

the Gospel and Our Culture

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At the 2008 meetings of the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature, held in November in Chicago and Boston respectively, the GOCN sponsored the seventh in a series of annual sessions called "Toward a Missional Hermeneutic." These sessions have had as their purpose to explore the ways in which missional vision leads us to new patterns of engagement with the biblical text. For this seventh year of the conversations, **George Hunsberger** was asked to review the presentations of the previous six years and reflect on the various "proposals for a missional hermeneutic" they represent. This newsletter includes his essay and two formal responses given to it at the AAR and SBL meetings. These were given by **Michael Barram** and **James V. Brownson**, respectively. Together, the retrospective look at the materials of the conversation thus far, and the probings offered by Barram and Brownson that identify crucial areas for further development, provide readers of the GOCN newsletter with an important marker on the missional hermeneutic path.

[Proposals for a Missional Hermeneutic: Mapping the Conversation](#) [1]

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["Starting Points, Trajectories, and Outcomes in Proposals for a Missional Hermeneutic: Mapping the Conversation." Presented at the AAR (Nov 1) and SBL (Nov 22) Meetings: Fall of 2008]

It is Sabbath year. Perhaps Jubilee year! The first three *days* of this creation *week* of gatherings at AAR/SBL were at breakfast. Our host was Tyndale Seminary of Toronto, and its then Academic Dean Jeff Greenman, a man with imagination and vision! (He has even larger visions about theological education waiting to be fulfilled!) Those three early morning (7:30am!) breakfast meetings invited conversation around presentations by Jim Brownson (2002), Michael Barram (2003), and Grant LeMarquand (2004).

Then the conversation became more ambitious, and under the sponsorship of the Gospel and Our Culture Network an Additional Meeting was established. For the inaugural Additional Meeting in 2005, a call for papers was issued and three submissions were accepted for presentation, response and discussion. They included papers by Chris Wright, Colin Yuckman, and James Miller, with responses by Jim Brownson, Michael Barram, and Grant LeMarquand, respectively. In the next two meetings, particular people were invited to give presentations that would carry the conversation forward. The presentations in 2006 were given by Mike Goheen and Michael Barram, and in 2007 by Darrell Guder and Ross Wagner, faculty colleagues presenting their experience of team teaching a seminary course on Philippians. In each of these two cases, a new innovation was woven into the fabric of the meeting. Following presentation and discussion, the attending group (more than fifty in both cases) was invited into small groups of four or five each to engage a particular text in light of the dimensions of a missional hermeneutic that had been raised. This was followed by some debriefing between the groups, and a general concluding discussion.

And that brings us to this Sabbath Year. The coordinating group that has been guiding the process of

these meetings, chaired by Michael Barram, responded positively to the idea that this year's program would focus on summing up and comparing and contrasting the various proposals for how to see a missional hermeneutic. It has become my assignment to stimulate that set of reflections by mapping the terrain these sessions have traversed and suggesting the emerging shape of this embryonic field, insofar as we have thus far engaged it.

A couple of meetings ago, I began to notice what seemed to me to be some sharp differences emerging between the various proposals being made about what a missional hermeneutic *is*. We had not achieved a uniform definition, it seemed to me, and perhaps not even a uniform way to pose the question. Now some of the proposals were beginning to speak to and about each other, cordially, but with some degree of candor, as well. Even where the proposals did not present themselves in that way, distinctions of approach and nuance and accent and aim were becoming more apparent, at least to me. All of this, I believed, and continue to believe, is a sign of maturation in this emerging field of hermeneutical reference.

My aim here is to tease out what I believe to be four different streams of thought about what a missional hermeneutic is and how it affects biblical interpretation. I do this in order to explore how each of the foci relates to the others, and test whether these differences represent alternative and incommensurate paths, or complementary and synergistic ones. Or maybe both!?!

I realize as I do this that I run the risk of being like the presumptuous man who tells the story of the six blind men describing an elephant. Each felt one part of the elephant with his hands and came away believing that what had been experienced was what an elephant *is* (a tree trunk, a vine, a wall, a snake). The teller of the story, of course, is the one who claims--without admitting it--to be the one who sees, and seeing the whole, knows it accurately. If I seem to claim to see too much and know too much about the whole, you of course will disabuse me of that pretense in your responses and the conversation to follow!

I have been amazed, reviewing again the papers presented over the past six years, at the richness of the texture and nuance with which each presentation has addressed the matter of a missional hermeneutic. Apart from any other reflections about their respective accents or differences, this may in fact be the most important thing to note. There *is* a swelling tide of imagination that converges here, arising from the influence of many disciplines and out of varieties of lived experience, and seeing in more crisp ways than would have been the case even a few years ago how fully missional life and biblical interpretation overlap and interpenetrate in their concerns and methodologies. The time is ripe for a rigorous and robust missional hermeneutic!

Reviewing the materials

I will begin with a word about the materials upon which this mapping takes place. Most of the presentations of the last six years are in manuscript form, a few exist only in notes. In most cases, the presenters have published these or other materials closely related to what they presented. In some cases, they had published their ideas prior to the presentation, in others, afterwards. Major published essays by these presenters around the work they've shared with us include:

- J. Brownson. 1994. *Speaking the Truth in Love: Elements of a Missional Hermeneutic*. *International Review of Mission*, and reprinted in *The Church between Gospel and culture*, ed. by George R. Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder. Expanded and republished in 1998 as *Speaking the truth in love: New Testament resources for a missional hermeneutic*. Trinity Press International.
- M. Barram. 2007. *The Bible, mission, and social location: Toward a missional hermeneutic*. *Interpretation*. See also, *Mission and Moral Reflection in Paul*. New York: Peter Lang, 2006.
- G. LeMarquand. 2002. *From Creation to New Creation: The Mission of God in the Biblical Story*. In *Waging Reconciliation: God's Mission in a Time of Globalization and Crisis* edited by Ian T.

Douglas.

- C. Wright. 2004. Mission as a matrix for hermeneutics and biblical theology. In *Out of Egypt: biblical theology and biblical interpretation*, editors, Craig Bartholomew, et al. Revised as the introduction to *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative*. InterVarsity Press.
- M. Goheen. 2008 (forthcoming). Continuing Steps Towards a Missional Hermeneutic. *Fideles: A Journal of Redeemer Pacific College*. This is an expanded version of his 2006 presentation entitled "Notes Toward a Framework for a Missional Hermeneutic" (accessible on the gocn.org website). See also, The urgency of reading the Bible as one story. *Theology Today*.
- D. Guder. 2008 (forthcoming). The Missional Authority of Scripture: Interpreting Scripture as Missional Formation; and The Missional Vocation of the Congregation: The Congregational Calling and How Scripture Shapes that Calling. *Mission Focus: Annual Review*. See also, *Unlikely Ambassadors: Clay Jar Christians in God's Service*. Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church U.S.A., 2002; and Biblical Formation and Discipleship. *Treasure in Clay Jars*, ed. by Lois Barrett, Eerdmans, 2004.
- R. Wagner. 2002. *Heralds of the Good News: Isaiah and Paul "In Concert" in the Letter to the Romans*. Brill.

Other papers presented that remain unpublished (so far as I know) include:

- J. Brownson. (presented) 2002. Untitled notes on "an adequate missional hermeneutic."
- C. Yuckman. (presented) 2005. An Ulterior Gospel: The Mission of Critical Hermeneutics and the Critical Hermeneutics of Mission.
- J. Miller. (presented) 2005. Missional Hermeneutics: An Experiment in Implementation and Reflection.
- M. Barram. (presented) 2006. "Located Questions" for a Missional Hermeneutic (accessible on the gocn.org website).

In addition to reviewing these, I have read some of the relevant work of others in the broader missional conversation, but for the most part confine what I say here to the perspectives of the conversation partners whose reflections have been shared with us in this forum. I will give attention to what I take to be the more central affirmations, stated or implicit, that attempt to define what a missional hermeneutic *is*. I will not attempt to give a thorough summary of each one's development of a missional hermeneutic, nor will I attempt to draw all of their many insights into a comprehensive whole. That could be done by someone, and to everyone's great benefit (!), but it lies beyond the scope of this initial exploration. What I am attempting here is much more like a preliminary scouting expedition to map the territory. As I survey the landscape, these are my observations about a variety of accents I hear. Where does each one lead, and where do they lead collectively? Where could they or must they lead us as we continue on?

Four streams of emphasis

Each proposal for a missional hermeneutic, I suggest, tends to exhibit a gravitational pull toward what is believed by the proponent to be the most essential aspect of what makes biblical interpretation missional. While a range of dimensions and facets of it might also be brought into view, those tend to remain closely allied with what is taken to be the fundamental point of it all! It is that gravitational center in each of the proposals we've heard, that controlling impulse, that I would like to examine. I have sensed, as I said, that there have been at least four differing streams of emphasis. The primary exemplars of each do in fact reflect on a missional hermeneutic in broader terms, and there is considerable overlap among them. Yet, I would argue, the diversity of primary accent is sufficiently strong that teasing out the differences can allow us to see something of the range of the territory we are engaging. *I suggest that these four points of gravity comprise an expanding and rich force field. Their spheres of interest and imagination intersect and produce synergy. (There is an important corollary to that thesis: none of these is sufficient on its own to provide a robust hermeneutic.)*

I will describe each of the four according to what is stressed as the orienting vision for the approach a missional hermeneutic should take.

1. The missional direction of the story.

The *framework* for biblical interpretation is the story it tells of the mission of God and the formation of a community sent to participate in it.

Chris Wright is perhaps the prime exemplar of this model, and is the one who has most thoroughly and extensively played it out. (See his "weighty" book, *The Mission of God*.) His presentation in 2005, which had been published previously and then incorporated into his book as its Introduction, offered a detailed rationale for interpreting the Bible in light of the mission of God as the heart and core of the biblical narrative. It is "what the Bible is about!" He does not deny that the narrative is multivocal, and comes in a variety of literary expressions. But taken as a canonical whole, the Bible, he says, tells the story of God's mission in and for the whole world, and with it the story of the people of God whom God has called and sent to be implicated in that mission. Interpreting any specific biblical material requires attending to this pervading story of which it is a part. The parts must be read in light of the whole. That, he says, is what comprises a missional hermeneutic. The mission of God provides the framework, the clue, the hermeneutical key for biblical interpretation.

Wright envisions a shift from speaking of "the biblical basis for mission" to "the missional basis of the Bible" (103, 106). "Mission is not just one of a list of things that the Bible happens to talk about, only a bit more urgently than some. Mission is, in that much-abused phrase, "what it's all about." (104)"We are thinking," he says, "of the purpose for which the Bible exists, the God the Bible renders to us, the people whose identity and mission the Bible invites us to share, and the story the Bible tells about this God and this people and indeed about the whole world and its future." (108-109) "For that reason, mission could provide the framework both for our hermeneutical approach to reading the Bible and for organizing our account of biblical theology." (104)

This frames for him a sense of the project on which a missional hermeneutic embarks: "A missional hermeneutic of the Bible sets out to explore that divine mission and all that lies behind it and flows from it in relation to God himself, God's people, and God's world." (105) It rests on the fundamental judgment about "[t]he writings that now comprise our Bible" that they "are themselves the product of, and witness to, the ultimate mission of God.... The Bible is the drama," he says, "of this God of purpose engaged in the mission of achieving that purpose universally...." (103-104) He concludes: "In short, a missional hermeneutic proceeds from the assumption that the whole Bible renders to us the story of God's mission through God's people in their engagement with God's world for the sake of the whole of God's creation. (122)

Two other presenters in this series have followed essentially this same path. Grant LeMarquand's presentation in 2004 reflected on the very general topic, "what the bible says about mission." The straightforward simplicity of that belies the richness of the nuances that follow. He is self-conscious of reading the Bible from the situation and experience of missional engagement, in his case in East Africa. He wrestles with holding together what many times are two competing streams/threads with respect to notions of mission: great commission and liberation from oppression. He works to put them together in the context of a comprehensive sense of the biblical narrative. For that purpose, he provides a "reading" of fundamental, paradigmatic texts, particularly the beginning (Genesis 1-12) and the ending of the story (Rev 4-5). In this way, he is not declaring the principle of a missional narrative core as fundamental to a missional hermeneutic, but is illustrating and underscoring it by engaging particular themes internal to that narrative and crucial for understanding it.

Michael Goheen is more direct in his acknowledgment that he follows Wright's lead, defining a missional hermeneutic in a similar way and stressing what he calls elsewhere "The urgency of reading the bible as

one story."^[1] He echoes and receives Wright's "framework" as the starting point for his own reading of Scripture in a missional way, while adding notes about that which anticipate what will be said shortly about three other streams of emphasis.

Goheen takes note of Wright's very conscious choice to understand the phrase *missio Dei*, the "mission of God," in a way different from what has become the traditional way of understanding it in terms of "sending"--in reference both to the mutual sending among the persons of trinity, and to God's sending of Israel, and the church. Wright fears the close association of the idea of sending with the church's sending of the few ("missionaries") and in the interest of involving the whole church in a sense of its mission, moves in a different direction. He chooses rather to use the term mission "in its more general sense of a long-term purpose or goal that is to be achieved through proximate objectives and planned actions." (104) This he does with reference both to the mission of God and the mission of the church.

Goheen does not explore his observation further, even though his own sense of the importance of God's sending is more present throughout his own work, and the missional ecclesiology that results from that is everywhere stronger (as his fine book on Lesslie Newbigin's "missionary ecclesiology" shows). But it is worth paying close attention to Wright's choice and wondering about its consequences. While commendable to seek to include the whole church in the term mission, his choice to steer clear of *missio* as sending may unwittingly have had the reverse effect.

Mission for us in the church is not that we *send* (missionaries, efforts), but that we ourselves *are sent* (by God)! This means that a missional emphasis is not merely motivating and focusing the church on doing what is required to join the action of God in pursuit of God's ultimate ends. That is certainly implicated for a sent people, but *missional* means a more thoroughgoing (perhaps violent!) conversion than that. It calls for the conversion to see with new eyes who we are and know that the action of God with respect to us sends us into this participation. Recognizing that changes everything! The very form of our life in community is implicated, the organizational behaviors are altered, and the lens through which we see and evaluate our participation in God's purposes is moved from something like achieving a task to something more like "fulfilling the gospel" (to use the apostle Paul's phrase, to which Paul Bowers has given special attention).

The mission on which God is traveling includes God's amazing habit of sending--evident within the trinity itself, and more surprisingly, extended to that which God has created, including human persons and communities! Lest this become merely a project, we need to keep clearly in view the sendingness of God. The relationship between the sending and the being sent means that there is not a strict parallel between God and us with regard to these two senses of what we may take *mission* to indicate. Perhaps in the end we may see it this way: *Missio* for God means that God is pursuing purpose, within which God sends. *Missio* for us means that we are those whom God sends, and that joins us to the pursuit of God's purposes.

What makes this issue a pregnant one at the present time is its implications for ecclesiology. A healthy sense of God's sending and our being sent means that the church is not only joined to the task of achieving God's purposes, but that the church recognizes what it has long forgotten, that it is by nature a community sent, and that is what joins it to all that God cares about and intends to do. Wright's reluctance to do much with the sending side of *missio* leaves his treatment vulnerable. It provides a missiology for the church (in the sense of *what it should do*) but not an ecclesiology for the mission (in the sense that it is rooted in the church's identity--*who it is*).^[2]

Two further comments may be added. First, this framework is fundamental to all the other proposals, and they all have in one way or another affirmed this understanding of the Bible as a whole. This may be a point for further serious engagement both with biblical scholarship (does it propose more unity than is present in the writings?) and with other observers tuned to the postmodern objections to metanarrative. Reference is made in several of these proposals, especially Colin Yuckman's, to the important work of Richard Bauckham (*The Bible and Mission*) who owns the sense that the Bible presents a metanarrative of a sort. But, he contends, it is one which privileges the poor and the "least"

and expects multicultural expressions to thrive--working against the grain, therefore, of the socially and culturally coercive and oppressive effects observable in other metanarratives.

Second, there is a certain circularity in this line of argument which needs to be frankly acknowledged and owned: from the scriptures is discerned the core narrative that becomes the key or clue for understanding the scriptures. This will need to be continuously attended to, in part by frankly acknowledging the circularity, in part by noting the same circularity in every proposal (even the one that finds little or no unity in the midst of the diversity), and in part by recourse to the sense of a progressive, spiraling hermeneutical circle and with it the kinds of practices that will enable a missional hermeneutic to be self-critical and self-correcting. This may be helped by some of Jim Brownson's suggestions along this line. He asserts that the shared identity the Bible imparts to the community "cannot be fully grasped and embodied apart from the actual *practice* of participating in God's mission to the world." While such practice will not erase that community's given cultural identity, it does "transform it in pervasive ways, so that the quality and character of the life of the people of God becomes, in itself, an embodiment of the good news they are called to proclaim." This produces a kind of "dislocation" which Brownson says "accompanies the experience of being called and sent" and "generates the critical principle by which a missional hermeneutic becomes self-correcting." Bauckham's book has much to contribute along these lines as well.

2. The missional purpose of the writings

The *aim* of biblical interpretation is to fulfill the equipping purpose of the biblical writings.

If the first stream lies within the arena of biblical theology, the second pertains to the character of the biblical literature itself. If the first had to do with the canonical narrative, drawn from texts reckoned to be "the products of, and witnesses to the mission of God," the second has to do with the purpose and aim of the biblical writings, and the canonical authority by virtue of their formative effect.

Darrell Guder is the one who has most forcefully made this case. "Jesus personally formed the first generation of Christians for his mission," he argues. "After that, their testimony became the tool for continuing formation." (2004:62) Thus, "the apostolic strategy of continuing formation of missional communities became the motivation of their writings." The New Testament writings have as their purpose to equip the churches for witness. (2008)

This is particularly evident in the epistles. They "carry out this formation through direct engagement with the challenges arising out of the contexts of the addressed communities." But it is no less true of the Gospels. They are about "the same fundamental task." They invite the churches into "the process of discipleship that consists of their joining Jesus' disciples and accompanying him through his earthly ministry on the path to the cross.... In this preparation of disciples to become apostles, missional formation is happening in the Gospels." (2008)

Guder concludes that "[t]he purpose of this 'Word of God written' was and is the continuing formation of the missional church.... This formation happens as the biblical word works powerfully within the community." (2004:62)

While Guder's display of the importance of scriptural purpose leans heaviest on the character of the New Testament writings, others suggest a similar thing with respect to the earlier testament. Goheen, for example, affirms that "[t]he Old Testament scriptures were written to 'equip' God's people for their missional purposes." The New Testament also, he goes on to say, was written in order to "form, equip, renew the church for their mission in the world."

So for Guder, the basic question that guides interpretation and "concretely opens up the Bible for us as the written testimony that God uses to shape us for our faithful witness and service" is this: "How did this text equip and shape God's people for their missional witness then, and how does it shape us

today?" (2002:5) Or put another way, "how did this particular text continue the formation of witnessing communities then, and how does it do that today?" (2008)

Guder's strong assertion about the equipping purpose of the biblical literature raises important questions that will require careful attention as the field of missional hermeneutics moves forward. I suggest that across the canon it is the case that the authors of the biblical materials are more or less clear and conscious about such a set of equipping and formative intentions. Continuing work is needed in order to discern and elaborate the way in which each of the biblical writings can be understood in light of this divine purpose to form the people of God in and for their witness. This would mean engaging the relationship between the overall, and constantly focusing, intentions of God in and by this literature, and the specific, contextual sense of an author and his/her intentions in writing. Different genres, different epochs, different personalities are all at play here. Imaginative appreciation for this facet in each of the writings--even where it otherwise may at first glance seem muted or less consciously so--may be one of the fruits of this sort of exploration.

It may help in this regard, to soften or widen the way the missional purpose of biblical materials is characterized. Brownson, for example, makes a similar point about the Bible's purpose, but casts that purpose in a wider frame than the idea of equipping. "The basic purpose of scripture, then, is to impart a shared identity to the people of God as a body called to participate in God's mission. This identity is grounded most centrally in the gospel, the good news that in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we see the culmination of God's saving purpose for the world." (Chris Wright speaks similarly about the scriptures' purpose to form the people of God.)

This point about the intent of biblical writings has correspondence with the case Guder has been making with increasing focus and force in recent years about 'missional theology,' an emerging conversation that has resonance with the one we are having here. Guder speaks of moving from "theology of mission," to "missional theology." All theology, he says, must be done *from* the perspective of the *missio Dei*, and from the recognition that the church is a sent community, missional by its nature and in its essence. Theology must likewise see its calling to be (like Paul's) oriented *toward* the equipping of the church for that vocation of witness to which it has been sent.

It is not hard to see, then, how a revolution in this imagination about theology itself will come to touch every aspect of the theology curriculum, in church and academy. The guilds of academic theological endeavor--systematic theology, historical interpretation, biblical interpretation, and practical theology (it deserves a better name!)--are all invited to wonder whether and how their own work would come into fresh vigor and usefulness to the church were they to be oriented to fulfilling such a missional imagination. The work we are doing on a missional biblical hermeneutic finds companionship with the historical work being done by Dale Irvin and Scott Sunquist in history. Recent doctoral work in practical theology is showing the methodological power of a 'missional Christian education' (Claire Annelise Smith) and a 'missional and ecumenical practical theology' (Thomas Hastings), and current doctoral work toward articulating 'missional ecclesial practices' shows promise of more of the same (Ben Conner). There is considerable ferment taking place that moves in the direction of re-imagining the structure and dynamism of theological education along these lines. This ferment moves along lines similar to those we have experienced in this forum, focused as it is on the biblical interpretation side of the curriculum.

Guder's case for missional theology is still a work on its way, he says, and much more remains to be developed. He welcomes others to enter that conversation. I believe our forum has something to suggest--that the nature of our conversations, and in particular the two emphases we will now move on to note, provide help for filling out the inner dynamic and methodology of missional theology as well as biblical hermeneutics. These next two themes help us in both arenas to answer the question, What exactly is it, in the biblical writings, that equips? Equips how, and in what manner, in which directions, in what areas of life, toward what forms of missional engagement? Here there is territory for a great deal of vigorous and imaginative work.

The *approach* required for a faithful reading of the Bible is from the missional location of the Christian community.

Concurring with the assessment that it is the purpose of the scriptures to form the people of God, Michael Barram shifts the perspective by looking at the character of a missional hermeneutic from the other side of the coin--from the position of the community being thus formed. (2006) He defines a missional hermeneutic as more than interpretive methodology or even "broad, meta-narrative sketches of the *missio Dei* in Scripture," much as these lay essential groundwork. Rather, he defines a missional hermeneutic as "an approach to the biblical text rooted in the basic conviction that God has a mission in the world and that we read Scripture as a community called into and caught up by those divine purposes." He makes the claim that "Christian congregations caught up in the *missio Dei* read the Bible from a social location characterized by mission."

This forms a particular kind of approach, Barram says, one characterized by a "relentless commitment to articulating critical questions aimed at faithfully articulating the *missio Dei* and the community's role within the purposes of God." It is his fundamental thesis "that a missional hermeneutic should be understood as an approach to Scripture that self-consciously, intentionally, and persistently bring[s] to the biblical text a range of focused, critical, and located questions regarding [the] church's purpose in order to discern the faith community's calling and task within the *missio Dei*. Such questions," he says, "will be inherently contextual...."

There are several important features here. First, Barram takes seriously the believing community's ownership of the fact that the scriptures are "for our equipping." He is not waiting for the scholars and pastors to decide how this or that text equips us in the community. He positions himself with the community itself to ask, "How shall the church read the Bible faithfully today?" (52) In doing so, he shifts the vantage point from the subject of the equipping (biblical authors and their interpreters) to the community being equipped. He envisions the community as the active subject of interpretation, not merely a passive recipient of it. In this, Barram warns our academic and pastoral selves not to presume that we provide interpretation *for* them. Even our own legitimate work in service to the community's *reading* of the word is called to be done in community, as part of the community.

Here it may prove helpful to keep listening to the experience of the base ecclesial communities in Latin America and their pastors and theologians. Pablo Richard, one of those theologians close to the ground, has offered fascinating suggestions about the notion of hermeneutical spaces.

Hermeneutic space is that institutional *place* where a specific interpretive *subject* gets its identity, proper to that place and different from any other subject. This space makes a certain *interpretation* of the Bible proper to that place and different from those other interpretations made in other hermeneutic *places*. Our interpretation of the Bible depends on the place where we find ourselves.

There are two traditionally accepted hermeneutic *spaces* which are thoroughly legitimate and always useful and necessary. The first is the *academic space*. These are the faculties of theology, the seminaries, and centers for studies. The Bible is interpreted here scientifically, according to the canons of the methods of historical-criticism, of classical literary methods, and of the new methods of human sciences. In this space, the subject of the Bible's interpretation is the expert, the exegete, the biblical professor, the graduate of biblical sciences and other related sciences.

The second traditional hermeneutic *space* is that of the *institution of the liturgy* of the Church. In it the Bible is read and interpreted in the context of the liturgy and in the context of the ordinary teaching and magisterial function of the Church.... In this liturgical space, the celebration of the Word is done within the community, but this community follows the hermeneutic logic dictated by liturgical prescriptions, with its calendar, its rules and liturgical norms. In this hermeneutic space the subject is the ordained

minister or the layman authorized to exercise his function.

The reading of the Bible in community is beginning to provide a third new and just as legitimate and necessary space for the experience of and the correct interpretation of God's Word. We would like to provisionally call this the *communitary space*. In it the Bible is read and interpreted in community.... The interpretation of the Bible performed in community possesses characteristics which are different from the academic or liturgical-institutional interpretations. The community, in the first place, is a space where those who normally cannot share in society (the poor, the rejected, the youth, women, indigenous natives) can participate. It assumes its importance in places where large institutions do not hold sway. It is also a place where solidarity and spirituality, commitment to freedom and gospel inspired mission are found. The community, inasmuch as it is a direct and representative expression of the Church as the People of God, is the space par excellence for spiritual, mystical, prophetic and apocalyptic creativity.... In this space *the subject* of the interpretation of the Bible is neither the exegete nor the ordained minister but the community itself.

The inter-action of all three hermeneutical spaces is all important.... [T]hey should not be placed in *opposition* to each other.... It is necessary to *distinguish* them as hermeneutic spaces.[\[3\]](#)

Further, Barram emphasizes that "an approach to biblical texts that privileges the missiological 'location' of the Christian community in the world as a hermeneutical key." (42-43) So his accent is not only on the approach to the text, and on the community that approaches it, but it is precisely on the fact of that community's locatedness in the world as a sent community. He is convinced that "the 'social location' of the people of God is at the very heart of a missional hermeneutic."

The sent community as location immediately implicates other layers of location. The community has been sent to be the people of God "at this time, in this place" (to borrow the title of an excellent book by Michael Warren). "Located" questions, then, are those that arise out of that tangible place and time in which the sent community lives and in terms of which it seeks to discern its particular charism and vocation. And that implicates further the community's location in its publicly present witness in that time and place. Its mission itself is the proper location from which the Bible is interpreted. (Both Grant LeMarquand and James Miller have illustrated for us in previous years how missional location impacts the interpretation of the Bible.)

Barram illustrates the kinds of questions he is imagining as those that arise from a community's missional location. He affirms the GOCN's five Missional Biblical Engagement questions, and the use Guder made of them in his PCUSA General Assembly Bible Studies several years ago.[\[4\]](#) But he presses for sharper specificity and locatedness (2006):

- Does *our reading* of the text challenge or baptize our assumptions and blind spots?
- How does *the text* help to clarify appropriate Christian behavior--not only in terms of conduct but also in terms of intentionality and motive?
- Does *our reading* emphasize the triumph of Christ's resurrection to the exclusion of the kenotic, cruciform character of his ministry?
- In what ways does *this text* proclaim good news to the poor and release to the captives, and how might our own social locations make it difficult to hear that news as good?
- Does *our reading* of this text acknowledge and confess our complicity and culpability in personal as well as structural sin?
- How does *this text* clarify what God is doing in our world, in our nation, in our cities, and in our neighborhoods--and how may we be called to be involved in those purposes?

There is something very interesting going on in the form of these questions. Notice how there is an interplay between questions about 'the text' and questions about 'our reading' of it! The questions are not only about what the text is getting at, but about what 'our reading(s)' of the text are doing with it! In that way, the questions are "precisely the kinds of critically important missional questions that my social

location has conditioned me to overlook or avoid." The questions then provide a kind of critical criteria by which not only our questions but our conclusions are continuously tested! The accent on 'our reading' serves, in the end, to underscore the community's full responsibility for its 'readings' and to remind the community that its readings are always open to being tested as the community reads, and is being read!

To speak about the locatedness of the community's efforts to "read faithfully" the biblical texts "today" sets in place the bridging that is proper to a hermeneutic. The community engages the texts knowing that they bore particular meanings in the time and place of their original readers/hearers. They come with questions located in their own time and place, and that puts in motion the conversation between those times and places.

A fourth stream in our conversations focuses on the dynamic this sets in motion.

4. The missional engagement with cultures.

The gospel functions as the interpretive *matrix* within which the received biblical tradition is brought into critical conversation with a particular human context.

Jim Brownson has in many ways pioneered the terms of our conversation. So far as I can determine, he was the first to use the term "missional hermeneutic." (This was in his 1994 presentation at a GOCN consultation and its subsequent publication in the *International Review of Mission* in the same year.) His address at the first breakfast meeting in this series in many ways structured the paths along which our conversation has moved.

By proposing "elements of a missional hermeneutic," Brownson was bringing together his pastoral experience, his deep resonance with matters of missiology, and his area of formal training and work in New Testament studies. Working from these locations, his model focuses on what is taking place in the missional moment, if I may call it that, in which biblical writers are addressing the people of their own time and place in terms of the received tradition. How do we interpret the dynamic of the way they draw on elements of prior tradition and bring them into critical relationship with the current moment? This is happening, of course, throughout the Old Testament period. Brownson, though, is drawn especially to ask the question about what is happening in the New Testament when authors appropriate Old Testament materials and with them engage the moments of the new circumstance of living "in Christ." How are they doing that and what is at stake?

This feature is important to watch, Brownson assumes, because what we can observe New Testament authors to be doing in this regard has a parallel with what Christ-followers in every place and culture are doing when they (we) give witness to the good news. In such cases, the fruit of what the New Testament authors did has come to be part of the received canonical tradition. But the way they functioned, in addition to where it led them, is important for the formation of our own missional hermeneutic. What happens in the New Testament, in other words, is paradigmatic for the daily engagement of the gospel with our own culture or cultures today. This encounter is the stuff of the church's calling and mission.

Brownson found a great deal of help in the work of his mentor Chris Beker at Princeton. He was a Pauline scholar who had played out something of the dynamic relationship between coherence and contingency in Paul's work. Brownson, however, wondered whether there wasn't something else going on for which that did not yet account. This led him ultimately to posit a third, perhaps less tangible but nonetheless critical, element in what Paul was doing. That is, there was some inner guidance system, an inner gyroscope, that guided Paul with respect to which parts of the tradition were brought to bear upon which dimensions of the presenting context, and in what particular ways. This Brownson has called the "interpretive matrix," and the gospel as Paul has come to grasp it was that matrix![\[5\]](#)

He lays out his argument in this way. His foundational theological mooring place, or discrimen (to use

David Kelsey's language and concept in *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology*, is that "the mode in which God is present among the faithful is irreducibly *multicultural*." (22) In the dynamic of expressing the tradition in each unique place, the gospel functions as the interpretive matrix: "the implicit set of rules that govern the way tradition is brought to bear in a particular context." (39) The gospel, he takes it, is most fundamentally "the good news that in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we see the culmination of God's saving purpose for the world." As told to us in the New Testament, the gospel exhibits these structural features: It summons to allegiance and decision. (It makes a claim.) It presupposes a public horizon and universal scope. (It presents itself as world news.) It regards death and resurrection as paradigmatic. (It opens up a way.) These function as criteria that must guide every fresh interpretation of biblical message anywhere and at any time.

Ross Wagner's work provides an important example of the dynamic of which Brownson speaks. Wagner, in his book *Heralds of the Good News*, says that "From the opening words of his letter to the Roman churches, Paul reveals himself to be both a 'missionary theologian' and a 'hermeneutic theologian.' That is, Paul presents his apostolic mission as one that proclaims and interprets the gospel and Israel's scriptural traditions in the service of creating and sustaining communities called into existence by God's grace and love in Jesus Christ." (2002:1) He notes that "Given the crucial role of Paul's gospel and mission at play in his reading of scripture, we should not be surprised if Paul's particular interpretation, while based on methods widely in use in his cultural context, do not find close parallels in the writings of other Jewish groups." (348, n. 22) Wagner concludes that the "...complex and dynamic interrelationship of scripture, theology, and mission within a particular cultural and historical context is nowhere more evident than in Paul's re-telling of Israel's story in Romans 9-11.... Paul revises the scriptural story to give Gentiles a prominent part in the drama of Israel's restoration. In so doing, he even goes so far as to cast Gentiles in a role originally written for Israel." (357) Paul provides an example of "...a bold and sweepingly revisionary rereading of scripture..." (357) Any inculturated witness to the gospel in our own time and place bears family resemblance to that!

Brownson's view and Wagner's example have correspondence with some of the most important missiological models developed in recent years by people such as Newbigin, Walls, Schreiter, Sanneh, Bosch, Bevans, and Bediako, to name a few. The dynamic of missional life and witness is viewed through the lens of what Newbigin has called "the triangular relationship between Bible, culture, and church." Goheen has indicated the importance of this for a missional hermeneutic: "The mission of God's people involves a missional encounter with culture which both embraces the treasures and opposes the idolatry of all cultures." As I have argued elsewhere, in the daily life to which the church is called and in which we are sent to bear the witness of the Spirit, we find ourselves "sitting on both sides" of the engagement of the gospel with our own culture. Because our culture is not merely "out there" somewhere but is one in terms of which we Christians also imagine and navigate our world, we are very much on the culture side, involved in what Lesslie Newbigin called the "inner dialogue." This is what "reading faithfully" and welcoming our own "continuing conversion" is about, as the gospel day by day shapes us to be faithful expressions of the gospel within our social setting. And this means we also sit on the gospel side, as those shaped by it and as demonstrations of it—incarnations of the good news. This is what Newbigin meant when he said the congregation is the hermeneutic of the gospel, which Colin Yuckman notes as an essential component of a missional hermeneutic. "While traditional biblical criticism asks, 'which hermeneutic is most qualified to understand the Scriptures?' missional hermeneutics asks instead, 'what kind of community does a faithful hermeneutic foster?'"

I suggest that this speaks to the fundamental methodology that would characterize a missional biblical hermeneutic. Likewise, for missional theology and other dimensions of the theological curriculum. Theology, done from the perspective of the *missio Dei* and the missional nature of the church and for the equipping of the community, finds the methodology for doing that here. In the process, the theologian--whether academic or community--is not only doing theology *from* a missional perspective and *for* missional equipping, but is actually *doing* the witness of the church! This way of doing theology *is* the church's calling, if Newbigin is right in his call for a missionary encounter of the gospel with our Western culture.

Conclusion

Finally then, our collective sense of a missional hermeneutic (if I may be so bold as to suggest that collective, communal development of ideas and hermeneutics is the way of the spirit and of a missional community of scholars and pastors and disciples!) is taking shape thus far around at least these four questions:

1. What is the story of the biblical narrative and how does it implicate us? (*missio Dei*)
2. What is the purpose of the biblical writings in the life of its hearers? (equipping witness)
3. How shall the church read the Bible faithfully today? (located questions)
4. What guides our use of the received tradition in the context before us? (gospel matrix)

My hope is that the mapping I've suggested will at the least stimulate further dialogue about the critical, central features of a missional hermeneutic. And I hope that it will incite the further constructive work that is needed both to extend the implications of the proposals to date and to place into the mix other features essential for the development of a missional hermeneutic.

As I suggested at the beginning, the force field created by the synergy of these four centering visions demonstrates the genuine *gravitas* of this emerging missional hermeneutics. In its further development lies real hope for an integrative biblical, historical, and practical theological academy. More than that, in its faithful practice lies real hope for the renewal of the church's vibrant life and witness in the world.

[\[1\]](#) Dan Beeby's work bringing together the hermeneutical implications of both canonical reading and missional reading lends support for this emphasis. See *Canon and Mission*.

[\[2\]](#) It is important to note that Goheen is currently writing a volume that gives articulation to the sweeping missional story of the scriptures, but with a different accent than Wright's treatment. Goheen is looking at it from the side of the missional identity and vocation of the people of God.

[\[3\]](#) Excerpted from an undated document written by Pablo Richard, "Word of God--Source of Life and Hope for the New Millennium," published on www.SEDOS.org.

[\[4\]](#) How does this text read us and our world? ...evangelize us with good news? ...convert us in personal and corporate life? ...orient us to the coming reign of God? ...send us and equip our witness? *The Gospel and Our Culture* vol. 11, no.3, 1999, available at www.gocn.org.

[\[5\]](#) It is important to note that Brownson's use of the term *matrix* is different from the way Chris Wright uses it (2004).

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[A Response at AAR to Hunsberger's "Proposals..." Essay](#) [4]

Author: Michael Barram

[Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Chicago, Illinois, November 1, 2008]

Let me begin by thanking George for this very thoughtful and stimulating paper, which admirably summarizes, critiques, and synthesizes the presentations and proposals made in these "missional hermeneutic" sessions over the past six years. I find his reading and assessment of the hermeneutical "streams" that have been emerging to be both insightful and challenging. He has, I believe, moved the conversation forward significantly, and I would not be surprised if we eventually look back on his attempt to tease out the contributions and implications of these "streams" as something of a watershed moment in the course of our ongoing conversations.

As George correctly notes, it has become increasingly clear that the various presenters in these sessions have been using the phrase "missional hermeneutic" in different ways--at the very least, with differing accents and emphases. He has mapped, in a fairly persuasive way, I think, four streams in these conversations by attending carefully to the primary focus or "centering vision" of each stream in turn. First, George discerns, especially in the work of Wright, LeMarquand, and Goheen (and presupposed in various ways across the proposals he surveys), a fundamental *framework* for a missional hermeneutic, namely, the character and narrative shape of the *missio Dei* in the Bible. Second, he finds in Guder's work the aim or goal of biblical interpretation, namely, to flesh out, appropriate, and enact the "equipping purpose" of the biblical texts for the community's missional witness. Third, George notes that my contributions have focused on an *approach* to biblical interpretation characterized by questions that must be asked in light of the interpretive community's missional location. And finally, drawing on Brownson, Wagner, and his own work, George identifies a fourth stream that envisions a missional hermeneutic in terms of the gospel's function as an interpretive *matrix* in which the canonical biblical tradition and the concrete contemporary context of the community are linked and critically engaged.

Despite the differences between these four "points of gravity," George suggests that they should be understood as synergistically related and mutually informing rather than opposed to one another, and he interprets the emergence of this "expanding and rich force field" as a clear indication that the broad contours of a missional hermeneutic are beginning to take shape. George suggests that perhaps each of the four "streams" contributes a fundamental question to this emerging hermeneutic. The focus on the *missio Dei* leads us to ask: What is the story of the biblical narrative and how does it implicate us? The emphasis on equipping challenges us to ask: What is the purpose of the biblical writings in the life of its hearers? Stressing located questions presses us to consider: How shall the church read the Bible faithfully today? And recognition of the gospel as the interpretive matrix urges us to reflect on: What guides our use of the received biblical tradition in the context before us?

In short, George's careful review highlights the robust character of the conversation to this point and helps to articulate the interrelationships between, and implications of, the various proposals. Perhaps most importantly, George's work begins to clarify a few of the hermeneutical challenges that lie ahead.

Let me simply pose just a few of the myriad questions that his work raises. Perhaps these are musings more than questions. In any case...

I find George's thesis about the four-part synergy to be both helpful and fairly persuasive. My main questions have to do with implementation, particularly in light of the "important corollary" to his thesis, namely that "none of these is sufficient on its own to provide a robust hermeneutic." Implementation becomes even more of an intriguing question given the implicit scaffolding--dare I say

hierarchy--seemingly at work in George's articulation of the four streams. At the simplest level, I wonder about what this corollary would mean when we actually sit down to engage with biblical texts. I am quite heartened that the entire conversation has moved well beyond a narrow and piecemeal use of biblical passages and references, and that mission and sending language are understood in far more robust and fundamental ways than they are often employed in popular usage. And yet I'm still not entirely clear on how we know that missional interpretation is what's being done in a given reading. George suggests that a lack of uniformity should be seen as a sign of maturation, which leads me to wonder, To what extent is some form of uniformity a goal to be sought? I agree that "a robust hermeneutic" would require attention to more than one--and perhaps all--of the "streams" George discerns. But is a fully "robust hermeneutic" necessary in each interpretive exercise in order for a reading to be considered missional? If an interpreter fails to attend to all four "streams" in a particular reading, is his or her analysis somehow less representative of a missional hermeneutic? Perhaps another way of putting this more sharply would be, Are there ways of thinking about mission and or missional concerns in dealing with biblical writings that would or should not be included within a missional hermeneutic? In the end, I'm still wondering, I guess, how concrete exegetical methodology relates to the notion of a larger, "robust hermeneutic."

Perhaps one of the elephant-in-the-room facets of this whole four "streams" discussion is whether there may be other major and significant "streams" that have not yet been proposed explicitly. I cannot imagine that these four "streams," for all their nuance and emerging "gravitas," have captured all that might be captured with respect to reading the Bible from a missional perspective. I can't help but wonder what blind spots may yet have gone unnoticed. All of the proposals, for example, at least in this session, have been from a relatively narrow milieu in terms of social location: white, male, North American Protestants. What might other voices from different "locations" bring to the conversation?

Relatedly, I continue to be struck and frankly a bit uncomfortable with the interpreter-centric assumptions implied in the four "streams." It should be clear that not only do we as the interpreting community ask questions of the text, but also the text asks questions of us--indeed, we might say, biblical texts ask hard, challenging questions about our questions. Moreover, although some of the proposals take context quite seriously, I wonder if we have dealt adequately with the context of the other, that is, the context of the one who is engaged--in whatever form--by the missional community. How does the encounter with the other challenge the power and privilege so often presupposed in the community's understanding of its "sentness"--and indeed, of its appropriation of the gospel? I wonder if a missional hermeneutic would be even more robust if we could come up with a "stream," or at least a focused question, that actually privileged the perspective of the other confronted by mission.

In any event, the gospel should function, as in "stream" four, as the interpretive matrix in a missional hermeneutic, but I'm struck by how much humility must therefore come into play as we proclaim the gospel--seeing how so much of gospel proclamation has been thoroughly misguided in myriad ways through history. At the very least, it would seem that a healthy missional hermeneutic must reflect an honest and continual acknowledgment that the community of faith is sent for divine purposes that are not, to us, fully self-evident. We Christians have too often assumed that we understand what God is up to, what mission means, and what our role in the process is--regularly using the Bible to find whatever might reinforce such presuppositions. In view of this uneven history, I suspect that readiness for the kind of thoroughgoing (and constant) perspectival revision implied in the Apostle Paul's work (as articulated by Wagner and noted by George) will be key to a "robust hermeneutic."

I'm grateful to George for mapping the conversation so helpfully, and I'm eager to hear what others have to say as the dialogue continues.

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[A Response at SBL to Hunsberger's "Proposals..." Essay](#) [5]

Author: James V. Brownson

[Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, Boston, Massachusetts, November 22, 2008]

I am grateful to George Hunsberger for his very helpful summary of a wide range of research. He has provided us with some useful categories for further reflection on "missional hermeneutics." I find George's framework to be a helpful one, which summarizes an enormous amount of material, and does so in ways that seem to me to be fair and insightful.

But I want to inject one other note into the conversation, which is not explicitly addressed by George, but seems to me to be important. I begin with the simple observation that missional encounters between people are, almost by definition, *cross-cultural* encounters. To the extent that this is true, then it follows that a missional hermeneutic is one that sees this cross-cultural encounter as the central context out of which interpretation takes place. This is most closely addressed in George's third category, which focuses on the location of the reader. A hermeneutic that is explicitly *missional* is one that sees interpretation as taking place in a three-sided conversation: not merely a conversation between the text and the reader, as in traditional western hermeneutics. Instead, a missional hermeneutic envisions a three-way conversation between the reader, an "other" who hears the text differently, and the text itself. It is this notion of otherness, implicit in reading the text in the midst of cross-cultural encounters, which is vital to a missional hermeneutic.

I want to push a little further on this, particularly in conversation with the more explicitly post-modern hermeneutical literature that begins with the notion of *difference*. In the post-modern world, *difference* is fundamental, absolute. The economic, social, and political powers of this world seek to suppress this absoluteness of difference under a variety of totalizing narratives, but they can never fully achieve their goal. Difference continues to leak out around the edges--our deep and abiding strangeness to each other.

And it's not only the great powers of the world that construct these metanarratives which seek to suppress difference. *We* construct metanarratives together with people who are like us, and in so doing, we reassure ourselves that difference is not absolute--that there is a deeper and abiding commonality that holds us together. Our images of God--even a "missional" God--may be just such metanarratives. But one doesn't need to read much of theorists like Derrida and Foucault to understand their argument that such metanarratives may simply be a form of self-deception, a way of avoiding the ontological priority of difference, our fundamental aloneness in a world which will always remain, in deep and basic ways, strange, foreign, and inexplicable to us.

The post-modern response to this encounter with deep, ontological difference is *bricolage*. Derrida speaks of *bricolage* in this way: "the necessity of borrowing one's concept from the text of a heritage which is more or less coherent or ruined, . . . every discourse is bricoleur."^[1] We assemble traces, elements, pieces of traditions into some sort of pastiche which, at this point in time, seems satisfying, but which itself is merely composite, subject to endless borrowing, augmentation, reframing, and reconstruction.

So the question to those of us who want to develop a missional hermeneutic is a simple one: is this all that we are doing, in speaking of a missional hermeneutic? Are we simply arranging the same biblical

chess pieces in a different configuration? Are we simply constructing a *bricolage* that serves our particular interests, which happen to be missional or missiologically in character? Perhaps, but I would argue otherwise, at least for a way of approaching the task that is conscious of these dangers and moves to limit them. But I don't want to make that argument simply by appealing to a massive exegetical argument which asserts that *missio dei* is in fact the deep metanarrative of Scripture. That is a *necessary*, but not a *sufficient* condition for a missional hermeneutic: necessary, because without it, such a hermeneutic cannot even begin, but not sufficient, because there will always be elements of the biblical narrative that may not perfectly fit such a framework, and render the project vulnerable to the suspicion that it is, in reality, simply a more compelling piece of *bricolage*.

So what would constitute not only a necessary, but also a sufficient condition for a missional hermeneutic? I would argue that the answer is found in the way such a hermeneutic addresses the fundamental reality of difference itself as it manifests itself in the missional encounter. I would argue that a missional hermeneutic neither suppresses difference, in the way that totalizing narratives typically do in human culture. Nor does a missional hermeneutic regard its work as simply arbitrary, subject to the sort of aesthetic mixing and matching that simply pleases in a passing, ephemeral way, depending on the needs and concern of this or that particular community at this or that particular point in time.

But if a missional hermeneutic is going to avoid becoming either a totalizing narrative that suppresses difference, or a pastiche that simply satisfies for the moment, a missional hermeneutic must take the reality of *difference* with utmost seriousness. And this brings us back to where I started a bit ago, in speaking about the centrality of cross-cultural encounter for a missional hermeneutic. Newbigin remarked long ago (and George Hunsberger wrote an entire dissertation on the topic^[2]), that there is a striking providence in the way that the New Testament unfolds--a providence that, as Newbigin would argue, originates deep in the divine electing purpose for humanity as a whole. That providence is that we all should hear the gospel--at least when we hear it most transformingly--from someone who is deeply "other," from someone who is *not like us*.

Already in the New Testament, Jews only discover the fullness of the gospel when they see it take root among Gentiles; and Gentiles only discover the fullness of life when they hear the good news from those strange Jews. In other words, there is something about the gospel which only discloses its deepest and truest transforming power when it crosses cultural boundaries; when speaker and hearer, in the midst of deep and abiding difference, find a still deeper unity with each other in Jesus Christ. A missional hermeneutic recognizes this, and places it at the center of the hermeneutical task: the most important things that God has to teach us--and the only way that our apparently fundamental difference and aloneness can be overcome--can only be learned when we hear the gospel from someone who is different from us in deep and abiding ways. In this way, the hermeneutical task and the goal toward which the gospel itself is directed are finally the same goal: the reconciliation of all things. This reconciliation happens, however, not in our constructed narratives, but only in Jesus Christ. It is apprehended, not comprehended; tasted, but not consumed. A missional hermeneutic thus must continually break itself open again to the reconciling work of God in Christ, lest any of our constructed narratives displace the true reconciler.

Here we come to what I believe is the heart of a missional hermeneutic: Not simply a claim about God--that God is on a mission to this world in which the church is invited to participate, necessary as that may be (and it *is* necessary for a missional hermeneutic!). Not simply a claim about the biblical narrative--that it finds its deepest and most encompassing frame in such a vision of God and God's mission, as necessary as that may be. Not simply a claim about the *purpose* of the biblical narratives to equip the church for mission, as necessary as that may be. Not simply an attentiveness to the transformative dynamics of the context in which the gospel message is heard, as necessary as that may be, and not even simply a focus on the centrality of the gospel as interpretative matrix, as necessary as that may be.

But in addition to all these things--in fact completing and focusing all these things, a missional

hermeneutic calls us to center the interpretative vision upon a text such as Col. 3:11: "In that renewal there is no longer Jew nor Greek, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!" From a purely human perspective, difference can never be overcome; it inevitably results either in violence and suppression of difference, or else in an endlessly fluid and shifting matrix of images and discourses. But the gospel holds out a vision for a deeper and transformed vision of what it means to be human. That image is the body of Christ, in which difference is not erased, but rather called into something deeper, richer, and more powerful. It is a vision of reconciliation without uniformity; of a world in which our endlessly shifting patterns of *bricolage* are caught up into an even deeper harmony, a song the melody of which we are still only beginning to learn.

That's the missional hermeneutic I want to work towards: one which engages the reality of difference as deeply as the post-modern world does, but which helps that same post-modern world to hear an even deeper song, which draws all of us, with our divergent voices, into the music of the spheres, into the Body of Christ.

What differences will this make, concretely, in the interpretation of Scripture? First, I think it is important not to forget the themes that George speaks of in this essay. All of them are necessary! But injecting this cross-cultural appreciation of the significance of difference will bring certain emphases and practices to the fore. First, it will underscore the critical link between interpretation and the various practices of cross-cultural encounter and friendship, without which missional interpretation will remain abstract and ungrounded. Secondly, it will lift up the *parabolic* dimension of Scripture, which opens us up to a God who continually draws us out of our comfort zones and into mission. Thirdly, it will invite us to lift up from Scripture a theological *anthropology* that cultivates a vision of reconciliation as indispensable to a full humanity. This reconciling vision provides a specific focus and direction to theology and ecclesiology, inviting a vision not only of the overcoming of hostility, but more deeply of the bridging of difference and the overcoming of *indifference*. Finally, this approach invites academic research that focuses upon the significance of cross-cultural encounters within the biblical text, and thus invites the exploration of the missional encounter of the people of God with their surroundings as a clue to the core movements of the text.

[1] Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

[2] George R. Hunsberger, *Bearing the witness of the Spirit: Lesslie Newbigin's theology of cultural plurality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

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