (one’s ability to know) and the concept of Self.

Knowing

In the Modern framework, one arrives at “knowing” through the process of scientific inquiry and reason. Philosophical Modernity presupposed that one could transcend one’s own place through the employment of reason,

It was looking more and more like the natural world was giving up its most intimate secrets to reason and that through science and technology, reason’s most natural employer, we human beings were on the precipice of solving humanity’s most pressing problems – physical, social, and otherwise.²²

What can be proven, discussed, translated, and transmitted could be defended through the five senses. The Modern era was influenced by the philosophy of Rene Descartes, placing an emphasis on reason over any other form of knowledge. Truth was ascertained through empirical method by a detached observer. For instance, in the Modern era, Liberal Christians rejected the supernatural claims of classic Christianity while Conservative

²¹ William Knoke, *Bold New World: The Essential Road Map to the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Kodansha America, 1996).

²² Corcoran, 10.

Christians sought to defend the faith through apologetics or supplying logical evidence.²³ Both of these seemingly different perspectives had the same foundation; reason alone was the final analysis on truth and reality. Leonard Sweet adds, “The shift from ‘troth’ to ‘truth’ was the shift from truth residing in relationships to truth being found in documents and evidence... But truth as doctrine, truth as a system of belief, truth as propositions that exist apart from those who incarnate truth spelled a profound social and religious change in the history of Western culture.”²⁴

As mentioned above, Postmodernity approaches knowledge with less rational certainty. Postmoderns affirm that one imports who they are in their knowing. “In the postmodern world, the way of knowing has changed. We now live in a world in which people have lost interest in argument and have taken to story, imagination, mystery, ambiguity, and vision.”²⁵ Knowledge, then, is not perceived only in arguments and intuitive-based exercises, but through stories, narratives, and parables that one shares from one’s “own world.” Kevin Corcoran notes the important shift that this type of knowledge has as one attempts to know God. In Postmodernity, God is not an “object to be dissected and parsed like a specimen under the scientist’s microscope. Rather, God is a

²³ Webber, *Ancient-Future*, 15. Webber includes the ideals of individualism, rationalism, and factualism in his assessment of Modernity. (see Webber, *Ancient-Future*, 18) Heath White adds that rationalism and optimism lead to the idea of progress towards human agreement. The hope was that, as humans removed their individual, non-rational bias, human reason would lead to consensus. White is extreme, here, but posits that the inability for “One True Culture” through science and reason brought dissonance (from a mild observation) or hostility and cruelty (from a critical perspective); see Heath White, *Postmodernism 101: A First Course for Curious Christians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), 39-43.

²⁴ Leonard Sweet, *Postmodern Pilgrims: First Century Passion for the 21st century World* (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2000), 131.

²⁵ Robert Webber, *The Divine Embrace: Recovering the Passionate Spiritual Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2006), 17.

life-transformative and life-altering subjective event.”²⁶ Events are more intuitively communicated through stories. This type of sharing of knowledge is encouraging for Christians for it resembles the culture of Jesus, “the world’s leading storyteller. He excelled at connecting people to one another, to himself, to creation, and to God.”²⁷ Grenz and Franke defend that all Christian theology is “Pilgrim Theology,” and on a journey with the people of God.

Theology attempts to assist the church in articulating the confession of Jesus as the Christ, together with the mosaic of beliefs to which it is intricately connected, in the appropriate thought forms of the culture in which the church is situated. In addition, theology seeks to explicate the implications, relevance, and application of the Christian faith to life in that particular social, cultural setting.²⁸

In short, theology communicates a blending of God’s story to and within the culture it finds itself.

The ramifications of this shift in culture are significant for ministry environments. A local church finds itself in a peculiar situation in the twenty-first century. The world is changing within a culture that values things differently than in centuries past. “Culture shapes behavior and how we express our beliefs,” Sweet adds. “Faith is not just a matter of logic and learning but of imagination and emotion and culture.”²⁹

²⁶ Corcoran, 8-9.

²⁷ Leonard I. Sweet, *Viral: How Social Networking is Poised to Ignite Revival* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Press, 2012), 6.

²⁸ Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 16-17.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

Google Versus Gutenberg

Sweet, attempting to navigate through the difficult waters of the Modernism/Postmodernism discussion, seeks to distinguish Modernity from Postmodernity two different monikers, “Gutenbergers” (describing Modernity through the watershed event of the invention of the printing press) and Googlers (describing Postmodernity with the open-source relational interface of Google.com). Sweet believes that the two groups perceive the world uniquely. Sweet finds several ways to juxtapose the Gutenberg and Google frameworks, but perhaps the most important distinction between the two is that Gutenbergers are concerned with communicating truth while Googlers are concerned with connecting with others around the truth, “Gutenbergers have been far more concerned about rectitude of thoughts about God than they have on rectitude of relationship with God.”³⁰ Sweet suggests that the current cultural mood in America is one where the hunger for relationship and connectivity is at an all-time high. If the church continues to operate with the Gutenberg software instead of the connective impulse of Google culture, Sweet fears that the church may miss out on the greatest harvest in church history. The church, according to Sweet, has the opportunity to become a viral movement within the Google grid of American culture, “A TGIF (Twitter, Google, iPhone, Facebook) revival is not a revival of an institution or a tradition, but a revival of the body of Christ as it reconstitutes itself and breathes virality into an already present organism. The question of the day, then, is whether the church can survive this new viral mutation – this infectious, fast-spreading, life-giving, virality of Christ.”³¹

³⁰ Sweet, *Viral*, 8.

As Evangelicals seek to engage this new cultural allotment, new ministry environments must be created to lead Googlers to share in the Christian narrative. Googlers will become aware of the knowledge of the Christian narrative in local churches that are more “tribal, local, pedestrian and artisanal,”³² all of which are tightly connected to the values of Cultural Postmodernism. In short, Sweet concludes, “The modes of knowledge in this new ‘scientific method’ are more relational (less propositional), more experiential (less experimental), more image-based (less word-centered), and more celebratory and communal (less cerebral and individual).”³³

The Self

Postmodern philosophy confronted Modern philosophy’s certainty in one’s own confidence in the “mechanistic view of nature... the pretense of reason, a knower’s ability to transcend its radical particularity and to view the world from a God’s-eye perspective”³⁴ and the power to have a clear identity of an autonomous self, increasing personal freedom.³⁵ Postmodernity, on the other hand, claims that the self is local rather than universal, and that the self is socially constructed,³⁶ or as mentioned above, the self is socially comprehended. This idea of social construction can be a cause of concern for

³¹ Ibid., 190.

³² Ibid., 194.

³³ Sweet, *Postmodern Pilgrims*, 144.

³⁴ Corcoran, 10.

³⁵ Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 23-27. Guder also provides 5 ways that the Church has adapted Modern autonomous Self into ecclesiology: Citizenship with rights and freedoms, Consumerism, Constructed Roles and Identities, Product of Technique, and Feeling, Intuition, and Desire; Guder, *Missional Church*, 25-31.

³⁶ White, *Postmodernism* 101, 73.

Christian ministry for if a person can be constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed depending upon the current community or setting that one finds oneself apart of. How can Christians communicate a world-changing message to one whose world continually changes?

Pursuit of Persistent Postmodernism

Although this writer contends that Philosophical Postmodernism has been helpful to re-image Christian witness within American culture that has abandoned the commitments of Modern Philosophy for Cultural Postmodernism, Postmodernity profoundly challenges historic Christianity. James K.A. Smith suggests an alternative to both the wholesale abandonment of Postmodernism and the wholesale embrace of Philosophical Postmodernism. Smith suggests that a radical commitment to historic Christianity in practice and belief, all the while a vibrant commitment to one's local context is found within what Smith calls, "Persistent Postmodernism."

Smith claims that there is a distinction between "Postmodernity" and "Postmodernism." Postmodernity, with its skepticism towards metanarratives in general and religious mythology in particular, is the "flowering" of the Modern philosophy project; rooted within the Enlightenment ideals of rationality or demanding culture to remove the superstitious and finitude that religion brings to culture. Particular religious beliefs did not belong in the world of Modernity, because religion, so it was assumed, prevented the pursuit of pure, unbiased reason. Postmodernity, then, holds the general assumption that religion cannot be trusted.

However, Postmodernism philosophers such as Derrida, Foucault, and Lyotard, critiqued the basic assumption of Modernism and the cultural mood of Postmodernity by simply stating the obvious. Religion could not be removed from public life because everyone has a bias, including religious beliefs. Therefore, to demand personal, particular religious beliefs to be sidelined in public discourse is to demand too much, to demand the impossible.

Smith illustrates an important idea, however, about the Postmodern Philosophical project of Jacques Derrida, in particular. Although Derrida desired to make room for religion in political discussion, he would often demand that particular, specific, and tribal religion to stay removed. Derrida attempted to explain a “pure religion”, instead, to be able to be acceptable in public. Derrida’s basic assumption was that specific, finite religion (such as Christianity) would lead to violence. Derrida’s “pure religion” was one that needed to be unstained by local and particular expressions of religious faith, such as Christianity. Smith connects this expectation of “pure religion” to be of a similar impulse as the modern philosophical project’s expectation of “pure reason.”³⁷ In the end, Postmodernism “acts” like Modernity, or as Charles Conniry has said, Postmodernism is “most-Modernism,”³⁸ allowing one to have a generic faith or spirituality, a “religion without a religion,” of one’s own choosing, without the constraints of a particular, traditional, historic, and confessing faith.

Smith recollects of a similar situation that the early church faced in the first few centuries of existence. Much like Derrida’s, “Religion without Religion,” the early

³⁷ James K.A. Smith, “Beyond A/Theism: Postmodernity and the Future of God,” October 2010, Ottawa University, Ottawa, CA. <http://vimeo.com/17928669>. (accessed September 19, 2012).

³⁸ Conniry, *Soaring in the Spirit*.

church faced Gnosticism that had similar attributes to Derrida's religious claims. Smith suggests that the church embrace "Incarnation," the finite, particular, local expressions of the Christian faith. Christianity, then, becomes the "true materialism" over and against both Platonic and Aristotelian ideals, which was the germs for Modern mutations of Christianity. Incarnation demands a more "Persistent Postmodernism," a proper critique of both the Modern and Derrida-Postmodern options. A Persistent Postmodernism would allow the discussion of God to enter into public discourse "without apology" and with the "thickness of confession" and the "gutsy" suggestion that "Postmodernism might be orthodox."³⁹

Postmodernity and the Ministry Context

Smith's challenge for the church to embrace the finite, local and particular in an environment that is either uncomfortable with particular religion or is hyper-inventive and atraditional with religion is a challenge for the Evangelical church. However, an incarnational form of religion encourages those who seek a sincere faith with rich tradition and community, both cravings of the Cultural Postmodern world, indeed the blending of ancient tradition and contemporary/progressive forms of church are desired qualities among Postmoderns. For instance, the idea of evangelism and conversion is re-imagined in this ministry context. In the Modern framework, a common form of evangelism was winning a convert through the quest of saving knowledge and rationality.⁴⁰ The unique setting of the individual did not seem to matter; because human

³⁹ James K.A. Smith, "Beyond A/Theism."

sin was universal and not partial to anyone's peculiar story, allowing Postmoderns to suggest that what was true for someone else does not necessarily mean it is true for them. However, in an incarnational framework, the self is reached when the individual is aware of God's continuing presence at work in his or her own story and his or her "own world."⁴¹ One may suggest that, in the Postmodern framework, one's world has to be reached before the actual self can be reached. This is a theological idea that is sacramental and incarnational in origin and would represent an historic Christian faith.

Persistent Postmodernism has the potential to develop a more robust ecclesiology, as well. Modern Christianity made the church a collection of individuals in search for personal salvation between the individual and God. After conversion, the Christian life involved a pursuit for more information about the Christian faith. The Christian faith, in the Modern framework, is "intellectualized rather than incarnate, commodified rather than the site of genuine community."⁴² In Persistent Postmodernism, however, churches chose to no longer be lecture halls of learning where an individual can learn religious truth through a myriad of classroom experiences and sermons in the form of lectures. Postmoderns value intellectualism, but also desire to have a communal and experiential faith leading Leonard Sweet to suggest a Postmodern Ecclesiological Quadrilateral,

⁴⁰ For example, *The Four Spiritual Laws* presentation that assumes a general consensus for all people, everywhere.

⁴¹ See Leonard Sweet, *Nudge: Awakening Each Other to the God Who's Already There* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook, 2010) as an example of this shift in evangelism practices. See also Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Evangelism: Making Your Church a Faith-Forming Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003).

⁴² James K A Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism*, 29.

“Experiential, Participatory, Image-Rich, and Connecting.”⁴³ These elements emerge as cherished values for those operating within the Google framework.

This craving for an active and communal faith might be the most important element of spiritual formation within the Persistent Postmodernism context. Within a world that is dominated by all-invasive truth claims, overwhelming campaign promises by political leaders, Cultural Postmodernism is skeptical of confession that is not matched by action. Incarnational faith demands an active and participatory faith rather than a rational-centered, and data-driven faith. Knowledge is not solely developed through intellectual reason, but is fused intimately within a story, with real people, real problems, and real hope. The self is not removed from local environments, but is directly related to a unique story. These values within a changing culture provoke the Evangelical church to consider how to re-imagine formation.

This writer contends that Christian spiritual formation⁴⁴ in a Persistent Postmodern framework will be more active, connective, and concrete, rather than intellectual, isolated, and theoretical. Kevin Cocoran affirms this notion,

The Christian faith... is concerned with a radical reorientation and redirection of our desires, our loves, our hates, our very lives... Christianity is about the reconfiguration of the human heart, the redirection of human desire... the Christian faith is about lives well lived in conformity with our created nature, the Christian faith inducts the Christian into concrete practices, rituals, and

⁴³ See Sweet, *Postmodern Pilgrims*, 33-120. See also Leonard Sweet, *The Gospel According to Starbucks: Living with a Grande Passion* (Waterbrook Press, 2007).

⁴⁴ This writer would define “Spiritual Formation” as, “The process whereby the inmost being of the individual (the heart, will, or spirit) takes on the quality or character of Jesus himself.” Definition is from Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002), 19.

sacraments that had for over fifteen years of Christian history the life-transforming effect of producing Christian disciples.⁴⁵

If Robert Webber and others are correct, the Evangelical framework shaped during the Modern philosophical era, both the Liberal and Conservative types of Modern Christianity, needs to be re-calibrated for a new world. The old forms will not be embraced within this new cultural context. This is the moment the Evangelical church needs to seize in order to fundamentally unlink itself from the values of Modernity-past in favor of Persistent Postmodernism that allows local communities to reflect on the rich tradition of the church while it discerns what it might look like to be faithfully present within its local environment. This move will allow Evangelicalism to rehearse a gospel that embraces the whole spectrum of the Christian faith to be practiced without compromise or embarrassment and to engage a world shaped by Cultural Postmodernism with a Christianity that they can believe and practice.

The question that lingers, then, is “Will the Evangelical church adapt in order to adjust to this cultural moment?” Perhaps a different question is required first, “Can Evangelicalism change its trajectory, all the while holding on to its historical essence?” The next chapter will briefly outline the twentieth and twenty-first centuries of Evangelical history within American, and will seek to show that Evangelicals have the capacity to re-imagine church within a new cultural context.

⁴⁵ Corcoran, 14-16.

CHAPTER THREE

CHURCH HISTORY: EVANGELICALISM- CONTOURS OF THE TWENTIETH AND TWENTY-FIRST CENTURIES AND THE CURRENT CULTURAL MOMENT

The current chapter will set out to sketch the current issues that shape American Evangelicalism twenty-first century setting. This author observes that Evangelicalism has the ability to be flexible as it faithfully represents Christ within its own context. As the previous chapter revealed, contemporary Evangelicalism inhabited a new cultural context which was distinct from previous generations. This new challenging, cultural setting has placed Evangelicalism in another critical moment where it needs to adjust, in order to engage American culture more faithfully in the twenty-first century. At the end of the twentieth century Evangelicalism pursued a significant place of power and influence, but after the first decade of the twenty-first century, now shows signs of decline, irrelevance, and antagonism within the American culture. The question that lingers for Evangelical leaders is, “Can Evangelicalism adapt to the significant changes within American culture and re-engage a transitioning American religious context?”

American Evangelicalism

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Evangelicalism was a small, insignificant stream of Christianity from Great Brittan, consisting of those gathered together after leaving the Church of England.¹ As Evangelicals migrated to the United

¹ Roger E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition and Reform* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 593.

States, the faith resembled an emerging Christian community with DNA strands from three former movements in European and North American church history, namely the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, the Protestant Piety movement of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and early signs of the Protestant movement called Fundamentalism.² The Evangelical faith did not remain small and insignificant, but began to grow in power at the beginning of the twentieth century and began to be a major part of significant religious discussions within the American culture.

Three Cycles of Evangelicalism in the Twentieth Century

The twentieth century was a season of growth and ascent for Evangelicalism, and as a result of this rapid growth, came great diversity and complexity by the end of the twentieth century. Within this century of Evangelicalism, Robert Webber discerns three distinct cycles of Evangelicalism, namely: “Fundamentalism” (1925-1945), “Neoevangelicalism” (1945-1966), and “Evangelical Diversity” (1966-2000).³ The first cycle of Evangelicalism, and the initial surge of popularity, was in large part due to the fierce battles between those from the perspective of Theological Liberalism and Conservative/Traditional forms of Christianity. At the heart of these disputes was the nature of Scripture and biblical interpretation. Webber notes that, in each of the other two later cycles in the twentieth century, Evangelicals resurrected the same initial issues that marked the Fundamentalist-Liberal controversy in the first quarter of the century, i.e. inerrancy of Scripture, literal miracles of Jesus, the Virgin Birth, seven literal days of

² William J. Abraham, *The Coming Great Revival* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 73.

³ Robert E. Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of a New World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002), 25.

creation, Eschatology, etc. In each of the three cycles, Evangelicals created new churches, higher learning institutions, and publications to communicate within the increasingly non-official “trans-denominational” groups that developed in the movement.

The first cycle of Evangelicalism represents the era when Evangelicals united with the Fundamentalists during the Liberal/Fundamentalist controversy. The name, “Fundamentalist” derives from a publication, *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth*,⁴ created during the Fundamentalist-Liberal controversy, which served as a defense for those resisting Theological Liberalism. Fundamentalists accused Liberal theologians of disfiguring the Christian faith altogether, merely resembling “a barely disguised Unitarianism that was more rationalist and humanist than gospel-centered.”⁵ It appeared to Evangelicals that Theological Liberalism threatened the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture. Evangelicals would not send potential ministers to seminaries that were dominated by Liberal thought. Therefore, this cycle of Evangelicalism resulted in a blend of Evangelicalism that was anti-higher education, antiecuminical, and anti-social action.⁶

The second cycle of Evangelicalism, beginning after World War II, resembled a triumphant season for the Christian faith in American culture. This era experienced the founding of the National Association of Evangelicals, Fuller Theological Seminary, and the *Christianity Today* magazine, among other influential organizations that still connect and serve American Evangelicalism today. Billy Graham became Evangelicalism’s

⁴ A.C. Dixon and Reuben Archer Torrey, eds., *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth* (Los Angeles: The Bible Institute of Los Angeles, 1910).

⁵ Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 534.

⁶ Webber, *Younger Evangelicals*, 26-27.

central figure with his large, evangelistic gatherings and soul-winning efforts. This moment of popularity provoked Evangelicals to connect with other faith groups and denominations to serve in common outreach and benevolent efforts. In this era, more Evangelicals were attending graduate school and pursued post-graduate education. Overall, this cycle of Evangelicalism represented a complete re-adjustment from the first cycle of Evangelicalism and challenged anti-intellectualism, antiecumenism, and anti-social action of its predecessors. Throughout this cycle, the division between Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism began to form, especially after Billy Graham sought support from churches outside of Fundamentalist churches.⁷

The final cycle of Evangelicalism, “Evangelical Diversity”, developed during a tumultuous time in American history marked by the overall “collapse of modern society.”⁸ Traditional family morals and expectations were challenged while Christianity began to lose its place within the center of American culture. The tension raised in this era of American Church history provoked the different streams of Evangelicalism to find common bonds with one another, and to embark on a journey of unity without uniformity.⁹

As the previous cycle of Evangelicalism began to engage in ecumenism and unity it also provoked a fresh theological and formational discussion among all Evangelicals. Reformed theology had long been the standard for Evangelical theology up until that

⁷ Webber, *Younger Evangelicals*, 30-32. By the middle of the 20th century, Fundamentalism began to exercise “biblical separation” from all faith groups, even those formerly connected to Fundamentalism. (Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 564)

⁸ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁹ Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 591.

time. However, a resurgence of Wesleyanism, including the influence of the Charismatic movement provoked greater diversity.¹⁰ Perhaps it was in this era of Evangelicalism that the core commitments of Evangelicalism: Activism, Biblicism, Conversionism, and Crucicentrism, became the identifiers of Evangelicalism. Evangelicalism, then, became a moniker that reached beyond the former divisions between denominations and faith groups around these four commitments. This third cycle of Evangelicalism introduced early signs of Emergence Christianity, a theme that will be discussed later in this assignment.

The issue of biblical inerrancy became a central source of contention for Evangelicals and, although there was much effort to unify the group around a common definition, none proved to be helpful. Higher criticism had a profound influence upon Evangelical scholars who had finished doctoral and their exposure to “issues” within the Scripture text could not lead them into full agreement with the Fundamentalist conviction inerrancy of Scripture. Descriptions such as “biblical fidelity” and “infallibility” were created as an attempt to harmonize a high view of Scripture alongside honest scholarship.¹¹

These seismic shifts during the twentieth century led Evangelical leaders to examine how Evangelical life and theology fit within the larger, historic Christian faith. In 1977, “The Chicago Call” gathering appeared to be a catalyst for this quest and

¹⁰ Roger Olson categorizes Evangelical Diversity into two camps. The first camp, Protestant orthodoxy, dedicated their efforts to communicating correct doctrine. This camp followed the lead of Jonathan Edwards and Charles Hodge. The second camp, Experientialist Evangelicals, dedicated their efforts on the transformative experiences of Conversion and Sanctification. This group followed the lead of John and Charles Wesley, Charles Finney, and other Pietists such as Spener, Francke, and Zinzendorf. (Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 594-595).

¹¹ Webber, *Younger Evangelicals*, 34-35.

provoked Evangelical leaders to search for treasures, old and new, to help re-calibrate the Evangelical expression of Christianity further into the future. This craving for an “Ancient-Future” faith would pave the way for a unique twenty-first century form of Evangelicalism.¹²

Three Evangelicalisms that Remain in the Twenty-First Century

At the start of the twenty-first century, Webber contends that two Evangelicalisms from the twentieth century era remain with a third emerging underneath the surface. First, there is an Evangelicalism that will always be linked to its Fundamentalist past, always bringing up the old controversies and agendas highlighted in *The Fundamentals* publication. The doctrines of main concern, such as “Young Earth Creationism” and the inerrancy of Scripture, will always serve as litmus tests of faithfulness. Webber contends that this group has serious challenges in a Postmodern world as it clings to “theological propositionalism, evidential apologetics, a cautious pragmatic regard toward evangelical diversity, and a negative view to postmodernity.”¹³

A second form of Evangelicalism that is present in the twenty-first century is the “pragmatic form” of the faith, found generally in churches shaped by the “church growth movement, mega church movement, and the contemporary worship movement.”¹⁴ This brand of Evangelicalism seeks to resist the theological controversies that have defined

¹² Ibid., 34-35.

¹³ Ibid., 41.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Evangelicalism's past and to focus upon convincing individuals to experience personal conversion, a personal walk with God, and a vibrant relationship with the local church.

The final group of Evangelicals, whom Webber called the "Younger Evangelicals," are those underneath the surface that differ from the Fundamentalist and pragmatic Evangelicals mentioned earlier. These Evangelicals cling to the traditional tenets of Evangelicalism, but differ from former expressions of Evangelicalism in how "Christianity is presented and practiced in a twenty-first century culture."¹⁵ Webber's observation is that these Younger Evangelicals now seek a new path to navigate through the challenging situation of Evangelicalism within the new cultural framework, a culture that is multi-faith than ever before and a culture that has also shown more visible antagonism with the Christian religion than ever before.

The Current Cultural Setting for Evangelicals

The American religious climate is in a peculiar situation within the second decade of the twenty-first century. Paradoxically, Americans appear to be both radically open to spirituality while also despondent towards the Christian faith, at the same time.¹⁶ The religious climate shaped by Modern philosophy, both the Liberal and the Conservative brands, that provoked individuals to engage in their own faith tradition in private and

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Reggie McNeal, and others mentioned in this assignment, reveals that nearly 20 percent of Americans 18-30 are claiming "No Affiliation" when asked for Religious Preference, a statistic that has doubled in the past 15 years. It is interesting, a McNeal notes, half of these "Nones" say that they believe in God and the Bible. They simply are not willing to engage in current Christian contexts. See Reggie McNeal, *Missional Communities: The Rise of the Post-Congregational Church* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 1-13.

removed from the public square and discourse, has been replaced by a ravenous appetite for spirituality.¹⁷ In short, Americans are eager for a spiritual journey.

This religious climate, however, is distinct from other eras in American history. The rise of globalization has developed a multi-faith environment that is more diverse than ever. Therefore, Americans exercise their liberty to choose from religious options which were not available in the past. Even more, Americans increasingly assume that one can even claim to be able to claim to “spiritual, but not religious,” and in doing so, can engage in spirituality all the while independently connected to an established faith group.

Peter Berger suggests that his “Heretical Imperative,” is an effective way to diagnose the present context. Humanity is supercharged by choices; one does not have to embrace traditional religious belief to develop some sort of spiritual experience. Religion is particularly vulnerable in this environment.¹⁸ Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger note that, since the 1950s, “religion has been understood in terms of its sociological and psychological significance, discounting any claims to divine revelation and absolute truth... Church as an institution... occupies a place on the margins of society alongside other recreational and non-profit organizations.”¹⁹ In this setting, the church appears to have no other choice but to resign from the role of “spiritual chaplain to society. The

¹⁷ NT Wright shares this transition with a compelling parable in *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* (New York: Harper One, 2006), 17-19.

¹⁸ Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 13.

¹⁹ Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005), 17.

church no longer address[es] all of reality, just the cordoned off realm of the ‘spiritual.’”²⁰

In contrast, Diana Butler Bass firmly believes that Western culture is in the midst of an era of spiritual awakening, one that has been building like a massive tidal wave ever since the 1960s. Phyllis Tickle affirms this claim that this “spiritual, but not religious” climate is a product of the “Age of Aquarius” from the 1960’s, which provided many Americans the ability to explore for a spirituality that is both less institutional and more open and free. This corporate quest has radically shaped American culture, for Tickle suggests that as high as one-third of Americans today would describe themselves as “spiritual, but not religious.”²¹ Bass, referencing the work of Harvey Cox, affirms that this epoch of time is the “Age of the Spirit,”²² or an era of time where religious life will be more experiential and less theoretical or rational. Americans are beginning to investigate spiritual life that is indirectly connected to religious institutions.

Bass chooses to see the “spiritual, but not religious” disposition in America to be encouraging, rather than a state of panic and boldly states, “This transformation is what some hope will be a ‘Great Turning’ toward a global community based on shared human

²⁰ Ibid., 71-72.

²¹ Phyllis Tickle, *Emergence Christianity: What it Is, Where it is Going, and Why it Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012), 77-79. In the midst of this climate of “spiritual, but not religious” Tickle praises the contribution of John Wimber, leader/founder of the Vineyard movement who was able to frame Christian spirituality in a way to appeal to these “spiritual, but not religious” group in practical ways: group discernment, conversation and critique after long sermons, and the use of music to engage the soul. (Tickle, *Emergence Christianity*, 80-82)

²² Harvey Cox, *The Future of Faith* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2010).

connection, dedicated to the care of our planet, committed to justice and equality, that seeks to raise hundreds of millions from poverty, violence, and oppression.”²³

But, is this transformation really the “end of religion,” as Bass suggests? As Bass surveys the current cultural moment she boldly claims that something monumental is on the horizon,

If it is not the end of religion, it certainly seems to be the end of what was conventionally understood to be American religion... The process of leaving religion, one that started three or four decades ago, seems to have reached a tipping point. We have most likely come to the end of the beginning of a great transformation of faith. What was is no longer. And, as a result, discontent, doubt, disillusionment, and for some, despair, are the themes of the day... All sorts of people—even mature, faithful Christians—are finding conventional religion increasingly less satisfying, are attending church less regularly, and are longing for new expressions of spiritual community.²⁴

Evangelicalism and “The Great Turning”

Alongside this craving for spirituality and perhaps an optimistic view of a “Great Turning,” attendance in local Evangelical churches is plummeting. Currently, Evangelicals make up a significant portion of the religious practitioners in North America. Both a *Pew Forum* study in 2004 and an *American Religious Identification Survey* in 2008 revealed that Evangelicals consist of nearly 50 million Americans. Even though, at this moment, Evangelicalism represents a great diversity, Evangelicals have

²³ Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion: The End of the Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2012), 5-6. See also Robert C. Fuller, *Spiritual but not Religious: Understanding Un-Churched America* (Oxford University Press, 2001). Tony Jones adds that Americans are not less religious, just “differently religious;” nearly 9 of 10 Americans claim some sort of faith. The way one experiences faith is simply different than, “seminary-trained pastors.” See Tony Jones, *The New Christians: Dispatches from the Emergent Frontier* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 1-3.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 14-15.

salient characteristics, or “master signifiers,” that function as rallying points of identity and mission.²⁵

David Fitch, using the psychoanalysis observations of Slavoj Zizek, believes that these master-signifiers: the belief in an inerrant Bible, personal salvation through a crisis of faith experience, and the myth of a Christian nation, have actually prevented Evangelicalism from engaging the American culture with biblical faithfulness that it desires. Fitch contends that Evangelicalism has suffered a moment of “reversal” in its history in which it,

Turned against its own commitments towards justice of the wider society and became more pessimistic towards culture. The politics of Evangelicalism changed dramatically here in reaction to what many have called ‘modernist-fundamentalist’ controversies of the 1920’s in American church history. I propose that we can locate in this history the development of each one of these doctrinal emphases and understand further why evangelicalism’s politic formed the way it did.²⁶

David Fitch’s observations appear to be confirmed by The Barna Group, under the supervision of David Kinnaman. Kinnaman compiled research into two important sources²⁷ that diagnose the way American 18-30 year olds in particular, are reacting

²⁵ These individuals were said to have had a “born-again experience” and were not associated with Protestant Mainline or Roman Catholic communities. Sociologically Evangelicals are those of the Christian faith who hold a high view of the Bible (inerrancy or infallibility), personal conversion through an open confession of sins against God and trusting in the sheer grace of Jesus Christ, and activism through evangelism. These three “master-signifiers” construct the Evangelical ideology. These master-signifiers shape the politic of Evangelicalism, or the way in which Evangelicals engage their environment. These signifiers are “absolutes,” the core beliefs that Evangelicals would defend as essential and which without would compromise their identity. See David E. Fitch, *The End of Evangelicalism? Discerning a New Faithfulness for Mission: Towards and Evangelical Political Theology*, (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 14-15.

²⁶ Ibid., 14-15.

²⁷ David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *UnChristian: What a New Generation Thinks about Christianity... and Why it Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007) and David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians are Leaving the Church... and Re-thinking Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011).

towards Christianity. There is not sufficient space to provide the vital observations from these sources, but a summary statement by Kinnaman frames the severity of Evangelicalism's struggle in the American culture,

Most people I meet assume that Christian means very conservative, entrenched in their thinking, anti-gay, anti-choice, angry, violent, illogical, empire builders, they want to convert everyone, and they generally cannot live peacefully with anyone who does not believe what they believe.²⁸

Thom Rainer and Sam Rainer note that nearly 70 percent of young people between the ages of 18-22 who attended a local church during adolescence will not return to church after emerging into adulthood. According to the Rainer and Rainer, the common theme in the reasons why the 70 percent left was because they did not see church as essential for their lives.²⁹ The angst appears to be deeper and more profound for the 18-30 year olds. They now inhabit a new world and social context, where traditional forms, structures, and doctrines do not appear to fit.

In a general, Evangelicalism's commitment to its master-signifiers has created an antagonistic relationship between the church and American culture, especially among those of the younger generation leading Fitch to suppose a possible "end" to Evangelicalism. This comes as a shocking surprise to leaders within Evangelicalism for Evangelicals have carried significant influence in American culture up to this point. This

²⁸ Kinnaman and Lyons, *UnChristian*, 26.

²⁹ Thom Rainer and Sam S. Rainer, *Essential Church: Reclaiming a Generation of Dropouts* (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2008), 2-5.

influence has, however, waned considerably in the past decade,³⁰ a decade that Bass calls “The Terrible Decade.”

The Terrible Decade, 2000-2010

Five significant events in the first decade of the twenty-first century have led to a seismic adjustment in the public opinion of Christians and the Christian church. After the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, many Americans fled to churches looking for guidance after the horrific events, but appeared to have not been satisfied, for the momentary increase in attendance vanished and church attendance returned to normal levels after merely one to two months. Even more, the terrorist attacks led to a general suspicion that religion of all kinds leads to nothing but violence. Evangelical reactions to the attacks were not well received by Americans, either. When leaders of large Christian movements blamed the attacks on the sinfulness of Americans, the general American public lost interest and were convinced, along with Christopher Hitchens that, “religion poisons everything.”³¹

Next, in 2002 *The Boston Globe* reported thousands of sexual abuse cases associated with Roman Catholic clergy that were covered up by church leadership. As the stories continued to surface, one could imagine the drastic decline of practicing Roman Catholics in North America was and is directly related to these events. By 2008, nearly one-third of Roman Catholics were no longer practicing faith and an astonishing 10 percent of Americans currently describe themselves as ex-Catholics. Another poll taken

³⁰ Fitch, 2.

³¹ Bass, 76-77.

in 2010 suggested that only 53 percent of Americans believed ministers to be of high moral standard, a 14 percent decline since 2002.

The third event came in 2003 when V. Gene Robinson was officially ordained as the first openly gay bishop of the Episcopal church denomination. Although the gay ordination issue has been debated in mainline denominations for decades, the “low spiritual tone”, the “politicization” of the issue, and the “global schism” caused the general public to be reminded of the bitter disagreements that happen within denominational structures, which fundamentally does not resemble a religion of love, acceptance, and unity. Bass also believes the struggle over this issue cemented a new narrative for Christianity in the American, “mean, bigoted, and makes people behave badly.”³²

George W. Bush’s re-election as the United States president in 2004 was empowered by a strong Evangelical presence in the polls. Even though Evangelicals and “the Religious Right” proved to help social and political conservatives win in 2004, Bass (referencing Putnam and Campbell’s *Amazing Grace*³³ study) believes the 2004 win created delineation between older and younger Evangelicals. The social values of younger Evangelicals, Putnam and Campbell noted, were significantly different than their parents’ values, including political affiliation and how politics and one’s faith interact.

³² Ibid., 79.

³³ Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *Amazing Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010).

The dramatic increase of the “Nones”³⁴ category among the 18-29 year olds illustrates the notion that younger people are taking political, religious, and social cues from their peers rather than their parents.

The fifth and final crucial event of the “Terrible Decade” is what Bass calls the “Great Religious Recession” of 2007. The 1990’s were a successful decade for Christian faith groups in regards to attendance, influence, and public opinion. However, by the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, public trust in religious institution is at a meager 20 percent, near the same level of trust that the public has towards Wall Street and other major corporations. This decline in trust for the church as an institution has provoked many to simply not return to church. Bass notes,

Between business-as-usual church, internal stresses, external scandals, and rank hypocrisy, finally compounded by economic crisis, American Christianity is in a mess... Although many people still express a level of satisfaction with their local congregations, the undercurrents of discontent are strong. Some 42 percent of churchgoers confess they are only moderately satisfied or dissatisfied with their churches, leaving open the “possibility of considering other options.”³⁵

These two contours, the craving for spirituality and distrust for organized religion of every kind and Evangelicalism in particular, frame the current setting that Evangelicals inhabit. In the midst of this complex terrain, Evangelical Christians (inspired by former generations of Evangelicalism) appear to be adjusting in order to faithfully engage the culture. Although the current context presents many profound challenges for Evangelicalism, many Evangelical leaders discern a unique opportunity for Evangelicalism to develop new forms of ecclesiology for a new environment. The next

³⁴ “Nones” are those individuals who claim no religious affiliation. In 1985, 12 percent of young people under 29 were officially “Nones.” Now, nearly 30% of young people under 29 are “Nones.” The American Religious Survey (ARIS) notes that the “Nones” grew 138% since 1990.

³⁵ Bass, 81-83.

section of this chapter will examine two sociological developments that are influencing ecclesiological developments for Evangelicals, namely Emergence Theory and the Fall of Christendom.

Emergence and the Value of Sharing

Social thinker Steven Johnson carefully illustrates the idea of the social theory of Emergence, or the complexity theories that have a “bottom-up intelligence,” rather than a top-down approach.³⁶ Johnson argues that cities, the internet, and culture are controlled by no unified, central, organized authority, but all the parts interact with one another in a decentralized system and operate with collective intelligence where contributions are from no one and everyone, at the same time.³⁷ Johnson surmises that society and culture are best served when ideas are connected and shared, rather than protected.³⁸ Innovative thinking, Johnson says, takes place in environments with a few salient characteristics, which stem from idea sharing even between those of different disciplines and institutions. Johnson calls these moments of shared ideas “Liquid Networks.” An idea, Johnson suggests, is a network, thousands of parts in a “swarm,” connecting together to form an idea.³⁹ In the end, Johnson suggests that the best ideas from all places are being shared and many different disciplines experience advances and maturity because of this sharing.

³⁶ Steven Johnson, *Emergence: The Connected Lives of Ants, Brains, Cities, and Software* (New York: Scribner, 2001), 67.

³⁷ Steven Johnson, “The Web as a City,” TED 2003 Conference, February 2003, http://www.ted.com/talks/steven_johnson_on_the_web_as_a_city.html, Retrieved on 11/2/2012.

³⁸ Steven Johnson, *Where Good Ideas Come From: The Natural History of Innovation* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2010), 22.

Tim Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian in Manhattan, New York, notes that our culture is in a peculiar time where ideas are being shared and harmonized. Keller remembers the bleak outlook of religion a couple of generations ago when two distinct camps shaped religious discourse. On the one hand, those who were eager for social justice were generally moral relativists or even secular humanists that desired to do good for others. On the other hand, the morally upright, those who were usually linked to a religious tradition did not seem interested to help the plight of the poor. As Keller discerns a harmony of these two former impulses within the younger generation of his urban local church:

I think these younger Christians are the vanguard of some major new religious, social, and political arrangements that could make the older form of culture wars obsolete,' Keller says. 'After they wrestle with doubts and objections to Christianity many come out of the other side with an orthodox faith that doesn't fit the current categories of liberal Democrat or conservative Republican... The new, fast-spreading multiethnic orthodox Christianity in the cities is much more concerned about the poor and social justice than Republicans have been, and at the same time much more concerned about upholding classic Christian moral and sexual ethics than Democrats have been.'⁴⁰

Keller's observations are shared by Phyllis Tickle who has been predicting a new Reformation in the church, a "Great Emergence" that highlights a sharing of the best of many streams in the Christian movement.

Tickle argues that the American church is in the midst of a profound transition, a transition so large that it appears to mirror other seismic shifts that happen nearly every

³⁹ Ibid., 45. See also Steven Johnson, "Where Good Ideas Come From," TED Global, July 2010. Oxford, England, http://www.ted.com/talks/steven_johnson_where_good_ideas_come_from.html, Retrieved 11/2/2012.

⁴⁰ Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in the Age of Skepticism* (New York: Penguin Group, Inc, 2008), ix-xx.

500 years. These transitions or “reformations” upgrade the church in three vital ways. First, new forms of Christianity emerge. Second, the dominant form of Christianity before the given reformation undergoes serious re-working and refining, resulting in a more “pure” expression than before. Lastly, reformations allow Christianity to enter into new places, spaces, and regions, enhancing the global scope of Christianity. Though reformations are times of distress and discomfort, their effect upon both the church and the world are vital and refreshing.⁴¹

Tickle refers to this current, latest seismic shift as, “The Great Emergence,” which shares characteristics with the Great Reformation, for both re-examine the idea of ecclesial authority, church practice, the use the current technology to dispense information, and the shared experience among groups of people.⁴² However, “The Great Emergence” has two new, driving questions within the current multi-faith environment of America: “What is the human,” and “What is the relationship with one’s personal religion to all of the other religions in the world?”⁴³ The quest for answers to these two questions has instigated a broader investigation as “to where or to whom should the church go to for the answers to these fundamental questions?” This same quest was launched during the Reformation and led the reformers choosing to allow the Scriptures to be the authority for questions regarding to life and faith.

Tickle notes that nearly three-dozen factors and events have aided the search process for a new authority. At the heart of Tickle’s observations is the challenge that

⁴¹ Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008), 17. Also found in Tickle, *Emergence Christianity*, 23-30.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 43-61.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 73.

significant social issues with American history have brought to the authority of *Sola Scriptura*, namely the abolishment of slavery, the acceptance of divorce among American Christians, and the ordination of women. Over time, these issues challenged the idea that the American, Evangelical Christian could trust “Scripture only” as the sole authority for all matters of life and faith. Tickle believes, that the contemporary debates of “the gay issue” may be the final battle lost and will deliver a significant threat to *Sola Scriptura*.⁴⁴

Tickle posits that four authorities are meeting together to construct a new quadrilateral in the Great Emergence. These four authorities represent the four major authorities within Church history: Tradition, Spirit, Scripture, and Experience. The blending of these four authorities results in a tension orthodoxy, orthopraxy, orthonomy (“correct harmony or beauty”), and theonomy (or God as the only source of beauty).⁴⁵ This is new territory for Christians because it is allowing Christian communities to experience a mosaic of ideas and practices represented across the spectrum of Christianity. Christians appear to be eager to share “best practices” with one another, developing a diverse center, where it is challenging to find any “bona fide adherents” of one stream of Christianity.

This diverse center has lead to a new ecclesial identity within the Great Emergence, “the hyphenateds,” or those who do not have ecclesial affinity with one faith tradition, but multiple faith streams. The hyphenateds are the ones who are mobile, blazing new trails of identity and authority. The hyphenateds represent an impulse within

⁴⁴ Ibid., 98-101.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 123-153.

Christianity that is helpful and healthy, the process of self-critique, or holding ancient Church traditions with high-regard, all the while calling into question when those traditions inhibit faithful Christian mission.⁴⁶ This critique of traditional Christianity has led to a flattened authority structure where Christian groups develop a presence of “networked authority,” where the church is a “self-organizing system of relations, symmetrical or otherwise, between innumerable member-parts that themselves form subsets of relations within their smaller networks, etc. and interlacing levels of complexity.”⁴⁷

Fall of Christendom

Alongside Emergence theory, another significant phenomenon that has provoked the quest to re-envision church within the current American context is the erosion of Christendom. George Lindbeck described the setting of American Christianity as in an “awkwardly intermediate stage of having once been culturally established but not yet clearly disestablished.”⁴⁸ Stanley Hauerwas confirms this observation, as Christians seem to be unsure of whether the church should strive to return to a place of prominence and power within the American culture or seek to establish a more “modest stance in liberal

⁴⁶ Phil Snider, ed., *The Hyphenateds: How Emergence Christianity is Re-Traditioning Mainline Practices* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2011).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 150-153.

⁴⁸ George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1984), 134.

societies.”⁴⁹ And, Hauerwas and Willimon put it pointedly, this world, “is no longer ‘our world’ – if it ever was.”⁵⁰

Christendom, according to Hauerwas and Willimon, is the assumption that the church controlled or monitored society, an idea akin to the era within church history after Constantine’s Edict of Milan in 313 CE that provided Christianity the opportunity to become the religious chaplain for the Roman Empire. The founding of the United States of America and the development of American religious institutions created a similar, but not identical setting for Christians within America; Americans have had a unique experience in attempting to navigate the relationship between church and nation, current American Christians experience this “unofficial” yet passionate connection between Christianity and politics, not least with the seismic impact of “the Christian Right” in political rhetoric and the “high octane” fever pitch that multitudes of American Christians experience with each election cycle. Common assumptions about the relationship between America as a nation and the church range from those who hope America and Christianity should be identical and those who believe that they should be entirely separate. In this current moment, Conservative Christians appear to have the most angst

⁴⁹ Stanley Hauerwas, *After Christendom?* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999), 23.

⁵⁰ Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989), 17. David Fitch finds this idea of the fall of Christendom a unique challenge for younger Evangelicals in this particular cultural moment, “Our main battlefield used to be with other Christians (those of Protestant Liberal ilk) not the current cultural void of disbelief. Now, the rug of the Christian cultural consensus pulled out from under our feet, evangelicalism is groping for a place to stand from which it can gather a people. Many younger evangelicals are tired of gathering around negative causes, whether they be fighting against the political left, those who don’t believe in absolute truth, or those who sexually undermine our family values. To them, evangelicalism as an integral way of life no longer makes sense in the new post-Christendom cultures of North America. Its reason for being its very politic is unraveling. In large parts of North America, evangelicalism is failing as a viable Christian ‘politic’ and we must take stock of why.” See David Fitch, *The End of Evangelicalism*, 10.

about the thought of the church migrating from the “the chaplain to the stranger” of American, for in their common narrative, the founders of the nation of the United States was by practicing Christians who had the hope of a Christian nation.

Hauerwas and Willimon, however, celebrate the decline of Christendom, hailing it as a new opportunity to re-imagine the lost identity of the church for a new contemporary setting. No longer must one associate being a good Christian as being a good American; it is an opportune time for one to discover the roots of being Christian.⁵¹

Likewise, Lesslie Newbigin recognized that the fall of Christendom would demand an inauguration of a new missional-incarnational faithfulness within Western Modern culture. Newbigin found that the commodification of the individual, i.e. the isolation of the private self, disconnected from the public self and public duty, through the developments of industrialization and consumerism are tragically antithetical to the claims of the gospel. The rise of industrialism required individuals to be displaced from traditional development, resulting in the separation of the self into two distinct entities, a social self (a nameless, faceless part of a Modern manufacturing machine and development of the Nation-state) and a private self (isolated from larger family units, sent to find out what reality is on a journey, on his or her own). In this cultural setting, a person learned that one did not need God to survive. Several generations of this formation promoted a gnawing suspicion that the nation-state held the world together, not

⁵¹ Ibid., 17-18.

God.⁵² Even if one desired to follow a religion, one's beliefs did not necessarily have to harmonize with civic responsibilities.

The church adapted to the idea of the Western, divided self by framing ministry around one of two perceived needs. On the one hand, the church became a place where individuals could learn more about the Christian faith, in relatively safe seclusion, so the nation-state could handle the things it was powerful enough to handle. On the other hand, the church became the entity that would engage the world's problems in public, all the while, not requiring allegiance to particular beliefs, doctrines, or confession to the Christian religion. This dichotomy shaped the antagonistic plot between Liberal and Conservative Christian brands of religion through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In contemporary American ecclesiology, Christians have been divided on whether the church should be preoccupied with saving souls and private religion or if Christians should be busy in the public life, leading change within the given structures in society. Hauerwas and Willimon have a radical thesis: both the private and the public impulses of church are not faithful forms of what it means to be the church, but entities that simply underwrite American democracy, resulting in the consumption of church and to “encourage individual fulfillment rather than being a crucible to engender individual conversion into the Body.” In each case, the Christian does not have to struggle against the powers that prevent the kingdom of God arriving in this world, but to be thankful to

⁵² Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 22-37. See also Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989). Newbigin contends that Western culture has entered into an era where Christianity is unfamiliar to the common story of the culture. Newbigin characterizes Western culture as pluralistic, where one's personal choice is radically promoted, where the self is separated into a public self (performing as a good citizen) and a private self (choosing one's own morality on the basis of one's own preference.)

be born in such a free society where one can achieve personal potential “parallel to the rights of others.”⁵³

According to Hauerwas and Willimon, the erosion of Christendom allows the church to experience the void that both the private or public nature of Christianity constructed within the Modern framework. This void launches the church into mission again, and creates a fresh opportunity to see itself as an entity with its own reason for being, separate from the needs and wants of “the state.” It is this idea of church where Hauerwas and Willimon find Niebuhr’s categories in Niebuhr’s infamous *Christ and Culture*⁵⁴ incomplete. They insist that Niebuhr’s model did not provide space for critiquing culture, but promoted a generic Christianity that urged churches not to become too sectarian or to distance themselves from being able to work within the culture’s political systems. Ultimately, Niebuhr urges the church to transform culture without being honest about how culture has transformed the church.⁵⁵

Hauerwas and Willimon contend the church “doesn’t have a social strategy, the church is a social strategy.” The church is situated in the world and is only preoccupied with the task of how to be in the world as God’s faithful people. Leaning on the work of John Howard Yoder,⁵⁶ Hauerwas and Willimon contend that the church needs to be a

⁵³ Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 31-33.

⁵⁴ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, (New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 1951). In short, Niebuhr grouped churches into three classifications. “Christ Above Culture” churches aligned to the Social Gospel agenda, “Christ Against Culture” churches that separated themselves from culture, such as Anabaptists, and “Christ Transforming Culture” churches that sought to work within the world and transform it, making the world a place that Jesus approved.

⁵⁵ Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 39-40.

⁵⁶ John Howard Yoder, “A People in the World: Theological Interpretation” in James Leo Garrett, Jr., ed., *The Concept of the Believer’s Church* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1969), 252-283. Yoder

“Confessing Church.” A Christian’s entrance and participation within the “Confessing Church” is,

A long process of being baptismally engrafted into a new people, an alternative *polis*, a countercultural social structure called church. It seeks to influence the world by being the church... a visible church, a place, clearly visible to the world, in which people are faithful to their promises, love their enemies, tell the truth, honor the poor, suffer for righteousness, and thereby testify to the amazing community-creating power of God.⁵⁷

This type of church cannot exist in Christendom; for it presumes that God, not the state, rules the world and that the faithfulness of God’s covenant people, the transcultural, transracial, and transnational church, are advanced models of a new creation. Hauerwas and Willimon concluded, “The most creative social strategy we have to offer is the church. Here we show the world a manner of life the world can never achieve through social coercion or governmental action. We serve the world by showing it something that it is not, namely, a place where God is forming a family out of strangers.”⁵⁸

Who is an Evangelical?

So far this chapter has covered two significant issues within Evangelicalism. First, Evangelicalism is an agile faith movement and has undergone seismic adjustments in the past century. These seismic shifts were strategic, allowing Evangelicalism to situate itself within culture for missional-incarnational impact. Second, at this current moment, Evangelicalism has created significant tension between its believers and the surrounding

provides three alternative classifications against Niebuhr’s Christ and Culture. Yoder delineates “activist” churches as those who engage in humanitarian efforts, “conversionist” churches that resist engaging in the social structures and focus on the individuals “receiving Christ,” and “confessing” churches that reject the activist and conversionist approaches to being church and seek to “worship Christ in all things.”

⁵⁷ Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 46.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 83.

culture, and it appears that this is another important moment for transformation in order to engage the new American culture with missional-incarnational faithfulness. The lingering question is, “Will Evangelicals adjust to the current moment?” The answer to this question and other related questions is to embrace the fundamental ideals of what it means to be Evangelical. As Evangelicals honor the core commitments and theology of their faith tradition, adjustment for a new cultural setting is indeed a valuable option in this critical moment.

As mentioned prior in Robert Webber’s analysis of the different “types” of Evangelicals entering into the twenty-first century, a significant amount of Evangelicals may resist adjustment. Those Evangelicals who find comfort with a Christianity shaped by Modernity will find the adjustments needed as a wholesale loss of identity. However, there will be others who will adjust for the current cultural moment and who will seek to discover a “big tent Evangelicalism,”⁵⁹ and who will honor the diversity of the Evangelical movement.

This pursuit of “big tent Evangelicalism” will lead Evangelicals to recover their vibrant heritage as a faith group that emphasizes the transformative experience with God in Christ as the primary indicator that one is Evangelical, even of more importance than affirming the particular doctrines of Evangelicalism. Donald Bloesch affirms this idea of experience, “My contention is that to be evangelical means to hold to a definite doctrine plus experience.”⁶⁰ Stanley Grenz noted that finding a common “card-carrying” body of

⁵⁹ This author has heard Roger E. Olson use this term. Others have inevitably used it, but this author heard it in the assorted writings and interviews of Olson.

⁶⁰ Donald Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), ix.

beliefs may be difficult for Evangelicals because the Evangelical faith is primarily a “sensed experience than a described theology.”⁶¹ Scot McKnight adds, “To be a true-blue evangelical in our heritage or to be accepted into the membership of a church in the evangelical tradition, one has to give witness to one’s personal experience of salvation... The experience of personal salvation is the threshold-crossing event, and the ability to give witness to that event is required for full acceptance.”⁶² Roger Olson agrees,

Doctrine is secondary; it is the second-order language of the church that brings to expression this transforming experience... the essence of Christianity and therefore also of evangelicalism is to say what primarily distinguishes Christianity from other religions and identifies the authentic from the inauthentic among those who claim to be Christians... Real Christianity... is defined by a certain experience of God that is supernatural, personally transforming, and centered around the cross of Jesus Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. It may be called ‘convertive piety’ or ‘conversional piety.’ Correct doctrine may exist without it, in which case real Christianity is not present. A person who has this experience may be a real Christian- and an evangelical- without yet being orthodox doctrinally.⁶³

If Evangelical identity is primarily based upon the transformative experience, a robust vision for Christian formation is also primary, for having the character and moral vision that accompanies personal faith commitment. Greenman notes that,

Theology at its best seeks to inform, guide and nurture the whole person... to obey the Great Commandment... when theology is construed merely as an academic exercise concerned to solve theoretical problems, without necessarily engaging the whole person, including matters of the heart or character, then we’ve already begun to define the whole enterprise in a way that greases the slide toward a one-sided intellectualism. But if theology concerns itself with the whole person,

⁶¹ Stanley Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the 21st Century* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 31.

⁶² Scot McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel: The Good News Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 74.

⁶³ Roger E. Olson, *Reformed and Always Reforming: The Postconservative Approach to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 78-80.

and every aspect of life, then there is a basis for a spiritually oriented approach to theology. Along these lines, we would need to say that theology as a task is not merely to clarify ideas about loving God, but to inform, guide and nurture the actual love of God. Theology's work of analytical and critical reflection concerning texts, beliefs or concepts is not an end in itself, but actually an important means towards the greater end of assisting the transformation of person toward Christian maturity.⁶⁴

In the Evangelical experience conversion, discipleship, and mission converge as one identity. The New Testament writings were written by vocational missionaries seeking to inspire and mobilize churches to engage the world with the gospel. Formation is at the heart of mission, for it prepares the people of God to embody the role as witnesses of the risen Christ.⁶⁵ These twin ideas of a personal, transformative experience and the compulsion to worldwide mission construct the Evangelical impulse. As I stated in the first section of this chapter, Evangelicalism has adapted to fit within its current, cultural moment in order to facilitate transformative experience and faithful mission into world. Along with personal faith commitment and formation, mission is a vital component for the Evangelical ethos. It is apparent, then, to be Evangelical is to envision an environment where all three elements are stimulated, celebrated, and protected.

David Fitch, and others, proposes for a fresh dream and vision for Evangelicals within the new cultural context by confronting Evangelicalism's ideology and, correspondingly, troubling public presence,

Let us not do the same evangelical practice and examine it for its social effectiveness. Instead, let us examine the way our doctrine and practice function to bind a social body together for witness in the world. Let us examine evangelicalism as 'a politic' ... [or] the ways such a belief system sustains a way

⁶⁴ Jeffery P. Greenman and George Kalantzis eds., *Life in the Spirit: Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 34.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 35.

of life that orders a people towards a certain type of compliance and motivation... I suggest, in light of the current upheaval, we examine evangelicalism as such an ideology in crisis. Ultimately, by diagnosing ideology, we can examine what type of people we are becoming and if it is helpful to fulfilling the mission of God, particularly in the era of Post-Christendom that Evangelicalism faces in North America. Something that we need to confront as Evangelicals is not just what we believe, but also how those beliefs are communicated in our politic, particularly in who we are becoming, and if who we are becoming is actually at odds with what we say we believe.⁶⁶

Gospel: The Operating Software of Evangelicalism

This chapter has examined Evangelicalism's ability to adapt and to adjust as a movement according to the cultural moment it is situated within. Evangelicalism is in a position to mobilize for a new setting. At the heart of this endeavor, and at the heart of Evangelicalism itself, is a vibrant rehearsal of the gospel. The gospel is where Evangelicalism's name is derived from and is at the heart of what it means to be a part of the faith group. The next chapter will examine the theological category of the gospel and how the gospel functions as an event that makes all things its subject.

⁶⁶ Fitch, 8-9.

CHAPTER FOUR

THEOLOGY: GOSPEL AS AN EVENT THAT MAKES SUBJECTS, RATHER THAN AN OBJECT FOR ONE TO HOLD

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. – Romans 1:16 NIV

Evangelicals and the Gospel

At the heart of what it means to be Evangelical is to be one who receives the gospel. The gospel is the message that the early followers of Jesus shared to the wider world; the good news that Jesus is raised from the dead and that God is re-creating the world. This gospel message does not appear to be inhibited by changing cultural norms or forms, but operates as a common proclamation and event that gathers God's people from all people groups. As Evangelicals seek to adjust to the changing cultural context for faithful missional-incarnational engagement, the theological category of gospel serves as a helpful and inspiring proclamation and narrative for this missional-incarnational engagement.

The word “Evangelical” has origins in the New Testament word, *euangelion*, meaning, “gospel.” Evangelicals are people of, “the good message... To be evangelical, then, means having one's life centered on the terrifically good message that God is reconciling the world to himself in Christ Jesus.”¹ Naturally, the identity of Evangelicalism is associated with a vibrant understanding and practice of the gospel. One could imagine that if the gospel is the unifying theme of the Scriptures, it should be

¹ Christian Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicalism is Not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2011), 93.

relatively straightforward to ascertain and to be uniformly understood. However, as this chapter will illustrate, defining and rehearsing the gospel within a faith community has different variations among the spectrum of Evangelicalism. All understandings of the gospel are not the same, which causes Evangelicals to seek to ascertain whether or not their own gospel rehearsal is helpful in this current cultural moment, or more plainly, if their gospel is really “good news?”

This chapter will first examine the nature of gospel and examine whether the gospel message remains the same or does the gospel change and adjust in new times, cultures, and situations? Next, this author will investigate two common gospel interpretations among the American Evangelical landscape today. Those two gospels are what Scot McKnight calls the “Soterian Gospel” and the “King Jesus Gospel.” This investigation will incorporate both a general description of each gospel and how the each gospel shapes Christian formation.

A Solution Looking for a Problem

First, what is the nature of the gospel? Tony Jones claims that the atoning work of Jesus on the cross is a solution looking for a problem, and upon careful examination of the variety of ways atonement is communicated throughout Church history, one can conclude that atonement has been nuanced by the particular place the theory found itself in Church history.² In order to harmonize these atonement theories, Scot McKnight uses

² Tony Jones, *A Better Atonement: Beyond the Depraved Doctrine of Original Sin* (Minneapolis, MN: The JoPa Group, 2012). Jones divides the general way the Church has communicated the doctrine of Atonement into three main, general ways according the innate need of that era. For instance, *Christus Victor* atonement theory was important for believers to embrace during an era where there was a general fear of demonic forces of evil preying upon God’s people. Jones speaks to these different eras and solutions on the *Homebrewed Christianity Podcast*, Interview by Tripp Fuller, Redondo Beach, CA, August 13, 2011.

the image of a bag full of golf clubs to describe how the different atonement theories and doctrines serve the church for different purposes, much like different golf clubs are used for different occasions during a golf game.³ Darrell Guder, along with Lesslie Newbigin, affirm that, like the doctrine of atonement, the rendering of “gospel” takes different shape depending upon the community that proclaims it;

There is no culture-free expression of the gospel... The church’s message, the gospel, is inevitably articulated in linguistic and cultural forms particular to its own place and time. Thus a rehearing of the gospel can be vulnerable to the “gospels” that we may tend to read back into the New Testament renderings of it. The first tellings of the gospel in Scripture themselves have a richly varied quality. They are as culturally particular as our own. Nevertheless, they are the root narrative of God’s action in Jesus Christ for the salvation of the world, and as such, the church’s originating message. It is of the essence of the church to root itself in what those first tellings portray of the character, actions, and purposes of God.⁴

Tony Jones provides a compelling image of gospel, that it is like lava, although a specific expression of the gospel can be,

Crusted over by layers of bureaucracy, institutionalism, and dogma... [the gospel] will always find a weak point and burst through... the Christian gospel is always encultured, always articulated by a certain people in a certain time and place. To try and freeze one particular articulation of the gospel, to make it timeless and universally applicable, actually does an injustice to the gospel.⁵

Whenever the church attempts to keep the gospel static and timeless, prophetic voices within the church attempt to free it from its bondage. Whenever a message as large as the gospel is placed “in a nutshell,” there are voices and movements that provoke the church

³ Scot McKnight, *A Community Called Atonement* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007), *xiii*.

⁴ Guder, *Missional Church*, 87. Newbigin, *Foolishness to Greeks*, 5-6.

⁵ Jones, *The New Christians*, 36, 98. Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger show how the Protestant Reformation was shaped by the new emerging literate culture. In the same way, Baby Boomer churches resembled “corporate culture of affluent functionality” during the Church Growth Movement. (Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 20-21).

to re-consider the gospel. John Caputo, urges the church to reconsider constrictive conclusive statements that prevent faithful hearings of the gospel, “Nutshells close and encapsulate, shelter and protect, reduce and simplify, while everything in deconstruction is toward opening, exposure, expansion, and complexification, toward releasing unheard of, undreamt of possibilities to come, toward cracking nutshells wherever they appear.”⁶ In order for the church to hear the gospel clearly and faithfully, to be mobilized for faithful mission in its current cultural moment, space for deconstruction and reconstruction is necessary.

Darrell Guder concludes the necessity for the gospel to always have fresh rehearsals,

Christianity has no universal message to proclaim. The Bible is not a collection of universal ideas cloaked in a particular culture. Universal ideas cannot be the good news that the concrete testimony of a particular people at a particular time can well be, if their witness is credible... Christian witness is not the interpretation of philosophy but the continuation of the event of God’s self-disclosure in human history.⁷

In this way, Brian McLaren believes that Christianity has the opportunity to be “forever young,” with every generation afforded the opportunity to see Christianity, “born again.”⁸

⁶ John Caputo, ed., *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* (Fordham University Press, 1997), 31.

⁷ Darrell L. Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 29.

⁸ Brian D. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity: Ten Questions that are Transforming the Faith* (New York: Harper One, 2010), xi. See also Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 29.

The Plot of the Story Needs a Wider Lens

Even though the gospel is open for being re-imagined within each and every generation of the church, the gospel cannot be anything that the church would want it to be. The essence of the gospel, according to the Apostle Paul, is a fulfillment of the Scriptures,⁹ or the story that began in Israel, or more clearly, that began with the God of Israel. In order to observe the gospel impulse, the church must faithfully read the Scriptures.

McKnight recommends that Bible readers retain a consistent biblical narrative while constructing a theology of the gospel, for Jesus's solution on the cross has to be the resolution to the precise problem revealed in the biblical story. McKnight observes that if one were to consider the entire picture of Genesis 3, traditionally considered the Fall of Humanity narrative, as the place where the problem originates, there are four fractures in God's good world that must be fixed. Those fractures are between God and humanity, between human and human, between human and himself or herself, and between human and creation.¹⁰ Although the heart of the biblical narrative is God's rescue of the fallen human, one would also need to anticipate a gospel message that directly includes the other fractures of from the Genesis 3 narrative. A gospel proclamation that does not include the other fractures falls short of the whole biblical narrative, and ultimately fails to be considered good news.

⁹ Romans 1:1-5; 1 Corinthians 15:3-ff.

¹⁰ Scot McKnight, *A Community Called Atonement* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007), 22-24. This idea is also shared by J.R. Daniel Kirk, *Jesus Have I Loved, but Paul?: A Narrative Approach to the Problem of Pauline Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), Kindle Electronic Edition: Chapter 2, Locations 671-676.

Two Different Gospels?

Therefore, if the church seeks to rehearse “the gospel” of the Scriptures, one that will also be good news within its own local context, that gospel should be shaped by themes of liberation and freedom not just for the individual and God, but also all of the fractures within God’s broken world. For this particular assignment the question that remains is, “What is good news for those dwelling in the American context?” A follow up question would be, “As people of the gospel, how might American Evangelicals proclaim, announce, and rehearse a gospel for their own time?”

In the following section, this writer will examine a current, vibrant discussion within American Evangelicalism. There appear to be two, primary camps in this discussion. On the one hand, the Neo Reformed¹¹ group which grounds their gospel proclamation in traditional, conservative Protestant theology. In general, the atonement theory that is only considered in this system of thought is Penal Substitution, or Jesus serving as a substitution for human sins.

On the other hand, Scot McKnight provides a critique of the Neo Reformed gospel, which he calls the “King Jesus Gospel.” In short, McKnight finds the Neo Reformed gospel is “soterian”¹² using the Greek New Testament term *soteria*, or “salvation or saved.” Although McKnight affirms the truth within the Soterian gospel, he contends that it is not the gospel, but merely a part of the gospel proclamation, or what he calls, “The Plan of Salvation.” On the surface, one might assume that McKnight is

¹¹ This writer includes those associated with The Gospel Coalition and the Acts 29 church plant network within the moniker of “Neo Reformed.” Both groups have a significant following within American Evangelicalism and close connection with one another.

¹² This writer will refer to the Neo Reformed gospel as Soterian from this point forward.

building a straw man in his critique. However, this author finds McKnight's observations as a massive contribution to the discussion of the gospel and how the gospel contributes to Christian formation and mission. The next section of this chapter will briefly examine the overview of both Soterian and King Jesus Gospels and the potential Christian formation possibilities in each.

Soterian Gospel

Together, D.A. Carson and Timothy Keller edited *The Gospel as Center*, a book designed to provide a clear explanation of the gospel, and its ministry implications, for those associated with The Gospel Coalition.¹³ The volume's aim, through its multiple contributors, is to "reclaim the core of our beliefs" and to provide further explanation on matters discussed in the founding documents that The Gospel Coalition has also developed.¹⁴ The volume's purpose appears to operate much like *The Fundamentals* document during the Fundamentalist-Liberal controversy in the beginning of the twentieth century.

Bryan Chapell provides a description of the gospel for this volume. Chapell divides the message of the gospel into three sections: "What God Requires, He Provides; What God Provides, He Perfects; Whom God Perfects, He Uses." His reflection of the gospel is shaped by Pauline texts, with a surprisingly lack of treatment of 1 Corinthians 15, which may be the earliest, shorthand summary of the gospel. Ultimately, Chapell is concerned with individuals inheriting eternal life through salvation in Christ, or the personal benefits of salvation. Chapell spends brief moments developing the new creation

¹³ D.A. Carson and Timothy Keller, eds., *The Gospel as Center: Renewing Our Faith and Reforming Our Ministry Practices* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 9 and Back Cover.

initiative of those transformed by the gospel and God's unending devotion to heal creation. However, Chapell's explanation of gospel appears to be limited to individual's effected by the problem of personal sin, expressed in the traditional human depravity motif, in need of a savior before a holy God, and Jesus being in the only answer to the problem. Chapell is satisfied with limited exposure to the story of Israel and the kingdom ministry and teachings of Jesus, as vital parts of the gospel as well. In the end, Chapell elevates the need for personal salvation as main agenda of the whole gospel message.

Acts 29 Pastoral Reflection of the Soterian Gospel

Matt Chandler, Lead Pastor at The Village in Dallas, TX and President of the Acts 29 Church Planting Network, set out to explain the gospel in his *The Explicit Gospel*,¹⁵ a book that mega church pastor Rick Warren endorsed as an important book and that if one was going to only read one book this year, they should read.¹⁶

The main agenda for Chandler is to clearly communicate the gospel in the midst of a church culture where one can attend a Christian church that preaches from the Bible, but has never heard the gospel message. Chandler cites Christian Smith's analysis of popular religion in America and the construction of "Moralistic, Therapeutic, Deism," as a culprit for a non-explicit, or the assumed gospel. Ultimately Chandler wants to provide a thorough and clear explanation of the gospel so Evangelicals can have a common understanding as to what the gospel means. To this end, Chandler defends a two-sided gospel, the gospel on the ground (individual's need for personal salvation) and the gospel

¹⁵ Matt Chandler with Jared Wilson, *The Explicit Gospel* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Front Cover.

from the air (a larger picture of redemption, God's ultimate plan for rescuing humanity).¹⁷

The first part of the book, the section dedicated to “the gospel on the ground,” follows the script for the traditional Penal Substitution Atonement of the gospel: God is good, humans are sinners under the immanent wrath of a holy God, the substitutionary work of Jesus Christ on the cross, and the response an individual believer based upon God's electing grace, through faith that God provides. This entire section is anchored in Pauline passages of the New Testament, especially Romans 11, with cursory references from the Gospels and proof-texts from the Old Testament. This writer suggests that Chandler's explicit gospel does not need anything from the Old Testament after Genesis 3 and it only needs limited material from the Gospel books of the New Testament, i.e. Jesus's incarnation, his sacrificial death on the cross, and resurrection.

In section two, Chandler attempts to illustrate the “gospel from the air,” and it appears to be a repeat of his “gospel on the ground.” In his treatment of Creation, Chandler re-hashes creation versus evolution debates, reminiscent of the Fundamentalism-Liberalism controversy in the early twentieth century. His treatment of the Fall of Humanity narrative, which he supports from a medley of ideas from Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon, includes the biblical idea of *shalom*.¹⁸ His treatment of *shalom*, however, is relegated to the individual and God, not a fully orbed *shalom* that anticipates the total renewal of all creation. In his treatment of Reconciliation, however, Chandler does attempt to broaden the effect of salvation, illustrating that part of experiencing reconciliation with God is joining with God in reconciling others to God. In

¹⁷ Ibid., 11-17.

¹⁸ Ibid., 120-133.

the end, however, Chandler's idea of helping others to be reconciled to God is helping them discover personal, private faith in Jesus Christ.

Compared side-by-side, Chandler's "gospel on the ground" and "gospel in the air" are synonymous: God is good, individual sinners are bad and are under God's wrath and deserve eternal punishment unless their sins are forgiven, Jesus dies in the place of elected sinful humanity, believers respond to God's call to repentance, and believers engage in mission to, ultimately, help other individuals discover the grace of God.

Soterian Gospel and Spiritual Formation

The connection between the gospel that a community proclaims is directly related to the gospel that the community rehearses within ecclesial life. The gospel in action, "gospelling," gives a community a sense of mission and hope and empowers the community to engage the world in which it dwells. The Soterian gospel creates Soterian gospel people. Jonathan K. Dodson, pastor of Austin City Life Church, along with Matt Chandler describe how "gospel-centered discipleship" operates within the life of the believer and within the local church community. His thesis is important: the gospel is not just for "sinners," but for disciples as well.¹⁹ A disciple, from Dodson's perspective, is one who follows Jesus by learning, who dwells in the family of faith, and who participates in mission of God uniquely communicated in Matthew 28:17-20. Ultimately, Dodson proposes a tension between vertical discipleship (personal holiness) and horizontal holiness (serving others, engaging in mission) resulting in allowing Jesus, as Lord, to govern and direct the disciple's life.²⁰

¹⁹ Jonathan K. Dodson, *Gospel-Centered Discipleship* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 17.

Dodson uses a Pauline metaphor for the process of discipleship, a fight. He says that the Christian is in the middle of a fight over one's image; one can be conformed to the image of the world or into the image of God. The crux of this fight is to continually believe the gospel, a pursuit that takes intentional and persistent effort.²¹ However, before one concludes that discipleship is a journey framed by frustration and angst, Dodson reminds his readers that pleasure is the motivation; pleasure that one finds in the gospel, being united with Christ, whom also followed God the Father obediently because it was Jesus's own good pleasure.²²

Dodson highlights the importance of the Holy Spirit in the process of discipleship, but sketches a peculiar role for the Spirit in discipling. Dodson reminds his readers that Jesus relied upon the Spirit to commune with the Father, to overcome temptation, to make the proper decisions, and to surrender to the Father's will.²³ Although each of these roles are vital in the biblical idea of the Holy Spirit, Dodson does not also include in his pneumatology the role of the Holy Spirit in the corporate life of the church. The Spirit's role, according to Dodson, is relegated to the individual, private spirituality of the believer.

Dodson practices gospel-centered discipleship through "fight clubs," or no-holds barred accountability groups where transparency and vulnerability are required. The fight club meetings consist of reading Scripture, repeating the gospel proclamation to one another, and confessing struggles and needs to the other group members. Dodson admits

²⁰ Ibid., 31-49.

²¹ Ibid., 51-60.

²² Ibid., 75-79.

²³ Ibid., 90-100.

that these fight clubs serve as moments where Jesus saves him again. This language is peculiar for Dodson to use, particularly as a Christian who is shaped by Reformed theology. Dodson explains, “His [Jesus] gospel is always saving us because nothing else can, not even for a moment. Jesus shed his blood so that we don’t have to. Instead, of death, God gives us life, a life worth living.”²⁴

Returning to the initial framing question: “Does this rendering of gospel help mend the four fractures in Genesis 3? Does this rehearsal of the gospel help the believer transform into the image of Christ?” The Soterian gospel appears to reduce the “gospel” to individuals finding personal freedom from sin. Darrell Guder laments this construction of the gospel, “The benefits of salvation are separated from the reason for which we receive God’s grace in Christ: to empower us as God’s people to become Christ’s witnesses. The fundamental dichotomy between the benefits of the gospel and the mission of the gospel constitutes the most profound reductionism of the gospel.”²⁵

The Soterian gospel, developed during the Reformation was good news in that time, particularly in an anxious era of European history. The Apostle Paul’s articulation of justification by faith alone was an important backbone for the Reformation movement that sought reforms within the troubled Western Church. Individuals did not have to find citizenship in the world that was troubled, but individuals could inherit eternal life in another world, through faith alone. This framework of the Reformation gospel from the sixteenth century appears to be the same gospel rendering The Gospel Coalition and the Acts 29 Network are using for the gospel message today.

²⁴ Ibid., 119-142.

²⁵ Guder, *Continuing*, 120.

The question remains, is the Soterian gospel good news for today? Is the call for individuals to engage in private faith good news today? Is this gospel too small? Does this gospel retain the needed elements of Evangelicalism: conversion experience, maturity, and mission? Scot McKnight, reflecting upon the angst of the younger Evangelicals within his classrooms thinks there is a significant need to communicate a bigger gospel.

This generation is tired of an old-fashioned atonement theology that does not make a difference, of an old-fashioned atonement theology that is for individual spiritual formation but not for ecclesial re-formation, and of an old-fashioned atonement theology that does not reconcile humans with humans. This generation of students doesn't think the "I'm not perfect, just forgiven" bumper sticker is either funny or something to be proud of. They believe atonement ought to make a difference in the here and now.²⁶

McKnight, and others, contend that there is a fresh opportunity to present a fuller explanation of the gospel, one which McKnight calls The King Jesus Gospel.

The King Jesus Gospel

Scot McKnight's *King Jesus Gospel* contends that the Soterian gospel is too small and is only part of the gospel that the Apostles anticipated after the resurrection of Jesus. This section of the chapter will examine Scot McKnight's *King Jesus Gospel*, and this author will suggest is more helpful for Evangelicals to communicate and rehearse good news in this current cultural moment. With the help of the King Jesus Gospel, and other sources, this section will examine the gospel in four sections: The Gospel is Jesus as Israel's Messiah, Restoration of Hyper-Relationality, Good News Again and Again: Gospel as Tradition and Apocalypse, and Gospel as Verb.

²⁶ McKnight, *A Community Called Atonement*, 2.

The Gospel is Jesus as Israel's Messiah

According to McKnight, Wright, and Kirk the gospel is pronouncement that Jesus of Nazareth is Israel's messiah and the world's true Lord, "The God of Israel acted decisively in the person of Jesus to restore God's rule and reconcile the whole world to himself."²⁷ If this is true, Jesus's life, death, and resurrection have a wider effect upon the world than for individual people finding personal forgiveness, i.e. the fundamental idea of the Soterian gospel. Scot McKnight, in his *The King Jesus Gospel*, contends that American Evangelicalism needs to reconsider the gospel it rehearses by recovering what Jesus and the Apostles had in mind when they proclaimed the original gospel. The problem, according to McKnight, is that the gospel has been abbreviated and reduced to the "Plan of Salvation," resulting in a Salvation culture where one is merely "sacramentalized" (but not evangelized) or is a "decider" (and not a disciple).²⁸ McKnight urges churches to consider the whole gospel in order to experience a gospel culture.

The process of recovering the original good news is to consider the whole narrative of Scripture. McKnight's outline for the biblical gospel is the "Story of Israel, the Story of Jesus, the Plan of Salvation, and the Method of Persuasion."²⁹ The Soterian gospel, from McKnight's vantage point, leaves out the story of Israel and the story of Jesus altogether.³⁰ A careful diagnosis of the Soterian gospel shows that only the first

²⁷ Kirk, *Jesus Have I Loved*, Kindle Electronic Edition: Chapter 1, Location 209.

²⁸ McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel*, 29-33.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 35-40.

³⁰ See also James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). Dunn gives considerable attention to how the Hebrew Bible shaped his idea of "gospel." The whole Hebrew story leads Paul to his conclusions on the death and resurrection of Jesus, particularly Paul's "shorthand" rehearsals of the gospel in Romans 1:1-4 and 1 Corinthians 15:1-8.

three chapters of the Old Testament are needed for it to be communicated, overlooking God's gospeling action in and through the story of Israel. McKnight further suggests the Soterian gospel is not explicitly found in the Gospels themselves, leaving many Soterians to believe that Jesus did not get to preach the gospel.³¹

N.T. Wright reminds Bible readers that the Gospel books in the New Testament have an agenda, to see the whole of Israel's history to come to a climax and conclusion in the story of Jesus. The story of Israel, as written in the Old Testament, is unique, with themes of "glorious beginnings, rich vocations, and then horrible failure and exile." The whole of Israel's history is seen in this pattern, and Wright suggests, that the writer of Genesis 1-3 has this theme in mind and perhaps Genesis 1-3 is shorthand of all of Israel's history.³² The Old Testament, therefore, is not a quest for individuals finding personal salvation, but God seeking to renew the whole world through the story of God's people Israel. Kirk draws readers to notice how the Gospels and many of Paul's writings begin with this same climax of the covenant to Israel in mind.³³

The gospel affirmation of Jesus being Israel's messiah is at the heart of Jesus's own preaching about the kingdom of God. McKnight finds in Jesus's proclamation of the Kingdom of God evidence for the problem that Jesus came to solve, i.e. the renewal of the whole cosmos for the reign of God. An idea which includes, and eclipses, the idea of

³¹ McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel*, 25-26.

³² N.T. Wright, *How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 65-66.

³³ Kirk, seeking to establish Paul within a narrative theologian framework, compares Paul's own introductions to his epistles, such as Romans 1:1-3, with the Gospel narratives like Mark, i.e. reflecting upon the whole of Israel's story and to conclude that "Jesus is the embodiment of God's making good on the ancient promise to bring Israel's story to a saving end." Kirk, *Jesus Have I Loved*, Kindle Electronic Edition: Chapter 1, Location 238.

the individuals and personal salvation. Jesus repeatedly speaks of the kingdom of God; it appears, then, that more than a personal Savior, Jesus's occupation centers on messiahship or the Lord over the whole world, fulfilling Israel's longing for a renewed creation and a trustworthy king for God's people, which reminds God's people of God's original hope for God-human relationship from Genesis 1-3.³⁴ By God choosing to rule the world by a human messiah, God desires,

To see humanity's creation-order role restored... We are reading a story of a God who is going to see the creation of his hands renewed and restored from top to bottom... God who made all things maintained an unshaken commitment to his beloved creation... It is a story of God restoring the world and winning a victory over the powers that had supplanted his rule.³⁵

This rendering of the gospel is larger than individuals working on their own private spirituality. The gospel is a story that calls all to be benefactors and participants in God's cosmic rescue plan in and through Jesus Christ.³⁶

The signpost of this reality and hope is found in the Christian confession of resurrection. The resurrection of Jesus as Israel's messiah is a fulfillment to the destiny of Israel and the hope of the whole world, "If Jesus is the one who is carrying the destiny of Israel, and if Israel is the people who are carrying the ultimate purposes of God to bring his justice and new creation to birth, then the resurrection of Jesus is the launching of the new world in which that justice and new creation have arrived at last, on earth as in heaven."³⁷ Jesus, as Israel's messiah, is putting God's entire world back together.

³⁴ McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel*, 136-137.

³⁵ Kirk, *Jesus Have I Loved*, Kindle Electronic Edition: Chapter 1, Locations 425-440.

³⁶ Roy Harrisville, *Fracture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 271.

³⁷ Wright, *How God Became King*, 268.

Individuals who benefit from this cosmic renewal enter into a vibrant relationship with God and are also drawn back to one another in peaceful relationships.

Restoration of Hyper-Relationship

The proclamation of the gospel includes the restoration of peace with one another. McKnight finds the heart of atonement theology the process of God fixing the fractured *Eikon*, or image of God within humanity. When God created humanity in His image humans were created as missional-incarnational beings (like God, who is a missional-incarnational being), as beings of representation, representing the God on mission. When humanity sins against God sin disfigures this missional, relational, representational essence of which humans are.³⁸ Under the reign of sin, humans are transfigured into self-centered beings, turning into oneself. Personal salvation, then, is the process of being set free *and* connected into life-giving relationships.³⁹ Indeed, sin through isolation is the weapon of mass destruction in God's world, fracturing the *shalom* in profound way, "Shalom is God's design for creation and redemption; sin is blamable human vandalism of these great realities and therefore an affront to their architect and builder."⁴⁰

The Scripture narrative shows God's creation in a profoundly broken state. Instead of starting over, God enters the story in order to renew God's own world in the midst of its disorder and brokenness. Redemption is reconnecting the interrelationships

³⁸ McKnight, *A Community Called Atonement*, 20-22.

³⁹ See Cherith Fee Nordling's contribution in J. G. Stackhouse, Jr. ed., *What Does it Mean to Be Saved?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002), 122.

⁴⁰ Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 13-14, 16. Emphasis mine.

that God formed in the creation narrative. “Sin,” Emil Brunner said, “is to go it alone.”⁴¹

The dynamic nature of the human, in contrast is created for,

Union with God, communion with others, love of self, and care for the world. To strive for absolute freedom is to ask the *Eikon* [image of God within humanity] to do what it cannot do. *Eikons* cannot *eikon* alone. *Eikons* are made for relationship and to *Eikons* a life without relationships, without dependence, and without love will diminish them... Severed *Eikons* diminish themselves.⁴²

The ramifications of the hyper-relationship of *Eikons*, and the proclivity for *Eikons* to sin presents communal or political dimensions of sin, and correspondingly, atonement, salvation, and gospel. Humans being restored to God and to one another is at the heart of the hope of the Scripture narrative, and is indeed good news for every tribe, tongue, and people.

Indeed, the idea of individuals receiving forgiveness from God has cosmic effects.

Although it may be true that forgiveness of sins lifts the believer, it also allows the believer to look outward and to see.

The world as a whole needs, longs for, aches and yearns and cries out for forgiveness – for that collective global sigh of relief that means that nobody need seek vengeance ever again; that nobody will bear a grudge ever again; that the million wrongs with which the world has been so horribly defaced will be put right at last; that in God’s ultimate new world there will be no moral shadow, no lingering resentment, no character warped by another’s wrong.⁴³

Kirk insists that this hope for renewed relationships is found in the vibrant work of Jesus during the crucifixion. In the crucifixion, God takes the toxic, destructive,

⁴¹ Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption* trans. O. Wyon (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1952), 92-93.

⁴² McKnight, *A Community Called Atonement*, 23-24.

⁴³ Wright, *How God Became King*, 271-272.

rebellious nature of humanity and puts it to death. Within this profound mystery of Good Friday God takes,

A people who had lived in rebellion against God needed to have a new representative to create a new alliance with God... On the cross Christ was “made sin,” but that sin died and was put out of sight with the burial of Jesus. The resurrected Christ is the first of a new humanity that stands as a people faithfully serving God, reconciled. The death of Jesus opens up the possibility for being truly human... at peace with God in a world of life, harmony, and plenty... We belong to a reconciled humanity.⁴⁴

The gospel creates a community of the redeemed, who are now signposts of a new world that is breaking into this present world. “Salvation in Christ,” David Bosch said, “is salvation in the context of human society en route to a whole and healed world.”⁴⁵ The gospel is a new way for gospelled individuals to interact with the world. God’s people, now, have the “new possibility of human, social, and therefore political relationships.”⁴⁶ In the same move, the gospel calls individuals to be reconciled to God and to one another.

Good News Again and Again: Gospel as Tradition and Apocalypse

In a unique tension, the gospel is a moniker that describes God’s cosmic plan within creation and the story that takes unique shape within local communities. John Franke suggests that Christians continue to live out the gospel in between two poles of tension: indigenization and transformation.

The indigenization principle is rooted in the core gospel affirmation that God comes to us where we are and accepts us as such through the work of Christ and

⁴⁴ Kirk, *Jesus Have I Loved*, Kindle Electronic Edition: Chapter 1: Locations 530-535.

⁴⁵ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Marynoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 399.

⁴⁶ John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 52.

not on the basis of what we have been, are or are trying to become... God does not relate to us as isolated, self-sufficient individuals but rather as people who are conditioned by the particular times and places in which we live. The impossibility of separating ourselves from our social relationships and the societies in which we belong has led to the unwavering commitment to indigenization that has characterized the Christian tradition. That is, to live life as both a Christian and as a member of a particular society, culture, and people group.⁴⁷

The gospel is also transformative, for God seeks to move individuals and communities out of those things that are “out of sync” with the mission of God within the world. The gospel urges to engage in the “renewal of our minds and lives and resisting conformity to many of the social and cultural patterns of our societies. In other words, faithfulness to Christ will often put us out of step with our culture.”⁴⁸

Paul’s own use of the term gospel shows this unique tension between indigenous and transformation. Paul affirms that the gospel, even though it was imbedded in the long history of Israel, was “revealed” at God’s appointed time. On the one hand, Paul affirms in his gospel proclamations that Jesus’s work was “according to the Scriptures.”⁴⁹ On the other hand, Paul affirms that the gospel was not given to him by human origin, but by a revelation from God.⁵⁰ Dunn says that these two paradoxical ideas harmonize in Paul’s commission to preach to the Gentiles.⁵¹ Paul’s gospel is traditional and fresh, old and new, for the Jew and for the Gentile, as Paul reflected upon the resurrection of Jesus and

⁴⁷ John R. Franke, *Manifold Witness: The Plurality of Truth* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2009), 25-26.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁴⁹ See Romans 1:1; 1 Cor. 15:3-4. In one of the many climaxes in Romans 9:6, Paul affirms that the word of God did not fail.

⁵⁰ See Galatians 1:11-12.

⁵¹ See Acts 9:15; 22:15; 26:16-18; 1 Corinthians 9:1; 15:8-11; and Galatians 1:15-16.

the cosmic ramifications of the event. Paul's Damascus road experience in Acts 9 is not a conversion to a new religion, but a transition into something entirely different.

A conversion for Paul the theologian... it was no doubt the total reversal of some very basic theological axioms (about Israel's status and the importance of preserving it) and previous conclusions (Jesus as a false claimant to messiahship rejected by God), which was at the heart of the theological reconstruction, which must have followed.⁵²

Kirk insists that Paul allows the Old Testament story to include the Gentile peoples, and in doing so, Paul insists that the gospel bends and curves from its old shape to communicate fresh readings and hearings. Paul, while writing to the Corinthian church, people of Gentile origin, includes the Gentiles in the story of Exodus, a story that the Old Testament historically only included the Jewish people. Paul literally calls the "fathers" of the Israelite nation as the "fathers" of the Gentiles.⁵³ The resurrection, in Paul's mind, was a way to re-work and "re-story" even the most sacred of Israel's narratives.

The idea that the gospel is old and new is an important fixture for Christian formation. When a person enters into the gospel story, it is a story that does not originate with them for,

To be saved is to be on the road again... salvation is a baptism into a community that has so truthful a story that we forget ourselves and our anxieties long enough to become part of that story, a story God has told in Scripture and continues to tell in Israel and in the church. Salvation is not so much a new beginning but rather a beginning in the middle, so to speak. Faith begins, not in discovery, but in remembrance. The story began without us, as a story of the peculiar way God is redeeming the world, a story that invites us to come forth and be saved by sharing in the world of a new people whom God has created in Israel and Jesus. Such movement saves us by (1) placing us within an adventure that is nothing less than

⁵² James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 179.

⁵³ Kirk, *Jesus Have I Loved*, Kindle Electronic Edition: Chapter 1, Locations 334-340.

God's purpose for the whole world, and (2) communally training us to fashion our lives in accordance with what is true rather than what is false.⁵⁴

The theology that emerges from the New Testament, from a faithful reworking and reimagining of God's redemptive work, considers that God's world is in the midst of a time warp, of sorts. God's future new creation has already arrived, in part, based upon the announcement that Jesus of Nazareth had been raised from the dead. For Paul, in particular, one who is in the embrace of God's gospel has already escaped the evil age, is a new creation, and is seated with Christ in heavenly places.⁵⁵ At the same time, one continues to work out salvation, experience the profound struggles of this present age, and sees God's image dimly.⁵⁶ In the meantime, the gospel draws the believer to remember Christ's work in the past, all the while anticipating God's future kingdom, in the midst of a present moment.⁵⁷ As the church engages in creative anticipation of God's future, and as the church witnesses the evidence of this future breaking into the present, it is filled with hope, a "hope within our history... [and] a hope beyond history as we know it."⁵⁸

This "time warp" allows the church to engage in fresh, creative ways to enact this new reality. The patterns, hopes, expectations, and longings of the world no longer

⁵⁴ Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 52.

⁵⁵ Galatians 1:4; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Ephesians 2:5-6.

⁵⁶ Philippians 2:12; Romans 7:21-25; 1 Corinthians 13:12.

⁵⁷ This writer notes how each of the two sacraments that Evangelicals observe, Baptism and the Eucharist, observe this time warp. This rehearsal of the gospel through liturgy is a profound reminder for the believing community of God's current redemptive activity in the present moment.

⁵⁸ Brian D. McLaren and Tony Campolo, *Adventures in Missing the Point: How the Culture-Controlled Church Neutered the Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 66.

occupy the consciousness of the people of God. Hauerwas and Willimon, in a staggering discourse on the effect of Jesus's death and resurrection, claim that God has already brought the world to an end and also a beginning, already, in the person of Jesus Christ.

For us, the world has ended. The Sermon [on the mount], however, collides with such accommodationist thinking. It drives us back to a completely new conception of what it means for people to live with one another. That completely new conception is the church. All that we have heard said of old is thrown up for grabs, demands to be reexamined, and pushed back to square one. Square one is that colony made up of those who are special, different, alien, and distinctive only in the sense that they are those who have heard Jesus say, "Follow me," and have come forth to be part of a new people, a colony formed by hearing his invitation and saying yes.⁵⁹

As this gospel continues to be communicated and experienced, it will embrace the unique shape of those who proclaim its message. Faithful gossellers will reflect upon where this story has been and anticipate where this story is going. These unique gospel "colonies" need to not critique one another for the unique expressions that develop, but to trust that God's ongoing story is continuing to reach its desired end.

And so as we grow in our awareness that our ways of articulating Christian theology are deeply contextualized, we open ourselves to the possibility that postmodern or non-Western cultures might choose not to adopt our way of speaking and living Christianly – and that such difference within the body need not be a source of division. The universality of Jesus's reign means that the can accommodate a world's worth of diverse expression of the Christian story... When Paul said that gentiles did not have to keep the God-given laws of the Old Testament in order to fully participate in God's family, he blew the door of cultural conformity off its hinges, forever invalidating any church's would-be baptism of social patterns of exclusion or alienation.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 92.

⁶⁰ Kirk, *Jesus Have I Loved*, Kindle Electronic Edition: Chapter 5: Locations 2150-2168.

In this way, the gospel can always be faithful to former expectations of its effect, all along, with new expectations of its work within local communities within God's good world.

Gospel as a Verb

In the end, the task of God's people is to rehearse the gospel, to embody and to live out the implications of the gospel, to see "gospel," as a noun and a verb. To "gospel" then, is to rehearse the reality that God, in Jesus Christ, is putting the world back together, a world that all humanity had torn apart. Now in Christ, humanity is given the opportunity to be reconciled to God as God is reconciling the whole world, not giving up on God's twin commitments to covenant and creation. In order to reconcile this world, God pardons humanity and invites people to enter back into the peace of God, the new creation that has begun, and will continue, until the return of Jesus Christ.

This reality is a reminder of the essence of God's call to Abraham in Genesis 12: God blesses Abraham, and Abraham is called to bless God's world. Jesus is God's way of making good on God's promise to Abraham and to bless the entire world.⁶¹ The calling of Abraham and the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham fully realized in Jesus, is the climax of the covenant. The story returns to the initial creation mandate in Genesis 1:26-27, God creating humanity as vice-regents within God's world, ruling and reigning together, and in partnership with God. This co-partnership is modeled and embodied in the life of Jesus of Nazareth, in all that is written of him between the manger and the cross. Jesus's life between incarnation and death, in this way, are just as much the gospel

⁶¹ Kirk, *Jesus I have Loved*, Kindle Electronic Edition: Chapter 1, Location 272-278.

as his incarnation, death, and resurrection, for it announces that God has chosen to rescue God's world "as far as the curse is found."

McKnight urges the churches to read the Gospels to inspire the imagination of their worshipping communities to be "gospellers" within their local contexts. As the community of Jesus embraces the Gospels and allows the narratives to shape their own consciousness, they will, from McKnight's vantage point, create a gospel culture.⁶² The gospelling activity empowers the church by the Holy Spirit to continue imagining God's good world breaking in all around them. The New Testament reveals Spirit's work within the local community as God's continued mission in the world. The gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost is not exclusively for one's assurance of personal salvation, but for worldwide mission.⁶³

The gift of the Holy Spirit to the church has a missionary orientation. The Holy Spirit is given not simply so that God's redeemed people may be blessed with his presence and love, though that does indeed follow, but so that we may be witnesses to Jesus and his resurrection, so that we may be for the world what Jesus was for Israel... [the Holy Spirit allows the church] to look outward and to invoke the Spirit, not to provide private 'blessings,' but to glorify Jesus in the wider world.⁶⁴

"Gospelling" also includes embodying the posture of Jesus as the suffering servant. "Self-giving sacrifice," and the way of the cross is an ethic of Jesus and should be an ethic among Jesus's people.⁶⁵ This role of suffering is related to the ethic of love that one finds in both Jesus's life and teachings, the laying down one's own life so that

⁶² McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel*, 153-154.

⁶³ Luke's post-resurrection, pre-Pentecost discourse with Jesus and his disciples reveals the missional shape of the gift of the Holy Spirit; Luke 24:49; Acts 1:8.

⁶⁴ Wright, *How God Became King*, 270.

⁶⁵ Kirk, *Jesus I have Loved*, Kindle Electronic Edition: Chapter 4, Locations 1499-1501.

others may live.⁶⁶ To “gospel” is to not only see the gospel as a story about Jesus, or even a proclamation of the church, but to consider it one’s rule of life, as Paul embodied the sufferings of Christ literally throughout his own ministry.⁶⁷ In the end, Kirk highlights the biblical idea of spirituality and ethics, “Living out our foundational narratives in the communities we have been joined to as followers of Jesus. We are to be living stories of the crucified Christ.”⁶⁸

In sum, a local church that desires to be those who gospel hold faithfully to the confession that Jesus is Israel’s messiah, and that God’s new creation is arriving, from the future and into the present. The gospel summons individuals into union with God, but also to seek peace and shalom with others and within all of creation. The local community rehearses the gospel in their own context, understanding that gospel experience is old and new, traditional and fresh. The local church discerns the site for gospel engagement by ascertaining the profound “pain” that is holding the local community under the bondage of brokenness, and, with the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, the means for the community to experience the in-breaking reign of God. The church becomes “good news” while,

The community of believers is the continuing narrative of Jesus Christ on earth. As such, we who comprise the family must enact a drama that truly displays what makes us who we are. We are to be one people, diverse in our manifestations of the gospel, living in faithful harmony with God our Father.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Ibid., Kindle Electronic Edition: Chapter 4, Locations 1520-1527.

⁶⁷ Ibid., Kindle Electronic Edition: Chapter 4: Locations 1600-1604. Paul presents a gospel life to the Corinthians who would have seen his type of lifestyle folly. However, Paul’s action appears to be subversive, imploring the Corinthians to consider the folly of the narrative within their own culture and the power of the Christ narrative. In 2 Corinthians 11, Paul provides a list of his hardships as a, “living narration of the gospel of Christ crucified.”

⁶⁸ Ibid., Kindle Electronic Edition: Chapter 4, Locations 1667-1669.

⁶⁹ Ibid., Kindle Electronic Edition: Chapter 5, Locations 2189-2218.

In conclusion, this chapter has explored the themes of gospel in order to display that, indeed, there is not a generic gospel that the church has proclaimed from generation to generation. Rather, the church as the body of believers engages in fresh, new rehearsals of God's continuing narrative of cosmic rescue. The Soterian gospel is helpful in communicating the individual's need for personal forgiveness before God and the responsibility to grow in their own personal faith. The Soterian gospel is not the gospel, but the gospel cannot be less than the Soterian gospel.⁷⁰ However, as this chapter has sought to display, the Soterian gospel is only part of the gospel.

This writer contends that the King Jesus Gospel is faithful to the biblical text, and provides the framework for the reversal of the four cosmic fractures of Genesis 3. The King Jesus Gospel also provides the inspiration for local church communities to faithfully engage gospel activity within their own local contexts. The King Jesus Gospel is also honest about the local and incarnate forms of ministry that emerge in Postmodern culture, highlighting themes of community, corporate spirituality, and social justice. Lastly, the King Jesus Gospel develops the three essential core identities of Evangelicalism, conversion experience, maturity, and mission.

The next chapter examines the way the Scripture interpretation helps the local Christian community engage their current cultural moment with fresh expressions of the gospel. First, the next chapter will examine how Jesus in his own pastoral setting, helped to reframe spiritual practices so his own faith community would be prepared for their own cultural situation. At the heart of this idea of reframing practices is a vibrant

⁷⁰ Personal conversation with Dr. Phil Carnes.

commitment to the Scripture text. The next chapter will also provide suggestions for Evangelical congregations to read the Scripture in a diverse community.

CHAPTER FIVE

BIBLICAL CONTENT: FRIENDS OF JESUS AND SONS OF HELL

I no longer call you servants... I have called you friends. – John 15:15 NIV

Evangelicalism's vibrant commitment to the faithful reading of Scripture inspires its people to hear and rehearse the gospel. The Scriptures are not history for the Evangelical, but the very inheritance of the faith. The role of the pastoral figure within Evangelical congregations, then, is to aid the local church to discover how an ancient text shapes believers in contemporary settings. This chapter is dedicated to displaying how pastoral figures can lead their congregations into gospel rehearsal from the biblical tradition.

This chapter has two focal points that meet at a common theme. The first section will examine how Jesus, as a pastoral figure, reframes practices of spiritual formation to prepare his disciples for a new missional-incarnational faithfulness within their own time and place. This idea will be shown from one of Jesus's discourses from Matthew's Gospel called, "The Six Antithesis."¹ The second section of the chapter will briefly discuss an Evangelical use of Scripture within the current American context.

Matthew: Brief Theological Context

The Gospel of Matthew reveals Jesus as Israel's messiah as one who leads on God's behalf to deliver judgment and to extend grace. In Matthew, Jesus brings sharp accusation against Israel's religious elite and Jesus gives extravagant pardon for those

¹ Matthew 5:21-48.

among Israel's despair. This apparent upside-down approach of leadership leads the reader to consider, "Who is the true Israel?" Near the end of the Gospel Jesus delivers "Seven Woes"² against Israel's elite, the climax of Jesus's judgment sentencing against them. At the same time, Jesus works to re-seed Israel from within Israel, and prepares the covenant community for a significant pivot in God's story. Ultimately, Matthew illustrates that a new Israel is developed through the teaching, ministry, and saving work of Jesus Christ and this new Israel is given a new commission,³ much like the commission to Abraham in Genesis 12. Matthew communicates through his Gospel that Israel is both old and new, launching into a new era of faithfulness.

Matthew's Gospel begins with a complex genealogy with three loose ends of Israel's narrative that find their climax in the person of Jesus: Abraham, David, and the exile.⁴ Shortly after the birth narrative of Jesus, Matthew displays Israel in significant religious revivalism through the ministry of John the Baptist. John not only baptizes new believers but announces significant judgment upon Israel's religious elite for their presumption, claiming that God could raise up children of Abraham from stones and that, ultimately, "the ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."⁵ John's ministry of baptism initiates new Exodus, passing through the water into the life and promise of God, escaping the bondage form within itself.

² Matthew 23:12-39.

³ Matthew 28:17-20

⁴ Matthew 1:1-17.

⁵ Matthew 3:9-10.

The idea of new Israel is displayed within the general outline of Matthew's Gospel. Commentators note the interesting "chiastic" structure of Matthew. Ancient writers used chiastic structures to arrange their material in order to isolate a central theme in their stories. The theme is normally found in the heart of the narrative, and from that center, the other parts of the story are organized to be viewed against one another. The Parables of the Kingdom unit found in Matthew 13 appears to be Matthew's emphasis in the Gospel, and from there, the rest of the Gospel is organized to be seen together. For instance, the Sermon on the Mount discourse (Matthew 5-7) is to be observed alongside Matthew 21-25, the final of five major narrative and discourse units of Matthew, where Jesus brings sharp accusation, warning, and judgment upon the presumption of the Jewish elite. When these passages are seen together, Matthew constructs, in shorthand form, the description of those entering the kingdom (Matthew 5-9) against those who are going to be left out of the kingdom. (Matthew 21-25)⁶

In Matthew 21-22, near the end of Jesus's preaching ministry and during the early climatic stages of Jesus's tension with the Israel religious elite, Pilate, and Herod, Jesus presents three different parables with similar plots. These parables have a similar theme in that they begin with an element of inclusion of all characters involved, but conclude with the exclusion of those being judged. In each case, the exclusion is to those who presume to be included, but are actually excluded because of their reaction towards the main character in each parable. In the middle of these parables, Jesus warns the chief priests and Pharisees, "Therefore I tell you, that the kingdom of God will be taken away

⁶ M. Eugene Boring, *Matthew In The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol 8. ed. Leander E. Keck, ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), 113. See also Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*. In *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol 33A. Bruce M. Metzger, ed. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2000), *lii*.

from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.”⁷ In Matthew 5-7, Jesus invites people into participation with God’s arriving kingdom. In the chiastic counterpart of Matthew 5-7, Matthew 21-25, Jesus is excluding those who will not participate in that kingdom.

In sum, Matthew’s narrative is a subtle, and at times explicit, treatise on God remaking Israel, the people of God, in and through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.⁸ The religious elite of Israel will be left out, for even the converts that they are making are “sons of hell.”⁹ All of the discipleship efforts of the religious elite are actually making God’s people enemies of God, instead of God’s friends.

Matthew 5-7: Sermon on the Mount

Early in the Gospel, Matthew begins to reveal the type of people this new Israel will be. Matthew 5-7, traditionally called the “Sermon on the Mount,” is the most familiar, ethical discourse from the teachings of Jesus. The main message is the kingdom of heaven,¹⁰ or the long-awaited fulfillment of the promises to Israel to be finally realized. As Jesus teaches on the kingdom of heaven in this passage, he not only acts as a rabbi presenting a new yoke of instruction, but ultimately, Jesus is a new lawgiver providing a new identity and, consequently, a new ethic for the new Israel.

⁷ Matthew 21:43.

⁸ See WBC, liii. Donald A. Hagner frames Matthew’s gospel as Jesus’s pursuit of Israel and rejection (Matthew 1-12), Jesus’s explanation of Israel’s negative response (Matthew 13), and then a new establishment of the people of God. (Matthew 14-28)

⁹ Matthew 23:15.

¹⁰ Note: Matthew’s use of “kingdom of heaven” and the other gospel writer’s use of “kingdom of God” are to be read as a similar meaning. The original hearers would have heard “heaven” and “God” as meaning the same thing.

Jesus as the New Moses

The Sermon on the Mount found in Matthew 5-7 is a parallel passage to the Gospel of Luke's "Sermon on the Plain."¹¹ One would find it alarming, then, that Matthew places Jesus on a mountain in his version while Luke places Jesus on a plain. Matthew regularly uses mountains as the setting for other significant events in the Gospel.¹² Perhaps the mountain is a literary device, a "place marker," for Matthew's readers to pay attention to important developments within the story.

However, it is interesting to ascertain the reason Matthew uses a mountain for this first discourse. The Old Testament reveals that Moses stood on the mountain to deliver the Law of God to the Israelite people after the Exodus narrative. The Law was a way for Israel to claim its identity as God's people. Jesus stands on a mountain in Matthew's Gospel for a similar event. This is not the only connection Matthew makes between Moses and Jesus. Indeed, Matthew's general outline for his Gospel, using five discourse units interlaced with five narrative units, draws the reader's attention to the Torah, the five books of Moses.¹³ Matthew desires to portray Jesus to his Jewish audience as a "greater than Moses" figure.¹⁴ The Jewish people had been waiting for this Moses-type figure for many generations,¹⁵ and that expectation appears to be met and exceeded in the

¹¹ Luke 6:17-49.

¹² See also Matthew 4:8; 17:1; 28:16, the mountain is used in the Temptation, Transfiguration, and Exaltation narratives.

¹³ R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*. In *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 3.

¹⁴ *NICNT*, 63-64, 79, 81-83, 89, and 157. See also *NIC*, 175.

¹⁵ "The LORD your God will raise up for you another prophet like me from among you, from your fellow Israelites. You must listen to him." (Deuteronomy 18:15)

person of Jesus. The original Jewish hearers of Matthew's Gospel would have surely made this stunning connection.

Matthew 5:17-48: Six Antitheses and Communal Practices

In the "Six Antitheses" discourse, a pattern develops, for six times¹⁶ Jesus uses the phrase, "You have heard that it was said... I say to you." Jesus appears to be doing this in order to show his own unique rendering of the Law, distinct from the Pharisees, and, at the same time, uncovering the true intent of the Law.¹⁷ Traditionally rabbis would have never intentionally placed their sayings in tension with a quotation from Scripture, but only against other rabbinical teachings. Commentators note that, by placing his own ethical standards against traditional Mosaic teachings, Jesus is claiming a messianic authority and as one who seeks to initiate a new kingdom of God.¹⁸

The Six Antitheses discourse also reveals how Jesus leads his local faith community and how he would seek to shape his new followers for a new missional-incarnational calling for a new era of faithfulness. Jesus is the messiah and lawgiver of a new Israelite community. The former practices of faith formation were no longer appropriate for their contemporary context. Jesus's community needed a robust vision as they imagined life as God's people under the Roman Empire, and in particular, after the

¹⁶ Matthew 5:21-22, 27-28, 31-32, 33-34, 38-39, and 43-44.

¹⁷ *WBC*, 111.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* Note: Jesus' unique treatment of the Law of Moses here further develops the hypothesis of Matthew comparing Jesus to Moses. Moses only spoke the words of God given to him; Jesus speaks on his own behalf. (*NICNT*, 157)

destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, which Jesus had anticipated.¹⁹ Jesus is not just a theologian or lawgiver, here in this passage. In this passage, the reader captures Jesus in a pastoral role, seeking to shape the minds and hearts of his people as they inhabited a strange, new world.

Within this new world, God's people would be required to be both benevolent towards those outside of the faith and purposeful to subvert the world's current order. Jesus's audience would have ascertained this tension at the conclusion of the passage in Matthew 5:38-48. In this challenging text, Jesus asks followers to love those who are their enemies (Matthew 5:43-48) and to provide creative ways of protest against those outside of the faith, (Matthew 5:38-42). On the one hand, Jesus's command for the disciples to love all is based upon God's common grace, or the idea that God allows rain to fall on the righteous and the unrighteous.²⁰ Instead of just loving those within their own nationality, which is what the Jews felt was needed for faithfulness, Jesus asks them to love enemies as well.

On the other hand, Jesus appears to believe this open display of love has the ability to remake the world, "the implication is that when the disciples offer indiscriminate love and graciousness to the unrighteous, it has the potential to bring them into right relation by inviting the estranged one out of enmity into the path of forgiveness, repentance, and reconciliation."²¹

¹⁹ Matthew 24:1-35.

²⁰ Matthew 5:45.

²¹ Barbara E. Reid, "Which God is With Us?" *Interpretation* Volume 64, Issue 4 October 2010, 381-382.

An Honors Course on Leadership?

After considering all of this, one might ask, “Whom is this sermon directed towards? Who is required to follow Jesus in these ways?” R.T. France says that the Sermon on the Mount is a private discussion between Jesus and his disciples, rather than with the whole crowd noted in the latter parts of Matthew 4. It is as if Jesus summons a private retreat with his followers “in the hills” to help shape them for kingdom life.²² The Sermon on the Mount is intended for the apprentices of Jesus, those who seek to not only hear what Jesus teaches, but to those who intend on following Jesus’s ways.²³

Ultimately, as Jesus’s followers observe the way Jesus engages traditional teachings, examines current sociological settings, and evaluates what would be “good news” for the particular time and context, Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount allows Jesus’s soon-to-be-shepherds to learn how to lead their own future faith communities. “These examples are not casuistic new laws, but models for the disciples to adapt to their varied post-Easter situations... The disciples are left to their own responsibility to be ‘Jesus theologians.’”²⁴ As Hans Betz states,

Hearing and doing the sayings of Jesus, therefore, means enabling the disciple to theologize creatively along the lines of the theology of the master. To say it pointedly: The [Sermon on the Mount] is not law to be obeyed, but theology to be intellectually appropriated and internalized, in order then to be creatively developed and implemented in concrete situations in life.²⁵

²² *NICNT*, 156-157. Hauerwas and Willimon affirm this observation, *Resident Aliens*, 76-77.

²³ *NIC*, 189.

²⁴ *NIC*, 189.

²⁵ Hans Bieter Betz, *Synoptische Studien* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1992), 91.

To conclude the first section of this chapter, Jesus illustrates the way one could faithfully read the Scripture and yet be particularly present within their own context. Jesus's challenge for reading and explaining Scripture is the challenge for God's people within every generation. That challenge can be summed up with a common question, "How can we be God's people today while seeking to be inspired by Scripture texts written in contexts that are distinct from our own?" The next section will provide a brief overview of a help form of faithful bible reading, namely Incarnational hermeneutics.

Reading Scripture within a Postmodern Context

In Matthew 5:17-48, Jesus practices the process of a faithful, yet timely reading of Scripture as he seeks to lead his people in their current moment. Evangelical Christians retain the emphasis of being faithfully present to God's word and faithfully present in God's world as ambassadors of God's grace within their own local and particular contexts. As chapter three briefly examined, Evangelicalism's recent history has been shaped by vibrant discussions on how one should read the Bible faithfully today. These discussions have alienated Evangelicals from one another, even within the same local congregation. These debates and controversies over the interpretation of the Bible is a sign of significant changes within the Evangelical world.

Different Types of Readings within a Christian Community

Kirk suggests that the normative treatment of Scripture within Modernity, and Evangelicalism's past, was built around the philosophical idea of Foundationalism, i.e. that the Bible is the basis of all knowledge. Those who prescribed to biblical inerrancy

surmised that if the Bible cannot be trusted as the source of all knowledge, then the information that the Bible provides for eternal salvation, the most important category of all (some would say), would also be under question.²⁶ Kirk notes, as culture has shifted towards a Postmodern mood, Evangelical believers recognize Scripture as part of the whole that led them to committing to following Jesus, “For this generation (in which I include myself), a network of relationships and experiences fills the primary role of confirmation of our beliefs that earlier evangelicals would have located primarily in ‘objective’ truths such as inerrancy of Scripture or, to take another example, proofs of the resurrection.”²⁷

McKnight notes the tension that has developed recently with these multiple types of hermeneutics within local congregations. On the one hand, pastors were taught a formal process of hermeneutics and biblical exegesis during their theological training. This hermeneutic involves a scientific process to unearth, if possible, the original authorial meaning of passage of Scripture. However, the average congregation member reads the Bible from a devotional vantage point, seeking to hear from God personally and to have one’s own faith formed through the text.

This tension presents a profound struggle within the local congregation. Professional clergy and faithful congregation members conclude with different ideas of what the text of Scripture “means.”²⁸ These multiple readings have the potential to cause

²⁶ Kirk, *Jesus have I have Loved*, Kindle Electronic Edition: Introduction, Location 168.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, *Jesus I have Loved*, Kindle Electronic Edition: Introduction, Location 181.

²⁸ From Corcoran, 106-111. McKnight develops five ways devotional reading is actualized within the North American context: Bible as Law book, Bible as a Collection of Blessings and Promises, Bible as Rorschach inkblots (“What do you see in the passage?”), Bible as a Puzzle to be put together through timelines of history or systematic theology, and Bible reading through a Maestro (i.e. picking one genre, section, or author from the Biblical text as primary influence. The example that McKnight gives is how

friction, bewilderment, or apathy concerning the Scripture text. Indeed, how can a pastor do his or her best to exegetically present the text and inspire the congregation to engage in the spiritual practice of personal Bible reading?

God Leads Through Scripture Reading

Christianities of many kinds affirm the central use of Scripture within the life of the believer and the community. There is a general consensus that God leads the church through the faithful study, reading, preaching, and liturgical use of Scripture. Through a faithful reading of Scripture, the church develops a robust vision and mission to engage God's world. As the church gives its attention and devotion to the biblical text, through the inspiration of God, the church is allowed to envision the world that the Bible anticipates. This world is not particularly the cultural world of the Bible nor is it the current setting that the church finds itself. The world that the Holy Spirit seeks to usher in, through the guidance of the Scripture is, "the eschatological world intended by God for creation that is disclosed, displayed, and anticipated in the pages of the Bible... concretely and particularly centered on the present and future lordship of Jesus Christ." This imaginative, creative, and missional-incarnational reading of Scripture is what John Franke calls, "eschatological realism."²⁹

However, even the casual appraisal of how different Evangelicals read the Scripture can show there are multiple approaches and expectations that surface in the reading of the Scripture text. In the past, these different readings caused individual

Evangelicals tend to make the Apostle Paul their maestro.) McKnight develops this further in his book, *The Blue Parakeet: Rethinking How You Read the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 67.

²⁹ Franke, *Manifold Witness*, 77, 80.

Christians to pick and choose between denominational affiliations and faith groups. However, as chapter 3 suggests, in this era of Emergence, these different readings are no longer sanctioned off into different church communities, multiple readings take place within the same local community. Indeed, the “trans-denominational” element of Evangelicalism leads to the construction of these mosaic communities. In the midst of this plurality, how can pastors and leaders promote the Scripture as God’s word, in the midst of those who hear the Scripture differently? Can this plurality of hearings still lead a community into faithful mission and wrestle through substantial biblical issues that emerge from generation to generation?

Comfort with a Plural Hearing of the Bible

The faithful reading of the Scripture text is as much as a sociological issue as it is a theological issue. When one suggests an interpretive preference of Scripture, he or she also lifts up a certain time/era of church history when such a reading was important. In many cases, the vibrant dedication to such an interpretation is not so much a theological reason, but a sociological one. One is not really defending what the text is saying but defending his or her identity that is constructed within the theological ideas he or she feels the Bible identifies. Kirk affirms this complex and challenging scenario.

Contextualizing is always the interpretive task of the church – and what we as modern readers are always doing with the Bible whether we acknowledge it or not. There is no ‘straight’ reading of the bible that does not require adaptation for our own context. There is no ‘doing what the Bible says’ that is not run through a grid of associated theological assumptions. There is no ‘adherence to the Word of God’ that does not spring from within a prior understanding of what it looks like to live the life of a faithful follower of Jesus Christ.³⁰

³⁰ Kirk, *Jesus have I Loved*, Kindle Electronic Edition: Chapter 10, Locations 3757-3760.

As a pastor seeks to create unity among diversity, he or she needs to allow a plurality of readings and hearings to help shape the community for faithful witness in its current moment. In the next section, this author will quickly provide suggestions that will help a pastor to create such a setting.

First, a pastor must model and encourage humility within the local community. McKnight appeals for both a passionate reading of the whole text of Scripture, along with the need for epistemic humility. McKnight uses the Jewish theology of Scripture, “Torah, oral Torah, and Torah of all-in-all... God’s written Word, the divinely guided interpretation of God’s Word, and the limitation of both written Word and interpreted Word for articulating the utter infinitude of God’s truth.”³¹ From McKnight’s vantage point, Scripture reading is accompanied by great mystery; for even the Apostle Paul, author of Scripture himself saw the truth of God as one who looks through a glass dimly.³²

McKnight provides the Bible reader with a helpful image as to how humble readings take place. Reading and commenting on the Bible is to be much like the open-source format like Wikipedia. McKnight contends that the whole of Scripture is a collection of “wiki-stories” of those who seek to follow God in their own time, place, and context, or “the ongoing reworking of the biblical Story by new authors so that they can speak the old story in new ways for their days... the Bible is like this: it is an ongoing series of retellings of the One True Story that never has a final, unrevisable shape.”³³ As a

³¹ Corcoran, *Church in Present Tense*, 114-115.

³² 1 Corinthians 13:12.

³³ Corcoran, *Church in Present Tense*, 118.

Christian, one is profoundly impacted by certain “plots” in this process of retelling the Bible’s main story. Therefore, a Christian should be open to a plurality of hearings and readings, not contending for his or her own plot as the one that holds absolute sway over biblical interpretation. This is what Roger Olson would call, “tradition but not traditionalism.” One should read the Bible both in touch with a certain stream of interpretation, but also open for fresh expressions of traditional truth.³⁴

John Franke encourages Bible readers to not read the Scripture in order to systematize the content or construct an interpretive grid to construct universal doctrine. Instead, read the Scripture,

Confident that the Spirit speaks through Scriptures in order to create a communal setting that bears contemporary witness to God’s future intentions for creation I the midst of the present circumstances... we must bear witness to the gospel in ways that are appropriate to our particular circumstances... Our task is not that of simply repeating the words of the Bible, but rather of speaking the words that we must speak today, in our particular circumstances, based on the stories and teachings of Scripture.³⁵

Peter Enns suggests that this is how the Apostle Paul read the Scripture text. Paul’s audience included both Jewish and Gentile audiences. In order for Paul to construct a Scripture narrative that illustrates the story of God’s redemption for both audiences, Paul could not start with Abraham (the starting point for the Jews), but with Adam (the character in the biblical narrative that would include all people, including Gentiles).³⁶ Enns notes that by the standard of occurrences, Adam is not a central figure in the Old Testament Scripture, for after Genesis 5 Adam is only mentioned once, that in

³⁴ Roger E. Olson, *How to be Evangelical Without being Conservative* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 36-40.

³⁵ Franke, *Manifold Witness*, 83-84.

³⁶ Romans 5:12-21; 1 Corinthians 15:21-22, 44-49.

the genealogies of 1 Chronicles. Enns notices that Paul’s use of Genesis is creative and re-frames Genesis from what appears to be its original agenda. In the end, Enns suggests that,

The ambiguous nature of the Adam story in Genesis, Adam’s functional absence in the Old Testament, the creative energy invested into the Adam story by other ancient interpreters, and Paul’s creative use of the Old Testament in general – we will approach Paul’s use of the Adam story with the expectation of finding there is not a plain reading of Genesis but a transformation of Genesis.³⁷

This type of reading of Scripture is what Enns calls an “Incarnational” observance of the text. Using the image of God’s incarnation from Philippians 2:6-11, Enns suggests that Scripture provides a moment where,

God condescends to speak, empty of all beauty and perfection, more like a humble servant subject to the lowest status... There is a reason why Scripture looks the way it does, so human, so much a part of its world: it looks this way to exalt God’s power, not our power... The “creatureliness” of Scripture is not an obstacle to be overcome so that God may finally be seen. Rather, just as Christians proclaim concerning Christ, it is through creatureliness that God can be seen.³⁸

To see the Bible in parallel terms with the incarnation of Christ retains the local church community to a “more willing recognition that the expression of our confession of the Bible as God’s word has a provisional quality to it. By faith, the church confesses the Bible is God’s word. It is up to Christians of each generation, however, to work out what that means and what words work best to describe it.”³⁹

³⁷ Peter Enns, *The Evolution of Adam: What the Bible Does and Doesn’t Say About Human Origins* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2012), Kindle Electronic Edition, Chapter 6, Locations 2728-2735, 2740-3083.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, Kindle Electronic Edition: Conclusion, Locations 3220-3235.

³⁹ Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), Kindle Electronic Edition: Chapter 5, Locations 3318-3321.

Kevin Vanhoozer suggests a “unity-in-plurality” reading of Scripture, for even the Scripture itself presents a spectrum of thought within its own record,

Strictly speaking, the diverse canonical parts neither contradict nor cohere with one another, for both these notions presuppose either the presence or absence of conceptual consistency. But this is to assume that the various books of the canon are playing the same kind of language game. They are not. Two notions that occupy different conceptual systems are nevertheless compatible if neither negates the other.⁴⁰

Plurality is not relativism, but it is the “intention and will of God as a faithful express of truth.”⁴¹ As Lamin Sanneh affirms, “Pluralism can be a rock of stumbling, but for God it is the cornerstone of the universal design.”⁴²

To many Evangelicals who have been shaped within the framework of Modernity that focuses on a systematic development of Biblical theology and that seeks to have answers for all of the answers, plurality of reading will sound much like relativism. There are indeed significant challenges for local communities to consider how the one biblical text can create a vast array of interpretive possibilities. For the Evangelical, however, the way in which the Bible works in the process of transformation is more crucial than specific, technical differences of doctrine. As Peter Rollins suggests, the journey of being a Christian is to become one who “believes in the right way – that is, believing in a loving, sacrificial and Christlike manner... Thus orthodoxy is no longer (mis)understood as the opposite of heresy but rather is understood as a term that signals a way of being in the world rather than a means of believing things about the world.”⁴³ The way knowledge

⁴⁰ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 275.

⁴¹ Franke, *Manifold Witness*, 88.

⁴² Lamin Senneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), 27.

is evaluated, when inspired by love, is not what a person knows, but how what that person claims to know is inspiring them to love. Two people could have identical beliefs, but it may cause one to become angry and the other kind. The issue is not the objective belief, but the way the belief works.⁴⁴ In the same way, when a community has a plurality of readings of Scripture, the analysis of the differences should not be within the belief propositions, but how those beliefs are either causing the believer to be more or less loving, and thus more Christlike.

Actors in the Unfolding Story

A faithful reading of the Scripture within a diverse community should be framed around the idea that the Scripture is a story to inhabit, rather than a constitution that provides propositional truths for believing people. The story of Scripture is a unique story, for it does not round off towards a complete ending; it illustrates a still unfolding narrative that absorbs each, new generation. N.T. Wright suggests the reading of Scripture is the church's way, "to be refreshed in our memory and understanding of the story within which we ourselves are actors, to be reminded where it has come from and where it is going to, and hence what our part within it ought to be."⁴⁵ This sacred narrative is a "multilayered, five-act hermeneutic model" that helps the Bible reader find his or her own place of faithfulness within the story, all the while, staying connected to the other parts of the story, as well.⁴⁶ This type of reading leads to faithful mission.

⁴³ Peter Rollins, *How (Not) To Speak of God* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2006), 2.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 65-72.

⁴⁵ NT Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God: How to Read the Bible Today* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 116.

The wisdom commended in scripture itself suggests that we will not go about this work simply by telling people what the Bible says. In the power and wisdom of the Spirit, we must so understand the priorities of the gospel and the way in which they work to pull down strongholds that we can articulate for ourselves, addressing particular context and settings, the challenge of the God who loves the world so much that he longs to rescue it from folly, oppression, and wickedness. Scripture's authority is thus seen to best advantage in its formation of the mind of the church, and its stiffening of our resolve, as we work to implement the resurrection of Jesus, and so to anticipate the day when God will make all things new, and justice, joy and peace will triumph.⁴⁷

In conclusion, Jesus's own interaction with the biblical text, as he sought to be faithfully present within his own community and cultural moment, allowed him to not only be faithful to the tradition before him, but to also find creative means to be faithfully present to God's mission in his own time. The writers of the New Testament, like Paul, incorporated an Incarnational reading of the Scriptures, allowing God's message to condescend into the soil of their own environment as they sought to be the faithful people of God. The Evangelical task of reading Scripture is to pronounce the gospel message with the text, leading the community to conform to the ongoing mission of God within creation. As local congregations encounter conflicted interpretations from the text, even from within their own community, the goal of transformation, or how the interpretation works towards the individual embodying love for God and for others, should be the ultimate test. As McKnight has suggested, this type of reading allows the church to read with tradition, both embracing its heritage of faithful Bible reading, all the while, allowing God to speak in fresh, new ways in a fresh new context.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 122-123. The five acts of Wright's model are: Creation, Fall, Israel, Jesus, and the Church. Scot McKnight has a similar structure in *The Blue Parakeet*, 67.

⁴⁷ Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God*, 116-117.

As the local church community engages in faithful reading and faithful mission, it forms into the Body of Christ, sent on God's mission within its local context. As Evangelicalism seeks to embody God's mission in a new cultural context, inevitably emerging ecclesiologies will form. These emerging ecclesiologies have qualities both of the movement's past and new elements that form in the new context. The next chapter will investigate two ecclesiologies emerging or "coming up from the soil," of this cultural environment, namely the Emergent and Missional-Incarnational church ecclesiologies.

CHAPTER SIX

ECCLESIOLOGY: EMERGING THEMES- MISSIONAL-INCARNATIONAL AND EMERGENT CHURCHES AND DISCIPLE MAKING

This project has sought to imagine a re-calibration of Evangelicalism within a significantly new cultural context. In review, Evangelicalism has historically been able to adjust to the significant need within each generation. In this current setting Evangelicalism is in an antagonistic struggle with American culture. However, there are evidences of significant movements that are discerning a new faithfulness within this cultural make up, ones that have an ecclesiology that comes up from the soil of this cultural context. This chapter seeks to evaluate two significant ecclesiologies that are dedicated to such an end, namely Missional-Incarnational and Emergent ecclesiologies.

Missio Dei

Both the Missional-Incarnational church and Emergent church discussions find their orientation within the theological category of *Missio Dei*. The much anticipated modern missions movement in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had failed in its hope to evangelize the whole world. In the background, Karl Barth and other Neo-Orthodox theologians developed the idea of missions with a full and robust theocentric center. Barth described the Triune God as the source of all mission, highlighting the themes of relational, incarnational, and cosmic reconciliation. Karl Hartenstein, a

contemporary of Barth, coined the phrase *Missio Dei*, or the idea the triune God is the God on mission in this world through “sending acts.”¹

Evangelicalism initially resisted this rendering of mission because, during the Liberal/Fundamentalist controversies of the early twentieth century, *Missio Dei* resembled the Social Gospel movement that was open to humanitarian progress but not uniquely Christian in its mission and confession. However, the works of John Stott and Lesslie Newbigin re-introduced the Evangelical world to the grand narrative of God on mission in the earth, and, correspondingly, the church should be the people of God as those who are, “culturally sensitive and yet radically countercultural,”² or to be “conduits of God’s *common* grace so that they can be conduits of God’s *saving* grace.”³

At the heart of the idea of *Missio Dei* is Jesus’s message of the Kingdom of God. A fresh telling of the Kingdom of God helped the church to understand that one does not necessarily “build” or “expand” the Kingdom. Both of these references connote the power and privilege elements of Christendom. The New Testament references of the Kingdom of God speak of a different posture and expectation. The Kingdom is to be “entered” or to be “received.” The Kingdom is a gift that one receives and a place that one dwells and belongs.⁴ The church is not synonymous with the Kingdom of God, but

¹ Two examples of these sending acts would be the Incarnation (John 1:14) and the sending of the Church (John 20:21). *Missio Dei*, in shorthand form, is the idea of God dwelling in triune community and on mission. *Missio Dei* is the idea of God being “open in an ongoing movement of generosity. Creation and redemption are the overflow of God’s triune life.” (*Mission-shaped Church*, 85)

² W Rodman MacIlvaine III, “What is the Missional Church Movement?” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 167 (Mar 2010), 98-100.

³ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁴ Guder, *Missional Church*, 93-95. A biblical example of Jesus’s kingdom invitation is found in Luke 18:17, 22-25, 29-30.

the church is a people brought into being because of God's Kingdom reign, through the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. J.C. Hoekendijk affirms, "The church cannot be more than a sign... pointing away from herself to the Kingdom; she lets herself be used for and through the Kingdom in the *oikoumene* [the whole inhabited earth]." ⁵ Within the idea of *Missio Dei*, the church is "centrifugal (flowing out)," instead of "centripetal (flowing in)." ⁶

This idea of God on mission in the world created opportunities for a fresh, new posture for the American church. As local churches began to experience the changes within modern culture, in particular culture's decreasing involvement and interest in the life of the church, a vibrant discussion developed in order to ascertain what type of a church would emerge or come up from the soil of this new cultural setting. The middle to last part of the twentieth century developed into a window of opportunity for the church to experiment with new ways to do church. Evangelicalism, as described in chapter 3, went through seismic shifts through this experimentation process. As the next section will illustrate, two vibrant movements, Missional-Incarnational church and Emergent church, that have emerged from this experimentation. Both have at their core the impulse of *Missio Dei*, and as this author suggests, are signs of Evangelical faithfulness within the Cultural Postmodern context.

⁵ J.C. Hoekendijk, *The Church Inside Out*, ed. L.A. Hoedemaker and Pieter Tijmes, tr. Isaac C. Rottenberg (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1966), 43.

⁶ Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 50.

American Evangelical Landscape over the past 20 years: Development and Designation of the Emergent Church and Missional-Incarnational Church

The Church Growth Movement in America desired to capture the attention of the Baby Boomer generation in the suburbs of America, drawing them back to church. The Boomers returned to church after starting their own families, so local churches used creative seeker-sensitive techniques, from architecture and strategic marketing in order to create a relaxed, nonthreatening, environment for attracting this large sector of American society.

However, the generation following the Baby Boomers, the GenXers, did not embrace the seeker-sensitive approach of their predecessors. In response, an Evangelical foundation called *The Leadership Network* was assembled to address the perceived challenges of reaching the GenX population, a generation that desired experiential faith practices, global-mindedness, and creativity and invention.⁷

Richard Flory and Donald E. Miller note four major sociological elements within the GenX subculture that are involved with a potential church experience for GenXers. First, GenXers, who were raised by parents who challenged authority, had developed a deep skepticism towards denominationalism and religious institutionalism. Secondly, the rise of globalism and the advancement of technology provided access to more information than ever before, allowing the decision-making capability for GenXers to

⁷ Tony Jones, *The Church is Flat: The Relational Ecclesiology of the Emerging Church Movement* (Minneapolis, MN: The JoPa Group, 2011), 36-37. See also Richard Flory and Donald E. Miller, *Finding Faith: The Spiritual Quest of the Post-Boomer Generation* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008). Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger note that the Boomers appear to be the last generation to embrace “a modern church service that is linear, word based, and abstract, whereas Gen-Xers desire rituals, visuals, and touch.” (Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 22)

bloom at a younger age. Third, the moral failures of leaders in culture in general, and in the church in particular, made GenXers skeptical of the authenticity of particular religion. Finally, the influence of Postmodernism challenged any religion's claim of universal, absolute truth, and made GenXers despondent towards morality altogether.⁸

The Rise of the Emerging Church Movement

Emergent church planter and thinker Doug Pagitt's became involved in *The Leadership Network* and the *Young Leaders Network* to facilitate an open discussion of the effects of Postmodernity within the GenX demographic, and correspondingly, with their disdain for Evangelical Christianity. However, friction began to build between the parent organization, *The Leadership Network*, and the *Young Leader's Network* because of the differences in methods and theology between the two entities. Both Pagitt's exit from *The Leadership Network* to plant Solomon's Porch (an iconic Emergent Church in Minneapolis, MN), and Brian McLaren's book *A New Kind of Christian*,⁹ a popular but controversial book published under *The Leadership Network* moniker, brought a permanent separation between *The Leadership Network* and the Emerging conversation. *The Leadership Network* continues to engage in a conversation about how to do faithful and creative ministry within the twenty-first century context. Many books written in conjunction with *The Leadership Network* currently engage in the Missional-

⁸ Tony Jones, *The Church is Flat: The Relational Ecclesiology of the Emerging Church Movement* (Minneapolis, MN: The JoPa Group, 2011), 37-38. See also, Tickle, *Emergence Christianity*, 97-102. See also Tony Jones, *The New Christians*, 67-68.

⁹ Brian D. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001).

Incarnational Church discussion, which resembles traditional conservative Evangelical theology.¹⁰

Shortly after the separation, the *Emergent Village* was launched to become the new home for the Emergent/Emerging discussion and, with a publishing partnership with *Youth Specialties*, began to gather church leaders from both Protestant mainline denominations and other Evangelical churches in a loosely connected network. Within the next several years, the *Emergent Village* grew in popularity as the Emergent expression of Christian spirituality was able to sell popular books and as the authors and pastors were given opportunity to appear at major conferences.¹¹

Another sign of a fracturing within Emergence Christianity was the attempt to separate “Emerging” and “Emergence.” After McLaren’s controversial book, *A New Kind of Christianity*,¹² a host of Christians who were formerly a part of the Emergent/Emerging conversation began to distance themselves from the “Emergent” group and claimed the moniker “Emerging” instead. The most notable among these leaders were mega church pastor and Acts 29 Church Planting Network leader Mark Driscoll and popular professor and theologian, Dr. Scot McKnight.¹³

¹⁰ Some of these titles include, Hugh Halter and Matt Smay, *The Tangible Kingdom: Creating Incarnational Community* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2008) and *The Tangible Kingdom Primer* (CRM Empowering Leaders, 2009), Neil Cole, *Organic Church: Growing Faith Where Life Happens* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2005) and *Church 3.0: Upgrades for the Future of the Church* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2010), and Reggie McNeal, *Missional Communities: The Rise of the Post-Congregational Church* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2011).

¹¹ Jones, *The Church is Flat*, 46-48.

¹² Brian D. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity: Ten Questions that are Transforming the Faith* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010).

¹³ Tickle, *Emergence Christianity*, 143.

Comparison of Emergent and Missional-Incarnational Spiritualities

This author observes that these two movements, Emergent/Emerging Church and Missional-Incarnational Church, have the same impulse with different applications. Each movement has found opportunities to adjust to contours of culture in order to be faithful in Christian mission within their unique, local context. These movements display evidence that, though Evangelicalism has been fractured in the recent decades, the movement is again adjusting in order to create a fresh of church within this current cultural context.

The following section will investigate the Missional-Incarnational and Emergent spiritualities and list their values that allow them each to engage the twenty-first century context. First, this writer will examine spiritual practices¹⁴ that both Missional-Incarnational and Emergent movements share and then will highlight two important differences between the two movements.

The Continual Conversion of the Church

Both Missional-Incarnational and Emergent churches celebrate the idea of God moving in fresh ways within the Earth. Missional-Incarnational church thinkers refer to the current American environment as in “liminality,” or “in between time.” After the erosion of Christendom, the need to engage a multi-faith, pluralistic culture demands a

¹⁴ By “practices” this writer borrows Darrell L. Guder’s definition, “socially established cooperative human activities carried in traditions that form people in a way of life... a community that embodies the language, rituals, and moral practices from which particular form of life grows.” (Guder, *Missional Church*, 153). See also Stanley Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life: A Study in Theological Ethics*, rev. ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 210-211.

new ecclesiology.¹⁵ Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch forecast a 2nd Reformation that is immanent, causing the Church to re-consider what it means to “be church” in mission and for Christians to see themselves primarily as missionaries.¹⁶ This re-calibration is nothing short of revolution, a significant shift in the way the church experiences Jesus for, “Christology determines missiology, and missiology determines ecclesiology.”¹⁷ To put it another way, the church does not go on mission, but mission gives birth to the church. As the church launches new mission within the American context, a new church will emerge from its soil.

Darrell Guder, along with others, definitively states that, Christianity has moved (or has been moved) away from its position of dominance within Western culture. His assessment is not simply because of the loss of the numbers of members within churches, but also the loss of power and influence within society.¹⁸ Ed Stetzer and David Putman note that Evangelicals may not be aware of the significant shift in Western culture from Modernism to Postmodernism because the Evangelical church has been able to insulate themselves from these profound changes, up until now. Stetzer and Putman are concerned for the future of Evangelical churches because they appear to not be prepared to engage a new cultural context.

¹⁵ Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, 7-9. Frost and Hirsch provide a helpful explanation for church from Pentecost to the Edict of Milan, to Christendom, to Emerging Missional. See also Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), 151. Hirsch adds that liminality requires apostolic leadership to lead the church into a new climate and social order.

¹⁶ Frost and Hirsch, *The Shape of Things to Come*, 15-16.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁸ Guder, *Missional Church*, 1.

Evangelical churches, firmly rooted in modernity, sit in a culture that has moved beyond modern ideas. Language has changed, music has changed, and the worldview has changed. Our churches need to decide whether they will be outposts of modernity in a new age or embrace the challenge of breaking a new cultural code.¹⁹

The Emergent evaluation of this cultural moment is similar, however, expressed in a different way. As the church moves from the center to the fringe of culture, Emergent spirituality seeks to present Christianity beyond the common sacred/secular division of reality. For in doing so, Christianity moves beyond the private, separated spirituality, that it was often expressed in earlier generations. Emergents reject the division between sacred and secular, and seek to find opportunities for faith and culture to intersect, and in doing so, allow disciplines outside of traditional theology and ecclesiology to help the people of God discover truth where it can be found, and to see God at work within all things.²⁰

Emergent thinker Brian McLaren believes that American culture is in a unique setting, causing Christianity to investigate its values in a new world with profound challenges. This post-colonial culture has produced an environment that is pluralistic, relativistic, global, and uncertain. The former paradigm of church, in McLaren's mind, is unable to engage this culture faithfully because that paradigm was developed in within an era of time distinct from the current one. As a local pastor in the 1980's and 1990's, McLaren felt that there was something altogether real and altogether wrong with the way Christianity was lived in America. From his vantage point, Evangelicalism, yoked together with "neoconservative political ideology" as the dominant idea of American

¹⁹ Ed Stetzer and David Putman, *Breaking the Missional Code: Your Church Can Become a Missionary in Your Community* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 8.

²⁰ Jones, *The New Christians*, 75.

Christianity, presented a confusing idea of the Christian faith. McLaren and others are encouraged by a new American cultural climate for it affords the church to explore a new way of living the Christian faith.²¹ McLaren suggests that Christians must begin a new quest for faithfulness within a new culture.²² In the midst of this honest reflection, Emergent Christians retain the idea that God is still faithfully engaging God's world and is on mission to continue the work of redemption.

For these reasons, both Missional-Incarnational and Emergent spiritualities seek to re-imagine who the church is in this current environment. Guder emphasizes the "continual evangelization of the church" as a primary way the church can remain missional-incarnational in its posture within a changing context. Guder suggests that as believers continue to hear the proclamation of the gospel within their own present context, the church undergoes its own re-conversion experience.²³ As the local church continues to hear good news, and in turn, desires to be God's agents of good news, that community will be challenged to "witness" the gospel in fresh ways.²⁴ Hans Küng affirms this nomadic and pilgrim-like nature of the church, "The Church is essentially en route, on a journey, a pilgrimage. A Church which pitches its tents without looking out

²¹ McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity*, 5-13.

²² *Ibid.*, 18.

²³ Guder, *Missional Church*, 87. See also Hans Küng, *The Church* (Garden City, NY: Image, 1967), 22-24, 126.

²⁴ Guder, *Continuing*, 150-153.

constantly for new horizons, which does not continually strike camp, is being untrue to its calling.”²⁵

An Emergent perspective would prescribe the re-conversion experience as the church looking behind and ahead of itself in fresh ways. Tony Jones, using the work of Flory and Miller, surmises that the Emergent spirituality is seeking to innovate a fresh spirituality for this setting by looking to the past. Emergent churches are abandoning their inherited Christianity and are beginning to incorporate a panorama of different forms of liturgy and practice from all of church history. These churches seek a “clean break” from the predominate Evangelical ecclesiology shaped by the Church Growth Movement and have instead gathered churches that are smaller in size, organic in structure, high in commitment, and expressive in spirituality.²⁶ Emergent churches suggest these types of churches fit more strategically within Cultural Postmodernism.

Incarnational

The 1990’s were the years anticipated as, “The Evangelism Decade” within American Evangelicalism, showing vibrant signs of commitment to engage the public with the gospel message. However, with the high-volume of activity, local church attendance continued to decline as twenty-first century arrived. The decline has shown to be so steep that Leonard Sweet suggests that the United States has become third, only behind both India and China, on a list of countries with more nonbelievers.²⁷ Frost and

²⁵ Kūng, 176.

²⁶ Jones, *The Church is Flat*, 40.

²⁷ Leonard Sweet, *SoulTsunami: Sink or Swim in New Millennium Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 50.

Hirsch suggest that the issue behind the decline of church involvement is the methodology of ministry. They suggest the church adopted the values of attractional (creating the local church as a product for consumers to try), dualistic (seeking to separate the holy and profane), and hierarchical (bureaucratic, top-down leadership structure).²⁸ These values, however, did not help meet the expectation of the Evangelism decade, and as chapter 3 suggested, created antagonism within American culture.

In response, Frost and Hirsch contend for an ecclesiology that is incarnational, or creating the desire within the local church to “leave its own religious zones and live comfortably with non-church-goers.” Incarnational involvement is non-dualistic, seeking a spirituality that is holistic. Also, incarnational ministry demands a church leadership structure that is more apostolic in nature that allows more communal commitment and giftedness over the top-down hierarchy of church structures from the past.²⁹ The Missional-Incarnational church is always outward looking, always changing (as culture continues to change), and always faithful to the Word of God.³⁰ The church also has an incarnational identity, resulting in the re-imagining of the gospel with local context styles, terms, and ideas, “the interaction between the gospel and all human cultures is a dynamic one, and it always lies at the heart of what it means to be the church.”³¹

²⁸ Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, 17-21.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 30.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

³¹ Guder, *Missional Church*, 14.

In order for the church to have an incarnational posture, Stetzer and Putman offer a helpful axiom.

Simply put, being missional does not mean doing things the way we like them. It means to take the gospel into the context where we have been called... and to some degree, to let the church take the best shape that it can in order to reach a specific culture. However, the problem is our preferences. *You can't be missional and pick what you like at the same time.*³²

The primary occupation of the Missional-Incarnational church, then, is to consider what would be good news within its local setting. The Missional-Incarnational church is a “sent” church, a community less interested in traditional membership, but more occupied with serving its setting in mission. As the church moves away from the former idea of stationary and placed, it makes room to become a people where the reign of God is powerfully apparent.³³

Incarnational ministry presents the opportunity for the local church to have a different scorecard than the Church Growth Movement, which focused upon attendance, finances, and participation. Ed Stetzer and Thom Rainer suggest a new scorecard is needed for churches to evaluate these values. “When the church thinks it’s the destination, it also confuses the scorecard. The destination is life... Abundant life is lived out with loved ones, friends, and acquaintances in the marketplace, in the home, in the neighborhood, in the world.”³⁴ Instead of counting new baptisms, new members, and worship attendance, Stetzer and Rainer suggest a Missional-Incarnational model of evaluation that measures three areas: “Discern, Embrace, and Engage.” These practices

³² Stetzer and Putman, *Breaking*, 50. Emphasis mine.

³³ Guder, *Missional Church*, 83-85.

³⁴ Reggie McNeal, *Missional Renaissance* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 16.

are a “Transformational Loop,” a pattern for local churches to remain faithful to their local context. A local church, then, seeking to ascertain their success in being a Missional-Incarnational church should evaluate their level of commitment to Discern, Embrace, and Engage.³⁵

The Emergent Church recommends incarnational engagement with the wider world, as well. Instead of focusing on *doing* church differently, Emergent thinkers suggest *communicating* Christianity differently within a changing American context. Tony Jones surmises, that the Emergent church is distinct from other forms of “fresh perspective” Christianities because it seeks to provide both innovative theology and innovative practices in the new cultural environment. Other forms of progressive church, Jones contends, are mere re-calibrations for new ways to do church.³⁶

The Emergent Church seeks to embrace a “Generous Orthodoxy,” not becoming preoccupied with minor differences between Christian streams, but embracing the wisdom and contributions from all Christian people.³⁷ McLaren refers to this process as “include and transcend,” looking to see the panorama of Christianity, treasuring each stream of the faith and realizing that the space that one inhabits today is appropriate and adequate, rather the only right answer.³⁸ In this way, McLaren attempts to be “post-critical,” or “to embrace the good in many traditions and historic streams of Christian

³⁵ Ed Stetzer and Thom S. Rainer, *Transformational Church: Creating a New Scorecard for Congregations* (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2010), 32-37.

³⁶ Jones, *The New Christians*, xix.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

³⁸ McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity*, 236-237.

faith, and to integrate them, yielding a new, generous, emergent approach that is greater than the sum of its parts.”³⁹

Emergents are open to the process of being evangelized, not just engaging in evangelism. Without seeking to be relativistic, nor dominating other faith communities, Emergents believe that within the Kingdom of God truth emerges in many places.⁴⁰ Peter Rollins suggests that in this particular environment, one does not have to change what one believes, but to change how one believes, “we must learn again how the test of faith is, from the beginning to end, evidenced in how we believe – that is, in how our beliefs challenge, transform and liberate the existence of others and ourselves. In short, how do our beliefs help to transform us into the image of Christ?”⁴¹

As Missional-Incarnational churches seek to engage the world around them, they develop unique physical spaces within culture to interact with non-Christians. These are spaces where a Christian and a non-Christian can naturally interact, meaningfully.⁴² In these spaces, the community members “lay aside their occupations and preoccupations, and they attend to one another. Hostility is converted into hospitality, strangers into friends, and enemies into guests.”⁴³ These spaces range from pubs, cafés, art galleries, etc. The hope is that, over a long period of natural interaction, friendships and faith can develop.

³⁹ Brian D. McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 18.

⁴⁰ Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 132-134.

⁴¹ Rollins, *How (Not) To Speak of God*, 125.

⁴² Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, 24.

⁴³ Guder, *Missional Church*, 179-180.

Along with shared spaces, Missional-Incarnational churches seek to engage in shared projects that connect a Christian community with other benevolent groups. As groups work together, opportunities for the normal separation between church and culture erode. Meaningful relationships emerge. Non-Christians can envision the Christian life, and are already being “discipled” and know what it means to be Christian, even before they officially decide to become a Christian. This commitment to shared spaces and projects reveal a common value in Missional-Incarnational churches, that people and places are more important than organizational, static strategies.⁴⁴

Mercy for the Stranger

At the heart of the posture of both Missional-Incarnational and Emergent church is showing kindness and respect to “the other,” those who are not necessarily a part of the Christian faith. In this pursuit, character formation is a central attribute of Missional-Incarnational ecclesiology.⁴⁵ As believers dwell together, with lives shaped by the fruit of the Spirit, they also serve as a source of healing and redemption for all of humanity. Christian community is not for the sole benefit of the participants, but also for the whole world.⁴⁶ Robert Mulholland Jr. affirms the missional-nature of character formation, “Spiritual formation is a process of being conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others.”⁴⁷ Roger Helland and Leonard Hjalmarson conclude, “Missional spirituality is

⁴⁴ Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, 25. See also Halter and Smay, *Tangible Kingdom*.

⁴⁵ Guder, *Missional Church*, 146-147.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 147-149.

⁴⁷ M. Robert Mulholland Jr., *Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 12.

an attentive and active engagement of embodied love for God and neighbor expressed from the inside out.”⁴⁸

As a protest to the competitive, individualistic, and private way of Western culture, the Missional-Incarnational church calls itself to public reconciliation. The gospel calls Christians to engage in reconciliation in both personal and cosmic settings. Believers are encouraged to right any wrongs that happen in any relationship in order that the community may realize love and peace.⁴⁹ In the words of Henri Nouwen, the church is called to help enemies to become friends (*hostis* to *hospes*).⁵⁰ The Missional-Incarnational church is eager to welcome the stranger because, from a biblical and theological perspective, the stranger can be a messenger from God. John Koenig notes the role of the “stranger” in each of the pivotal Christian narratives (Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost), “The child in the manger, the traveler on the road to Emmaus, and the mighty wind of the Spirit all meet us as mysterious visitors, challenging our belief systems even as they welcome us to new worlds.”⁵¹

The Emergent discussion is deeply interested in the role of Christianity within a multi-faith environment. McLaren challenges the “us versus them” thinking that shapes Western Christianity by reminding readers of the wide scope of the story of Jesus, that

⁴⁸ Helland and Hjalmarson, *Missional Spirituality*, 31.

⁴⁹ Guder, *Missional Church*, 166-168.

⁵⁰ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), 46.

⁵¹ John Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality: Partnership with Strangers as Promise and Mission* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1985), 5.

many of the New Testament writers envisioned a broad effect of the gospel of Jesus.⁵²

McLaren also reminds of the important role of “the outsider” character in many biblical texts, “Outsider characters... prove themselves more just and godly than the religious insiders. The Scriptures don’t minimize their goodness, but rather celebrate it.”⁵³

McLaren particularly draws insight from Paul’s discourse in Acts 17, surmising “Paul unifies everyone in a singular ‘us’ – people created by God... people who already living and moving and having their being in God... we could also go back to the original calling of Abraham in Genesis 12, noting that God does not choose some to the exclusion of others, but some for the benefit of others.”⁵⁴

McLaren suggests a different posture for Christians to have within a multi-faith world. According to McLaren, viewing Christianity as the only true faith creates much anxiety and paranoia, it promotes its proponents to envision a day where all “other people” are removed from the world, and it convinces believers to justify any means necessary to protect themselves from the threat of other religions.⁵⁵ McLaren sees the message of Jesus, and the climax of the Scriptural narrative as one which,

Sends us into the world with Christlike love for our neighbors of other religions, not suspicion; with humility and respect, not disdain; with a desire to understand, serve, and know not a desire to conquer and colonize; with passion to share – both

⁵² See Acts 17:24-28; Romans 5:12-21; 11:25-36; 2 Corinthians 5:14-21; 1 John 2:29; 3:14, 24; 4:7, 16-21.

⁵³ McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity*, 209-211.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 211.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 212-214.

receiving and giving – because we each have been given treasures for the common good.⁵⁶

McLaren, and others, remind Christians that doctrines were originally referred to as “healing teachings,” from the French word for “doctor.” Therefore, the particular beliefs of Christianity should not operate in imperialistic ways, but should rather unite, even when they are distinct. If believers can evaluate beliefs on “how” they operate, not just on “how” beliefs sound, perhaps beliefs can connect instead of divide.⁵⁷

Embodied Spirituality

Missional-Incarnational spirituality is experiential in its origin; it is a way of life and practice of faith. The Missional-Incarnational church rejects the spirit/body dualism from Greco-Roman origins and embraces the idea of holistic and integrated world prefers what Frost and Hirsch call, “Messianic Spirituality.”⁵⁸ Hellenistic thinking, which shaped much of institutional Christianity for the nearly seventeen centuries, is more “speculative in nature.” Hebraic thinking, in contrast, is more concrete and “earthy.” Messianic Spirituality is concerned with orthopraxy, primarily, and orthodoxy, secondarily. Messianic Spirituality is faith being worked out through action. Frost and Hirsch see

⁵⁶ McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity*, 223-224.

⁵⁷ Brian D. McLaren, *Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road?: Christian Identity in a Multi-Faith World* (New York: Jericho Books, 2012), 99-115. See also Bass, *Christianity After Religion*, 134-135.

⁵⁸ Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, 12.

Missional-Incarnational activity as sacrament; actions have intrinsic and significant value.⁵⁹

Frost and Hirsch call the church back to “Practical Monotheism,” of hallowing God in the everyday. The writings of the *Torah* reveal a God who is over all, a radical idea in the midst of era when nations surrounding Israel created different gods for fields, harvests, the Sun, etc. Practical Monotheism, in contrast, prevents the compartmentalization of life, a temptation that humanity has today; i.e. to have a god of the church, of politics, of economics, etc. Frost and Hirsch provide five Hebrew ideas to help rehearse Practical Monotheism in everyday life: *Shema*,⁶⁰ *shekinah*,⁶¹ *kavanah*,⁶² *kadesh*,⁶³ and *emunah*.⁶⁴ The blending of these ideas creates a new posture for an action-

⁵⁹ Ibid., 115, 121.

⁶⁰ *Shema*, is a common prayer recited by Jews from Deuteronomy 6:4-6. The idea expressed in the *Shema* is the call for God’s people to see Yahweh as lord over all things. This idea is expressed over and against the popular polytheism of other nations during the era of Ancient Judaism. See Frost and Hirsh, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, 126-127.

⁶¹ *Shekinah* comes from the Jewish Mystic idea of God’s glory. Jewish mystics believed *Shekinah* was God’s lover that was shattered and exiled through the fall. The sparks of God’s glory are exiled in all things. These sparks are on a journey back to God. As one acts out holiness, the sparks are freed and return to God. Frost and Hirsch link this idea to missional living, finding something sacred in all things. See Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, 128.

⁶² *Kavanah*, in short, is the process of being intentional about one’s deeds. *Kavanah* seeks to connect with God through individual deeds. Deeds are the pathway to connecting with God. It celebrates the intention behind the deed, not just the deed itself. It seeks to direct reason with love, combining the rational activities of the person alongside one’s passion and desires, too. See Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, 129-132.

⁶³ *Kadesh*, the idea of “hallowing the everyday.” Frost and Hirsh do not use the word *Kadesh* in their understanding of “hallowing the everyday,” but this author, for this explanation, uses the common Hebrew word for “holy,” namely, *Kadesh*. The Hebrews believed all things were “holy” and “not-yet-holy.” Instead of holiness by negation and avoidance, common in Christendom Spirituality, “holiness is primarily defined... by what we do in our hollowing of the everyday. All things, all events, all activities, can be occasions of hollowing.” See Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, 132. Gibbs and Bolger refer to this process as “Transforming Secular Space.” The Missional Church seeks to challenge the Modern philosophical notion of a “Sacred Space” where spirituality happens and a “Sacred Space” that is void of God. Missional Spirituality seeks to create holistic approaches. (Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 66-67.

oriented spiritual formation. A common critique against the Missional-Incarnational church is a lack of actual Bible teaching within this “active-faith” environment. Frost and Hirsch suggest that learning happens while on mission, “Too much Bible teaching happens to passive groups of Christians, many of whom are not involved in any kind of risky missional activity... Like Jesus’ first followers discovered, learning occurs when we need to draw on information because a situation demands it.”⁶⁵

Emergent thinkers find the opportunity to embody spiritual formation practices as moments to connect to people of other faiths, as well. Practices, serve as ways to create friendship instead of exclusion. Americans appear to be craving an embodied spirituality rather than a collection of propositional beliefs. McLaren finds the practice of one’s own faith to be an incredible opportunity to create friendships with those outside of the Christian faith. Instead of instigating multi-faith arguments and demonstrations, McLaren suggests that Christians engage in Christian practices that other faiths practice, as well. McLaren notes how the seven most widely practiced Christian disciplines are common in both Judaism and Islam: fixed-hour prayer, fasting, Sabbath, the sacred meal, pilgrimage, observance of sacred seasons, and giving. In this current, anxious cultural moment, these three faiths comprise of over half of the world’s population. McLaren urges Christian believers to allow the practicing of their own faith to inspire peaceful engagement with

⁶⁴ *Emunah* is the process of having an active faith and trust in God. Over and against the propositional nature of Christendom Spirituality, Frost and Hirsh suggest *Emunah* to encourage an encounter with Jesus, the living God, instead of a creed about the living God. In this regard, experience is primary and is supported, secondarily, by biblical doctrines. See Frost and Hirsh, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, 133. A.J. Swoboda, Adjunct Professor at George Fox Evangelical Seminary and pastor of Theophilus Church in Portland, OR says about doing theology, “Doing theology is building a small seahorse in order to build a house.”

⁶⁵ Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, 27.

one another, instead of antagonism and the threat of war. McLaren notes the interesting connection between these three Abrahamic faiths with the life of Abraham himself who “lived side by side with others who honored many different gods and practiced many different religions. And during his lifetime, Abraham... had an encounter with God that distinguished him from his contemporaries and propelled him into a mission, introducing a new way of life that changed the world.”⁶⁶

Community

The final characteristic that both Missional-Incarnational and Emergent churches share is community. Missional-Incarnational churches seek to build community for many reasons; perhaps the primary reason is the desire to reject the ideals of individualism and self-interest within the Modern framework of American society.⁶⁷ This idea of community and resisting individualism frames nearly everything that happens within both Missional-Incarnational and Emergent churches. For instance, the practice of discernment is conducted within the community, which is over and against the democratic decision-making process that is ordinary in American culture. Discernment honors the idea of communal giftedness; finding tension between hierarchy and egalitarianism, Missional-Incarnational churches honor the diversity of gifts and gift differentiation.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Brian D. McLaren, *Finding Our Way Again: The Return of the Ancient Practices* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008), 21-23. See also, Brian McLaren, Tripp Fuller and Bo Sanders from the Homebrew Christianity Podcast, Redondo Beach, CA, 7 March 2011. See also McLaren, *Naked Spirituality: A Life with God in 12 Simple Words* (New York: HarperOne, 2012).

⁶⁷ Guder, *Missional Church*, 145-146.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 172-174.

Tony Jones uses the phrase, “Envelope of Friendship” to describe the idea of community within the Emergent church. Far above the call to finer points of doctrine is the call for Christians to be ministers of reconciliation, therefore Emergents believe in having lives of reconciliation.⁶⁹ Community, as Emergents see it, is in direct confrontation with the individualistic ideals of Western culture. From their vantage point, the biblical idea of self is not to be protected, but to be sacrificed.⁷⁰ Even the process of doing theology is local, conversational, and it relies on the work of theology that has gone before it.⁷¹

The value of community also shapes leadership constructs with both Missional-Incarnational and Emergent churches. Emergent spirituality is complex and multi-faceted, for there is not a central governing body to decide what precisely is Emergent. Phyllis Tickle summarizes the common elements of Emergent spirituality.

Deinstitutionalism, nonhierarchical organization, a comfortable and informed interface with physical science; dialogical and contextual habits of thought; almost universal technological savvy; triple citizenship with its triple loyalties and obligations; a deeply embedded commitment to social justice with an accompanying, though largely unpremeditated, assumption of all forms of human diversity as the norm; and a vocation toward greenness.⁷²

⁶⁹ Jones, *The New Christians*, 78-79.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 80-81.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 112-113.

⁷² Tickle, *Emergence Christianity*, 137. Note: “triple-citizenship” is the commitment to both God, to the governing presence in a nation/state, and also a commitment towards one’s culture. “Culture” in this sense is, “an electronically enhanced and electronically facilitated place-of-being that is neither familial nor territorial nor inherently religious in its composition. We are who we hook up with wherever and whoever they are, and that is enough. Indeed, it is more than enough. It is prime, and, by extension, primal.” (Tickle, *Emergence Christianity*, 134).

Emergents, following the lead of Wikipedia and other open-source formats, resist hierarchy and bureaucracy and embrace relational forms of oversight. Open-source networking celebrates the disciplines of “open-access, trust, mutual accountability, agility, connectivity, and messiness.”⁷³ Many Missional-Incarnational churches use the Ephesians 4 model of plurality in leadership, in order to equip the body of believers for the work of ministry. This flattened and shared leadership construct helps believers within Missional-Incarnational churches to inhabit a communal spiritual formation climate.

Differences Between Missional-Incarnational and Emergent

The above section showed the important characteristics that both Missional-Incarnational and Emergent churches retain as ecclesial visions within the Postmodern contexts. These values help Evangelicals within each stream to embrace and Evangelical heritage that is provided opportunities of adjustment within a new cultural framework. This next section, however, will provide a brief examination of two significant differences between the Missional-Incarnational and Emergent ecclesiologies. After each differences are examined, this writer will provide a few concluding thoughts about Evangelical ecclesiology.

The Ecclesial Environment

Diana Butler Bass suggests a fresh vision for the new cultural environment that church inhabits. From her vantage point, Christianity creates a “belief gap” among their

⁷³ Jones, *The New Christians*, 180-190.

adherents. As advancements in science, history, psychology have challenged traditional Christian belief, Christians are at an interesting crossroads, “Do I continue to believe what the church has always told me or can I re-work my beliefs in light of new information, yet still retain Christian identity?” Christians who decide not to engage in this type of quest, Bass notes, becoming increasingly hostile towards “secular knowledge” and demand more doctrinal support for their traditional beliefs. This hostility turns into antagonism that eventually alienates Christians not only from non-adherents, but also with those within their own faith traditions.⁷⁴

Harvey Cox suggests that after about 400 CE, Christianity transitioned from the “Age of Belief,” where being Christian meant, “to live in his Spirit, embrace his hope, and to follow him in the work he had begun,” transitioned into the “Age of Reason” that emphasized creeds, catechisms, and the commitment to “tenets” about Jesus, “[Christianity went from] a movement of faith... into a phalanx of required beliefs.”⁷⁵ This “Age of Reason” continued until the twentieth century when Cox surmises that the church began to transition into the “Age of the Spirit” or the experience of Jesus.

Bass affirms that much of Christianity is still committed to the “Age of Reason” vision. To experience a sense of belonging among the Christian faith within that framework, Bass suggests, one needs to rightly believe, then rightly behave, and only then discover belonging. This pattern of “believe, behave, and belong” is constructed in the sacramental, liturgical, and theological life of Christian congregations within the

⁷⁴ Bass, *Christianity After Religion*, 107-108.

⁷⁵ Cox, *The Future of Faith*, 5-6.

American context. Bass notes how odd it is for any community to require this type of orientation for someone to enter the group and to feel a sense of being, “knit together.”⁷⁶ Christianity has not always been this way, Bass notes, and she suggests that Christians today should, “run the script backward,” and in doing so, engage in the “Age of the Spirit.”⁷⁷

The first stage of entry into a community, Bass suggests, is relationship. This initial embrace begins the path of transformation, “relationship leads to craft which leads to experiential belief. That is the path of becoming someone different.”⁷⁸ The process of “belong, behave, believe,” is the path that Jesus used in making his own disciples, Bass suggests, and it is the most helpful way to create Christian community, “We make friends, join a group, or enter into a romance because it is this person or these people who make our hearts lighter, bring joy and comfort, and make the world more interesting and bearable... People no longer join, they join in.”⁷⁹

The paradigm of “relational community, intentional practice, and experiential belief,” has the potential to create new expectations for what it means to be a part of a local church. Membership and an affirmation of belief statements or common behavior is not the starting point, but simply a desire to begin a journey of faith, even without having to have made an official confession of faith. Those who make up the “church” then are not necessarily Christians yet. In fact, Christians within local churches are merely “hosts”

⁷⁶ Bass, *Christianity After Religion*, 202.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 200-201.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 203.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 204-205.

for those who desire to discover what a life that follows Christ might be. This process of discipleship also helps a new believer connect “how” a disciple lives with “what” one believes, without creating a belief ideology that may or may not correlate with lifestyle and values.

Missional-Incarnational churches have a similar hope for strangers and those outside of the faith to join in to what the local church is doing for mission in order to discover Christ while they serve. Brandon Hatmaker, a Missional-Incarnational church pastor in Austin, TX, suggests that the unhelpful pattern in American churches is actually, “behave, believe, belong,” not “believe, behave, belong,” as Bass suggests. Hatmaker, then, suggests that churches create environments where nonbelievers “belong, believe, become.” In his paradigm, belief is not at the end of the process, but in the middle, and that right belief propels one to become the person God desires for them to be.⁸⁰

Stetzer and Putman suggest a similar process of assimilation and discipleship to help Christians embody the calling as “sent” people. First, a non-believer is given space to consider spiritual matters as a “seeker.” Next, a seeker makes a commitment to Christ through “believing” the gospel. After belief, the new believer experiences official “belonging” and relates well with other believers. The experience of belonging leads to a process of “becoming” a fully devoted Christ follower, experiencing freedom in Christ.

⁸⁰ Brandon Hatmaker, lecture, West Evangelical Free Church, Wichita, KS, October 19, 2012.

As the believer experiences freedom in Christ, they embody the call to “serve” and to help other seekers discover Christ.⁸¹

Multiple Citizenship or Multiple Conversions?

Another issue of difference between Emergent and Missional-Incarnational ecclesiology is the identity formation of the Christian believer. Phyllis Tickle notes how Christians have historically navigated through different citizenships, as Jesus said in the gospel narratives, “give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.”⁸² In Christendom, however, the two worlds blended together and it was assumed that if one was disloyal to the state it showed disloyalty to church, as well. As Christendom continues to erode, the dual citizenship idea emerges again within American culture as one discovers the importance of serving in both the local church and in the local community. However, with the integration of social networking technologies, a third citizenship has developed in American culture and is a core value for Emergent Christians.

This third citizenship is dedication to one’s own tribal moment, to its culture. Citizenship to culture is, “an electronically enhanced and electronically facilitated place-of-being that is neither familial nor territorial nor inherently religious in its composition. We are whom we hook up with wherever and whoever they are, and that is enough. Indeed, it is more than enough. It is prime and, by extension, primal.”⁸³ This hyper-

⁸¹ Stetzer and Putman, *Breaking*, 128-136.

⁸² Matthew 22:21.

⁸³ Tickle, *Emergence Christianity*, 133-134.

connected cultural commitment also gives way to the common value of “social justice” among Emergents, who would consider justice as common sense. In this third citizenship idea, a theme like social justice is no longer, “I did this for them,” as if the server and the one receiving service are distinct. Instead, an “I did this for us,” is uniquely considered. Tickle claims that this idea also shapes who Emergent groups are innately diverse in social make up and why Emergents tend to gather in urban centers of cities, in close proximity with others.⁸⁴ Emergents believe that the way we do church should be familiar with their friends within the cultural around the church. In this new cultural moment, Emergents believe, “Christians must dwell in culture now and point to God from within, not from without. Only in this way can culture be redeemed and secularization overcome.”⁸⁵ The process of discipleship, then, is to point Christians out into the world that surrounds them and to engage God’s world wherever God is already at work. This triple citizenship identity formation is a challenge for some local churches that remove themselves from cultural engagement in fear of temptation or syncretism.

In a similar, yet distinct move, Missional-Incarnational church leaders describe a multiple conversion process in order to help new Christians not only develop a personal faith commitment to Christ, but to also engage God’s world in mission. One of the main agendas of the Missional-Incarnational Church movement was to help Christians to consider missions as something more than the modern missions movement (with its emphasis on international missionaries as exclusively on mission), and to see all

⁸⁴ Ibid., 135-136.

⁸⁵ Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 79.

Christians as sent people, not just “senders” of foreign missionaries into foreign contexts. To this end Stetzer says there are two conversions that take place in this particular cultural alignment, a conversion into Christian community, and then a conversion to Christ at a later event.⁸⁶ Even from there, Missional-Incarnational church leaders prescribe further “conversions.” Brandon Hatmaker, a Missional-Incarnational church pastor mentioned earlier, suggests a process of three conversions in order to help an individual to engage in mission: conversion to Christ, conversion to the church, and then conversion to the mission of God in Christ.⁸⁷ Instead of retaining the sense of identity in three different spheres like the Emergent thinkers would suggest, Missional-Incarnational church leaders call their people to phase from one sense of identity to the next.

The ecclesiologies of Emergent and Missional-Incarnational churches are dedicated to constructing Christian identity within the soil of an American context that is significantly different than generations before. Each of these movements are trying to help their adherents not only imagine a robust Christian identity, but to also engage the world that is around them, a world that God loves and, as the idea of *Missio Dei* suggests, a world that God is vibrantly present to redeem and to recreate.

This writer would charitably suggest two course corrections for these two, meaningful ecclesiologies. First, Emergents must be careful not to further exacerbate the common issue that Westerns encounter with the construction of “multiple selves.” As Emergents try to help adherents develop an identity of three citizenships, Emergents must

⁸⁶ Stetzer and Putman, *Breaking*, 124.

⁸⁷ Brandon Hatmaker, lecture, West Evangelical Free Church, Wichita, KS, October 19, 2012. Note: this author is concerned with the need for three conversions, even with the liberal use of “conversion.” Perhaps the initial “gospel” presented to these new believers could include God’s mission for the world alongside the need for individual conversion.

also help individuals develop a robust self-differentiation while involved in these three citizenships, so that the individual does not get lost in the midst of maintaining “right standings” within the multiple citizenships. Indeed, having multiple selves that do not cohere with one another would not be good for one’s Christian formation, maturity, and mission.

For Missional-Incarnational churches, the requirement for right belief needs to be closely monitored in their process of discipleship and formation. Creating a sense of belonging in order to create moments for personal conversion can lead to a “bait and switch” experience for new believers. At one moment, a new believer could experience a profound sense of bewilderment because they assumed a local church community was going to be warm, affirming, and open, but along the way, communicate an exclusive, sectarian, and narrow belief system. The idea of multiple conversions is connected to this fear, as well. This writer suggests that the Missional-Incarnational church should reframe the discussion of gospel that correlates with the gospel-related activity that the local church community engages in, so that, the activity of the local church illustrates the content of their gospel proclamation. In regards to the gospel discussion earlier, it appears that some of these Missional-Incarnational churches are enacting the King Jesus Gospel but are verbally proclaiming the Soterian gospel. This writer’s suggestion would be to match the proclamation of the gospel with the gospel-centered mission in which the churches are already engaged.

In the end, both Missional-Incarnational and Emergent ecclesiologies help Evangelicalism within the current cultural context. Each ecclesiology elevates the transformative experience of the believer, elevates the redemptive narrative of the

Scriptures, and mobilizes the local faith community to narrate and share good news within their local contexts. These are, indeed, encouraging signs of re-calibration of corporate witness and the embrace of the particular cultural moment. In the final concluding chapter, this author will provide a few suggestions for how he will apply this project's discussion within his own local church context.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION

“Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses.”¹

Brian Fortner, a stay-at-home dad, shares the story of his son’s first day of school. In many ways it is similar to other parents’ experiences with this monumental event. His son had a hard time sleeping the night before, yet woke up at 5:00 AM, was promptly dressed, skipped breakfast, and marched towards the front door. Fortunately, Fortner was able to catch his son before he left the house and tried to explain to him that his son was ready for school nearly three hours too early. His son remained inside the house, pacing in front of the window, anxiously waiting for the bus to arrive.

As the bus approached their home, Fortner and his son made their way to the bus stop. Fortner notes that although his son was so eager to go to school that day when the school bus driver opened the door to let his son in Fortner’s son ran in the opposite direction.²

This writer suggests that this story is a picture of the current state of Evangelicalism in America. This faith group that has a rich tradition of engaging its context with the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ is in retreat. This retreat, however, is peculiar in its shape. Evangelicals are neither completely removed from the cultural setting, nor is Evangelicalism small enough in size to avoid cultural interaction.

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Collier Books, 1980), 19.

² Brian Fortner, “Raise Kids Like a Man: A Stay-at-Home Dad Re-Writes the Rules of Fatherhood. *Men’s Health*, May 7th, 2008, <http://www.menshealth.com/best-life/parenting-tips-stay-home-dad>, Retrieved 12-13-2011.

Christian Smith suggests that Evangelicalism is “embattled and thriving,” for there is a sense that Evangelicalism has created a subculture that is both simultaneously in “high tension and high integration into mainstream society.”³ Evangelicalism is not going to become obsolete. However, Evangelical leaders must envision new ways to engage a new cultural context in order to prevent retreat from missional-incarnational engagement.

This project has sought to imagine how Evangelicals can engage an environment that has displaced the movement to the fringe of culture. This author suggests that Evangelicalism is at a juncture, a critical moment of decision-making. If Evangelicalism desires to engage this cultural setting with missional-incarnational faithfulness, it must engage in seismic ecclesial adjustments and “enter the bus.” This writer will conclude with a few key initiatives that he will consider as he pastors a local church community within this new context.

Pursuing “the Other”

This writer suggests that American Evangelicals re-examine “the Other,” those outside of the Christian faith as an critical element of re-covering missional-incarnational faithfulness. It is common for American evangelicals who participate in youth groups within their local churches to have been told, in some form or fashion, that interaction with non-believers should be limited lest the outsider tempts them into compromising their faith. This reaction, when fully grown, can cause believers to view outsiders as either “problems or projects,” i.e. the outsider is the source of all the problems within society or the ones that believers should “target” in order for the outsider to become a

³ Christian Smith, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998).

Christian. This general posture towards “the Other” can lead whole church communities to isolate themselves from non-believers, or to create antagonism with non-believers that is detrimental for missional-incarnational engagement.

As this writer reads the life patterns of Jesus, however, it is apparent that the life of the outsider/non-believer/Other is *precisely* the location at which the kingdom of God is arriving in God’s world. Whether it was with the Roman Centurion,⁴ the mysterious woman at the well,⁵ or a tax-collector named Zacchaeus,⁶ etc., Jesus appeared to be aware of the arrival of God’s new world as he interacted with these individuals. Therefore, if believers isolate themselves from non-believers, not only are they missing moments to share good news to their neighbors, they are also missing the presence of Christ, who is near the non-believer, the “ground-zero” of God’s arriving kingdom.

The process of encouraging believers to engage with non-believers is an important theological transformation process. At the heart of the issue is for the church to consider the event in which the presence of Christ is experienced. David Fitch, borrowing from French Jesuit theologian Henri de Lubac, suggests that the church reconsiders the tangible presence of Christ’s body. Lubac suggested that there are three “bodies” of Christ: the actual/historical body of Jesus of Nazareth, the body of Christ represented in

⁴ See Matthew 8:5-13. It is interesting to note that in this narrative Jesus declares that the faith of the Roman Centurion exceeded the faith of anyone that he had known in Israel.

⁵ See John 4:1-26. This well-known narrative displays a woman with questionable history becoming not only a person of faith, but also one who introduces Jesus to a whole village who then declared that Jesus was the Savior of the world.

⁶ See Luke 19:1-10. Zacchaeus is an infamous tax-collector who had stolen from the poor. Without knowing the extent of the meeting that Zacchaeus and Jesus had in Zacchaeus’s house, Zacchaeus vowed to give back any money that he had stolen. Jesus declared that salvation had come to Zacchaeus’s house.

the sacrament/worship of the church, and the church itself within God's world.⁷ In this allotment of "bodies of Christ," there is a general understanding that the church experiences a "visible" and "invisible" (or symbolic) body of Christ. De Lubac contended that from the Patristic period until the Medieval period of church history the invisible nature of Christ's body was the Eucharist and the physical body of Christ was the church on mission within God's world. Over the course of time, however, the body of Christ experienced in the mission of the church was replaced by the Eucharist meal, i.e. the real presence had become the Eucharist, and consequently, the body of Christ became invisible. The Eucharist was the spectacle that drew individuals to a worship service as individuals on a personal faith journey. This liturgical and theological move, however, caused the church's presence in the world invisible. Fitch draws an interesting parallel with this Medieval era shift of "Eucharist as spectacle" idea with how modern Evangelicalism promotes the "come and watch" liturgy within worship services, all the while, staying relatively invisible in the world.⁸

In order to prevent this demarcation, Leonard Sweet suggests that individual Christians and local church communities perform "MRI" exams. "MRI" is an acronym for "missional, relational, incarnational," or the salient characteristics of a vibrant Christianity, or as Sweet insists, "MRI theology is the only theology worth bothering with because it is the strategic operating command center of Christianity and because it embraces and employs the whole theater of faith: the marks of mission, the arks of

⁷ Fitch, 155.

⁸ Ibid., 155-156.

relationship, the arts of incarnation.”⁹ Christianity on mission is a vibrant and healthy expression of the faith, calling practitioners to not only mental and emotional commitments to beliefs, but also to enacting of the faith.

Holistic Salvation: Transcending Over-identification of “Personal Salvation” Claims

In order for Evangelicals to embrace missional-incarnational faithfulness within this current context, this writer also suggests a re-examination of the essence of salvation. Evangelical history shows an unswerving commitment to call all to repentance, to faith in Christ, and to embrace God’s grace through faith alone. Although this common commitment of Evangelicals is orthodox theologically, Evangelicals must examine how this belief shapes the life and conduct of the believer, as well. As chapter 4 evaluated, the Soterian gospel fundamentally helps individuals discern a need for God’s grace, but only indirectly inspires faithful mission. The Soterian gospel is not the gospel. However, anything less than the Soterian gospel is not helpful for Christian witness, either. In the midst of this dilemma, Evangelicals must consider the connection between salvation and discipleship and allow one gospel message to inspire both necessary works within the life of the believer.

David Fitch suggests Evangelicals thoroughly examine this issue. Fitch, referring to Zizek’s political theory (mentioned earlier in chapter 3), suggests Evangelicalism has become over-identified with the concern of individuals accepting Jesus as Savior and Lord. Over-identification happens when “the failures of an ideology are exposed.”¹⁰ The

⁹ Leonard Sweet, *So Beautiful: Divine Design for Life and the Church* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook, 2009) Kindle Electronic Edition, Introduction, Locations 387-392.

average Evangelical would affirm that one needs to be “saved” and that salvation happens as an individual confesses faith in Christ. However, this idea often accompanies bewilderment, for new Christians do not sense a significant change after their confession and often discern there is something “more” to the Christian faith than a mere confession, something more than a faith claim. The honest Evangelical would admit that there is “more to salvation than that,” but trying to engage in a conversation about what that “more” could be, to many Evangelicals, shows signs of insubordination to biblical fidelity. Unless this “over-identification” can be replaced by a fresh expression of both the transformative work of Christ and a full embrace of the Scriptures, Evangelicalism will hold unswervingly to this seemingly empty ideology. In short, Evangelicals need to yoke the event of “becoming Christian” with the call to embrace the mission of God in Christ.

In the Modern framework, as the opening narratives of this assignment suggests, discipleship was conducted in an age of information. Christian maturity was evaluated by the amount of content that one could gather, receive, and share with others. However, the gathering-information-for-maturity paradigm did not ultimately require growth in character or interaction with those outside of the Christian faith. Ultimately, disciples within the Modern framework become “PowerPoint presentations” instead of “poems.”¹¹

Leonard Sweet suggests that disciples of Jesus be compared to a host of a virus. To be a host of a virus, the disciple needs to be in contact with others. Sweet suggests that, “The Jesus movement began virally, and ‘viral’ was the Jesus way of living. Like

¹⁰ Fitch, 203.

¹¹ This writer uses the word “poem,” as a reference to Ephesians 2:10. Paul’s term “workmanship, masterpiece” is the Greek term “*poiema*” or poem.

any life-beginning and life-affirming process, the Jesus movement revives itself again and again with a period of incubation, then relationality, replication, and a bursting forth of multiplication that cannot be contained.”¹² In this way, discipleship and evangelism are connected. The life of the host is enhanced as it is connected with others, “Evangelism is, in its purest form, discipleship: a recognition of being part of a body bigger than ourselves and an organic way of behaving within it.”¹³ Sweet suggests that Christians view their baptism as their ordination into ministry and commission as a missionary;¹⁴ the call to salvation is being exposed to a gospel virus that causes each believer to carry the claims of Christ into God’s world.

Philip Clayton finds this idea of “host” to be an appropriate term for those who are leading within the church, whether they are clergy or laity. “Hosts invite people together,” Clayton says, “create safe settings, enable folks to feel comfortable with each other, allow differences to be expressed – and then help them deal with whatever happens during the time together... Great hosts are not top-down managers; they are geniuses at building and maintaining networks and at creating positive links with other networks.”¹⁵

Clayton’s image of “host” is important for Evangelicals to also consider the way in which the gospel is enacted, lived, and expressed within their environment. Along with the dualism of intellectual faith versus lived or applied faith, Evangelicals must also seek to link the idea of proclaiming the gospel and rehearsing the gospel.

¹² Sweet, *Viral*, 189.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 190.

¹⁴ Sweet, *So Beautiful*, Kindle Electronic Edition, Introduction, Locations 467-472.

¹⁵ Philip Clayton, *Transforming Christian Theology: For Church and Society* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 50.

Rehearsal- Filling in the Gospel Gap

It is this author's observation of the gospel the Evangelical world offers is merely a message for people to hear, in order to be "saved from sins" so they may inhabit eternal life *only* after they die, it is not entirely good news for today. It is a reduced gospel, one of "sin management," an isolated concern for "wrongdoing or wrong-being and its effect. Life, our actual existence, is not included in what is now presented as the heart of the Christian message."¹⁶ This idea is what Dallas Willard calls the "gospel gap," for it presents a gospel that disengages disciples from considering how their own personal character, gifts, and vocations anticipate the coming kingdom of God.¹⁷ To create a community that is only anticipating a kingdom "down the road," or after one dies, is only left to critique, criticize, blame, and to vehemently oppose all of culture. Brian McLaren and Tony Campolo agree,

If our theologies make us focus only on the eternal and the individual (i.e., getting my soul into heaven) so that we avoid God's concern for the historic and the global (i.e., God's will being done on earth as well as in heaven), then the more people we win over to our ideologies, the fewer people will care about God's new world here and now. The more converts we make, the worse the world will become.¹⁸

Surely the "individual and after life" idea of the gospel is not the vision of the multitudes that have followed Jesus in the church's rich history. The creation narratives of Genesis reveal a world where God and human co-labor in overseeing God's good

¹⁶ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering our Hidden Life in God* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1997), 41.

¹⁷ Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 54. Willard notes a gospel gap in both "right" and "left" renditions of the gospel. This author has only briefly mentioned what would be Willard's treatment of the "right's" gospel gap.

¹⁸ Brian D. McLaren and Tony Campolo, *Adventures in Missing the Point: How the Culture-Controlled Church Neutered the Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 53.

creation, not seeking to be removed from it. The Scripture narrative points to a day when God's world is put back together, that the God of creation is still deeply invested in God's world.

Historic Christianity reveals that Christians navigate a tension between the "already and not yet" of God's coming kingdom. But, as N.T. Wright suggests, this anticipation transcends intellectual anticipation; it is a vibrant reality that shapes and forms God's people now, as if they are already living in God's world yet to come. Much like a troupe of actors that engage in a dress rehearsal in preparation for their near performance, the church enacts the patterns of a new age in the midst of this current one, allowing the reality of God's future to invade this present world,

The full reality is yet to be revealed, but we can genuinely partake in the final reality in advance. We can draw down some of God's future into our own present moment. The rationale for this is that in Jesus that future has already burst into our present time, so that in anticipating that which is to come, we are also implementing what has already taken place.¹⁹

Sweet affirms this rehearsal motif, "The future is our native time zone... It's the time zone that, when we occupy it, we are being most human. But we are being most Christian as well... The default time zone of the Christian is what is ahead, not what is behind."²⁰ To rehearse the gospel, then, is for Christians to engage in creative ministry shaped by the thought of the new heavens and the new earth. Christians consider how this broken world is out of sync with God's new world and partners with the Spirit to consider

¹⁹ N.T. Wright, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2012), 64-65.

²⁰ Sweet, *So Beautiful*, Kindle Electronic Edition, Introduction, Locations 825-832.

how those broken parts of creation can be made new again.²¹ This rehearsal is gospelling, i.e. allowing the gospel to transcend mere proclamation, but allowing the gospel to be the lifestyle of the believer and the evidence of his or her confession.

Scripture as Drama and the Scripture Believers Inhabit

Scripture in the Evangelical framework needs to be re-imagined in the light of a missional-incarnational need. As many writers such as N.T. Wright, Scot McKnight, Stanley Hauerwas, Hans Frei, and Kevin Vanhoozer, have suggested, Scripture can be observed as a,

Theo-drama, narrative, or story. Scripture is more than the means for correct knowledge about God or a relationship with God; it is the authoritative script by which we participate in (perform) the ongoing work of God in Christ extended by the Spirit for the redemption of all creation. Scripture's authority is constituted among a people in the very shaping of a people as actors in this drama of God – God's mission in the world.²²

The very idea of “drama” elicits the idea of action, as Sweet notes, “drama comes from the Greek word *dran*, which means ‘to do.’ The incarnation is all about God’s drama of ‘doing God,’ God’s drama of love.”²³ Indeed, the very occasion of the biblical text is the recounting of God’s people on mission in the world. Christopher Wright even suggests that one cannot know Scripture’s authority apart from the plot of God’s mission in the world.²⁴

²¹ N.T. Wright speaks of Christian vocation in the light of “Reclaiming” and “Renouncing.” Because of the resurrection, Christians reclaim evidences of God’s new creation and renounce those things that are out of sync with God’s in breaking kingdom. See N.T. Wright, *Simply Christian*, 222-225.

²² Fitch, 137.

²³ Sweet, *So Beautiful*, Kindle Electronic Edition, Introduction, Locations 1015-1018.

²⁴ Christopher J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006).

The gospeling church, then, allows Scripture to narrate their missional-incarnational involvement within their own, local context. Christians do not try to reenact or recapitulate the biblical narrative, but engage in a “mash-up”²⁵ of the world of the Bible with their own context.

Closing

In closing, returning to the idea of “Funny Uncles” and “Sons of Hell,” it appears that the heart of the missional-incarnational issue for American Evangelicalism is the disposition and posture of the believer. As an evocative image, a Funny Uncle is one that is strategically placed within culture as a signpost for God’s new world to come. God’s new world, shaped by the themes of restoration, peace, mercy, and joy, is indeed good news within a world that is broken, fractured, afraid, and downcast. Gospeling as a Funny Uncle is merely the response of the individual who is swept up in the earth-shattering news of the resurrection of the Son of God, and the hope that God’s new world is not a far reality, experienced when one dies after placing intellectual faith in God, but a theo-drama that is renovating the world one inhabits. The birthright of Evangelicalism is the passionate engagement of God’s world as a Funny Uncle. At this critical moment in the contemporary American Evangelical story, may it be said of this Christian tribe that they are Funny Uncles instead of Sons of Hell.

²⁵ A “mash-up” is a musical term that describes the process of blending two different songs into a coherent whole. Each song is distinct, yet mysteriously linked together through careful “stitching” of the songs.

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