

Mission as Hermeneutic for Scriptural Interpretation

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The title of this chapter could be read in at least two ways, which are certainly not mutually exclusive. One could take it to mean that the church's practice of mission is a form of scriptural interpretation. The Bible is the sort of text that calls for interpretation not only by means of more text but also by the practice of what it preaches. Could anyone really understand what it means to love enemies without doing it, or at least seeing it done? That the church's mission in and to the world is the *practice* of the biblical text in which the text is constantly being interpreted is important, and I shall return to it at the end of the chapter.¹ But it depends, I think, on the other possible meaning of my title. In this case the title refers to a missionary hermeneutic of Scripture: in other words, a way of reading the Bible for which mission is the hermeneutical key, much as, for example, liberation is the hermeneutical key for the way of reading the Bible that liberation theology advocates. A missionary hermeneutic of this kind would not be simply a study of the theme of mission in the biblical writings, but a way of reading the whole of Scripture with mission as its central interest and goal.² Of course, such a missionary hermeneutic could and should be only one way of reading Scripture among others, since mission itself is not the comprehensive subject of the whole Bible. But a missionary hermeneutic would be a way of reading Scripture that sought to understand what the church's mission really is in the world as Scripture depicts that mission, and thereby to inspire and inform the church's missionary praxis. Such a hermeneutic, one that reads the Bible with a view to mission, should properly be developed in reciprocal relationship with the practice of mission as itself a practice of interpreting Scripture. In the preliminary sketch I am offering now of the character of a missionary hermeneutic, it will be possible to indicate only one major aspect of that relationship with praxis, at the end of the chapter.

A Missionary Hermeneutic and Biblical Studies

To situate such a missionary hermeneutic within the academic discipline (or disciplines) of biblical studies as practiced in the Western world today, it is important to stress that its hermeneutical context would not be the academic guild of biblical scholars itself, whose largely self-generated agenda increasingly excludes the church from its context and implied audience. This agenda often reflects the interests and concerns of nonbelieving scholars in the context of the academy, usually adopting the newest items on the agenda of other academic disciplines, and it addresses Christians only insofar as they can be trained or persuaded to limit their interests in the Bible to those that are also of secular interest. The context in the academy has much to offer the believing scholar and a Christian audience, but a missionary hermeneutic must also transcend it. It must address the church in its mission to the world. More specifically, I suggest, its dialogue partners—not simply its audience—should be those who seek to live Christianity as a countercultural movement in our particular post-Christian society. It must share the recognition, now relatively widespread among Western Christians, that the church in the West is now in a missionary situation, in the sense in which Christians in the West once regarded the situation of churches in many other parts of the world as missionary. While it was a mistake to suppose that the church in any situation ever lacks a missionary vocation in that situation, the recent recognition of our current situation as missionary is recognition of a real change, from a society at least aspiring to the description “Christian,” to a culture largely indifferent or even positively hostile to the Christian faith. A missionary hermeneutic in the West today must address such a situation without by any means neglecting the global context in which the various churches find themselves situated both similarly and differently.

Two current trends in biblical hermeneutics are especially favorable to a missionary hermeneutic. These are canonical interpretation (the reading of Scripture as a canonical whole) and narrative interpretation (which recognizes the way narrative creates its own world in front of the text and so interprets our world for us, how narrative opens up new possibilities of living that change us and our

world, how we are given our identities by the narratives of our own lives and the wider narratives to which they relate). Scripture read as a canonical whole tells a story, a metanarrative about all reality, within which are told many other stories and within which, of course, nonnarrative literature also finds its place. In the interests of a missionary hermeneutic I suggest we focus on one prominent aspect of the narrative shape of the biblical story: its movement from the particular to the universal. This direction of the biblical story corresponds to the biblical God, who is the God of the one people Israel and the one human being Jesus Christ, and is also the Creator and Lord of all things. The identity of this God is itself a narrative identity, a particular identity God gives himself in the particular story of Israel and Jesus, and an identity that itself drives the narrative toward the universal realization of God's kingdom in all creation. In the narrative world of the Bible the people of God are also given their identity in this movement from the particular to the universal, an identity whose God-given dynamic has traditionally been summed up in the word "mission."

From Particular to Universal: Temporal, Spatial, and Social Aspects

The movement of the biblical narrative from the particular to the universal has three aspects: the temporal, the spatial, and the social. The *temporal* movement of the narrative runs from creation to the eschatological future, from the old to the new, reconstructing the past in memory and constructing the future in expectation. Within this movement, mission is movement into the new future of God. It is the movement of the people of God whose identity is found not only in the narrative of the past but also in their being turned by that narrative toward the coming of God's kingdom. The possibilities the narrative opens up for them, when they find themselves in it, are those God gives as they live toward his future. Temporally, mission is movement into the ever new future.

Temporal movement is not, as such, necessarily from the particular to the universal, but in the case of the biblical narrative it is. From Genesis 12 to Revelation the narrative is always in transition from a particular past toward the universal future. This is so definitively in the movement from the history of Jesus to his parousia and the coming of the kingdom in all creation. It is his life, death, and resurrection that open up God's new future for all creation, and so it is only as the universal future of Jesus, as the future projected by his particular story, that the New Testament knows the future. Mission is the movement that takes place between the sending of Jesus by his Father and the future coming of Jesus in the kingdom of his Father.

The *spatial* or *geographical* movement of the biblical narrative runs from one place to every place, from the center to the periphery, from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. This too is the divine movement of God's saving purpose from his particular presence in the temple in the midst of his own people toward the coming of his universal kingdom. The church finds its identity also within this geographical movement. Spatially, mission is movement toward ever new horizons.

I shall discuss this geographical aspect of mission in more detail shortly. Biblical scholars who usually take history seriously rarely take geography equally seriously, but literal and theological geography forms a very significant aspect of the biblical narrative. A missionary hermeneutic requires not only a biblical-theological version of Paul Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative*, but also a biblical-theological version of his (nonexistent) *Space and Narrative*.

Movement in time and space is also movement of people, movement from person to person, people to people. The Old Testament typically reckons time in genealogies, and the New Testament measures space in journeys. The *social* or, we could say, numerical movement of the biblical narrative is from the one to the many, from Abraham to the nations, from Jesus to every creature in heaven, on earth, and under the earth. Socially, mission is a movement that is always being joined by others: the movement, therefore, of an ever new people.

Anticipating the Universal Goal: The Mission of the Church

Many biblical narratives portray instances of temporal, spatial, and social movement from the particular toward the universal. Historical or even -realistic fictional narratives cannot, of course, portray the attainment of the universal goal of the movement. They can portray only the ever-recurrent setting out

from the particular toward the universal in a movement that can move in a universal direction only by way of other particulars, since the goal is not an abstract universal but the gathering of all particulars into the one kingdom of the one God. This goal is portrayed not in realistic narrative but in a rich variety of narrative images. We can sample these now by attending to three, each representing one aspect of the movement, to be found in the Gospels.

In Jesus's parable of the seed that grows by itself (Mark 4:26–29), the temporal aspect is most prominent. While the farmer lives his normal life from day to day, the seed he sows sprouts and grows until the moment for harvest—a common image of the eschatological consummation—arrives. He does not know how it grows. Jewish farmers in first-century Palestine would think less of a process of natural cause and effect, more of an annual miracle, the direct act of God's power and generosity, as in Paul's observation that he planted and Apollos watered, but it was God who gave the growth (1 Cor. 3:6). From the seed planted in Jesus's ministry to the eschatological harvest, the movement is not humanly calculable or achievable: it is the gift of God. The church in its missionary vocation is not so much the agent of the process as its product on the way to its God-given goal.

Second, in the parable of the mustard seed (Mark 4:30–33 and parallels), the spatial aspect is stressed, in the contrast between the smallest of all seeds and the greatest of all shrubs into which it grows. The sizeable shrub that the mustard plant actually is, is so described as to evoke the image of the mythological world tree, which from its trunk at the center of the world overshadows the whole world with its branches. In Daniel (4:10–12) and Ezekiel (17:22–23) it was already an image of God's universal kingdom, the birds in its branches representing the nations that enjoy the blessings of God's rule. Here it is not the process of growth that is the point, but that the insignificant beginnings will lead to the astonishingly great end result. No more than in the case of our first parable should we assimilate this parable to a modern ideology of progress. The church is never far from the insignificance of Jesus and his band of unimpressive followers. It is always setting out from the particular in the direction of God's incalculable gift of everything.

The third parabolic story from the Gospels is an acted parable: the miraculous catch of fish that in both Luke and John is intended to illustrate Jesus's designation of the disciples as fishers of people. In the epilogue to John (21:2–11), the fishing story serves a similar function to the great commission at the end of Matthew's Gospel. It previews the church's mission that lies ahead of the gospel narrative itself. Also, in John the emphasis is on the social or numerical aspect of the metanarrative movement: the fishing disciples are seven (the number of completeness) and so representative of all, while the catch is counted and numbers 153 fish. If this number is rightly considered the number of kinds of fish there are, it suggests the inclusion of people of all nations in the church, and in any case it suggests a large number.³ Unlike the two parables of growth, in this case the activity of the church itself in the movement from particular to universal is pictured, but the fishing is futile until Jesus intervenes. The results of mission are always the gift of God.

In these three examples we see how the church's mission takes place between its commissioning by God and the coming of the kingdom of God. It lives from the God who gives and sends and toward the God who gives and comes. We can see how the world of possibilities the biblical narratives create for their readers is not simply a different way of seeing the world (though it is that), nor are the possibilities such as the church's mission itself can achieve. The missionary church's "passion for the possible"⁴ is a passion for what is possible with God: for what the church, living faithfully and expectantly, receives as divine gift in every anticipation of the coming kingdom. The movement from the particular to the universal in which the church's mission belongs should not be confused with the progressivism of the modern world. It is not a steadily cumulative process in which we move ever further away from the biblical narratives. We are always beginning again from the biblical narratives that still open up unexpected possibilities for our own future within the future of Jesus Christ. We are always figuratively starting again from Jerusalem on our way to the ends of the earth; we are always starting again from Jesus, who is the one human for all others; and we are always starting again from Pentecost, the event that gives birth to the new community on its way to the new future.

The New Testament has a surprising way of speaking of the universal goal of mission as though it were almost or even already achieved. In terms of our three aspects of the movement from particular to universal, we can say that the New Testament indulges in temporal, geographical, and numerical

hyperbole. Temporally, as is well known, it anticipates the parousia of Jesus in the near future. Geographically, Paul can tell the Roman Christians that their “faith is proclaimed throughout the whole world” (Rom. 1:8; cf. 1 Pet. 5:9), even though he was particularly conscious when writing Romans that there were not yet churches in parts of the Roman Empire. Socially or numerically, Colossians 1:23 can claim that the gospel “has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven.”

All three forms of hyperbole are especially evident in the book of Revelation if read as addressing its first readers. In some respects they parallel the Roman Empire’s patently exaggerated claim to rule the world—exaggerated not because of our own knowledge of continents unknown to the ancients, but because much of the well-known world of the time lay beyond the empire’s borders. Much as the empire’s political theology required the claim to universal rule, so the early church’s eagerness for the coming universal kingdom of God found expression in hyperbole.

But at the same time the New Testament’s story of the church’s mission in the New Testament period noticeably stops short of its universal goal. In terms of narrative function, we could say that it stops short at the point where we come in. Just as many interpreters of the Hebrew Bible suppose that the Pentateuch reached its final form in the period of the Babylonian exile and so ends its story of the Israelites of old at a point comparable with the position of the Israelites in Babylon, poised to reenter and to repossess the promised land, so the New Testament narrative leaves the task of mission incomplete, as it has been for every generation of readers. Paul’s intention of going on from Rome to Spain is not fulfilled, at least within the pages of Scripture. That in Christ “there is no longer Greek and Jew, . . . barbarian [and] Scythian” (Col. 3:11) opens up a whole vista of as yet unevangelized savages (for as savages, worse than barbarians, Scythians were conventionally regarded) in the little-known northern reaches of the world beyond the Black Sea. The “great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” (depicted in Rev. 7) is far from the reality of the church at the end of the first century, when the number of Christians probably could have been counted at least as accurately as Josephus numbers the Essenes and the Pharisees. The New Testament gives the church in every age its missionary identity by plunging it *in medias res* where the words of the great commission still ring in its ears.

Two Directions of the Church’s Mission: Centripetal and Centrifugal

I do not, of course, mean that the New Testament finds us literally with Paul in Rome or with Titus in Dalmatia (cf. 2 Tim. 4:10). At this point we need to look more closely at the geographical aspect of the movement from the particular to the universal. Studies of the precedents for missionary thinking in the Old Testament and of the beginnings of missionary practice in the New Testament frequently contrast two directions of movement: the centripetal and the centrifugal.⁵ The expectation in the Old Testament prophets, that the nations will come to acknowledge and to serve the God of Israel, is usually depicted as the coming of the nations to Jerusalem, to the center where God is present and worshiped. It is this expectation that appears, for example, in Jesus’s saying that many will come from the east and from the west and eat with the patriarchs in the kingdom of God (Matt. 8:11). The New Testament understanding of mission is said to be novel, not in its expectation of the conversion of the gentile nations, but in the idea of mission to them: that is, of going out from the center to the periphery. In fact, there are hints of this in the prophets (Isa. 2:3b; 66:19; Jonah), while conversely the centripetal image also appears in the New Testament (see below). The two are not mutually exclusive, especially when, as we shall see, the geography becomes more metaphorical than literal.

The dominant centrifugal image is that of the sending of an individual. Frequently used of God’s sending a prophet to God’s own people (Moses, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jesus himself), its sense is of authorization to speak and act in God’s name, a meaning retained in the sending of disciples by God or Jesus (John 20:21; Rom. 10:15; 1 Cor. 1:17). Especially when used of sending to other nations, it acquires a more strongly geographical nuance, as already in Isaiah’s prophecy of the survivors who will be sent to the nations (Isa. 66:19) and then in the sending of apostles (Acts 13:4; 22:21; 26:17), though authorization to speak remains the more important meaning. Major centripetal images are the city set on a high mountain for all to see (Isa. 2:2–3; Matt. 5:14), and the light whose shining into the darkness draws people to it (Isa. 60:1–3; Tobit 13:11; Matt. 5:14–16; Phil. 2:15; Rev. 21:23–24), both taken up from Isaiah in the Gospels

and in other parts of the New Testament. While both types of image are used of Jesus himself (e.g., John 8:12; 12:32, 46; 20:21), normal biblical usage reserves the centrifugal image for individuals and the centripetal image for the community.

The literal geographical use of these images depends on the idea of the centrality of Jerusalem, which the earliest Christian mission certainly assumed and to which the book of Acts continues to refer when Jesus tells the apostles they are to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). This is the geography of the book of Isaiah, in which the ends of the earth (e.g., Isa. 45:22) are the furthest extent of the earth as viewed from its geographical and theological center on mount Zion. This geography is important even for the way Paul conceived his mission (Rom. 15:19). But with the fall of Jerusalem, if not earlier for some, the Christian movement lost its physical center. We can observe the spatial imagery thereby losing its literal spatial sense but retaining a metaphorical meaning when Ephesians speaks of “those who were near” and “those who were far off” (Eph. 2:13, 17), language borrowed from Isaiah 57:19, to refer to Israel and the gentiles, respectively insiders and outsiders to God’s covenant with Israel, able and not able to enter God’s presence in the temple (Eph. 2:12). But in the church, both have access to God in Christ. God’s presence is now among his people in the metaphorical temple they compose (2:21). This new center is everywhere and nowhere, just as with the advent of modern geography and postmodern globalization the ends of the earth are everywhere and nowhere. To substitute another physical center for Jerusalem, whether Rome or Byzantium in earlier times, or western Europe in the modern age of missions, was always a mistake. God’s people move from place to place, but not from a geographical center to a geographical periphery. The permanent value of the two kinds of image—centrifugal and centripetal—is not tied to any particular geography, though it will always, like all human life, have geographical contexts. The church’s mission requires both the individuals who, authorized by God to communicate his message, go out from the community to others, near or far, and also the community that manifests God’s presence in its midst by its life together and its relationships to others. The image of witness, which lies near the heart of the biblical understanding of mission, transcends the two aspects.

Another Missionary Image: Exiles among the Nations

There is, however, also a third geographical image, which comes into its own with the loss or the lack of a physical center. This is the image of God’s people as exiles among the nations. Luke’s account of the movement of the gospel from Jerusalem outward depicts a literal diaspora of the Jerusalem church, driven by persecution from Jerusalem, some as far as Antioch, where the gentile mission first began in earnest. With the loss of a sense of a physical center of the Christian movement in Jerusalem, the way is clear for writers like the authors of Hebrews and 1 Peter to represent Christians anywhere as aliens and exiles among the nations, sojourning like the patriarchs in lands that are not their own, awaiting their homecoming to the heavenly Jerusalem that will come down to earth in the future. In recent times the image has suffered from association with a nonbiblical kind of otherworldliness, but its positive significance for mission is its call to the church to be a countercultural movement, living for a different God in a different way and with a different future in view. It may be that this image will come into its own again as the church in the postmodern West reconceptualizes its missionary relationship to a post-Christian society. The church in the West may have to get used to the idea that its own center in God, from which it goes out to others in proclamation and compassion, is actually a position of social and cultural marginality. This may improve its witness to the Christ who was himself usually also found at the margins.

Is the Universality of the Biblical Story and Mission Oppressive?

In considering all three aspects of the biblical narrative’s movement from the particular to the universal I have spoken in ways that, in our contemporary cultural context, almost invite the postmodern critique of all metanarratives as oppressive. Isn’t this movement a kind of narrative imperialism or ecclesiastical globalization, a form of self-aggrandizement on the church’s part, in which the church universalizes its own story, foists it on others, subjects others to it, suppresses their own stories, and deprives them of the opportunity to write their own stories? Is it not even the case, it might be asked, that the Christian church’s

drive to universalize its own story at others' expense is the root of the whole modern phenomenon of totalizing narratives, from the Enlightenment idea of progress, through European imperialism, Marxism, Nazism, down to global capitalism and the Americanization of the world, with all the implications for violent suppression and ideological repression of human freedom and diversity?

That some of these narratives have indeed applied a veneer of Christianity to justify themselves, and that the church and its mission have sometimes been implicated in both the brighter and the darker sides of these manifestations of modernity, cannot be denied. Our question must be whether the biblical narrative of movement from the particular to the universal has anything that essentially distinguishes it from such dubious totalization. Or must we take refuge in a radical pluralism that can tolerate only local narratives with no pretensions to wider relevance and renounce altogether the desire for meaning that requires some sketch of the meaning of the whole if we are to live meaningful stories of our own? At stake is not only the human quest for narrative meaning but also the claims of a God who is other than radically unknowable. I take the postmodern critique not as a prescription of what is thinkable or not, but as a critique that can assist Christian and biblical theology, so long as it does not overstep the limits of critique.

This charge is answerable only by considering the content of the church's witness. This motif of witness, drawn like so much of the New Testament's missionary conceptuality and vocabulary from Deutero-Isaiah and developed especially in the Gospel of John and the book of Revelation, imagines history as a global contest for the truth in which the God of Israel and Jesus will demonstrate his true and sole deity to the nations. God's people are the witnesses to his truth and his great acts of salvation. The emphasis in this image is not so much on the authorization of a spokesperson, but on the ability to speak from observation and experience of the God whose identity is not universally evident in the mere nature of things but must be known from his particular history with Israel and Jesus. He is indeed the Creator and Lord of all things, never more emphatically than in the calls for all to acknowledge his true deity in Deutero-Isaiah and Revelation, but who this Creator and Lord truly is appears from his particular history with Israel and Jesus. This is why the Scriptures often associate mission with the making known of God's name, as in the command to baptize in Matthew's great commission: God's name names the narrative identity he gives himself in the biblical story.

Witness to this God is always also witness against idolatry, contending with the false witnesses to the idols who are no-gods.⁶ The projects of the idols are indeed often projections of the aspirations and frustrations of the human will to power. We might think today, for example, of the greedy, never-satisfied idols that lurk behind the ideology of consumerism in its project to dominate the whole of life and the whole globe. To the domination of the no-gods, the rule of the true God is opposed not as a rival of the same kind but as qualitatively different. It must be characterized by telling the stories of the exodus from pharaoh's tyranny, of the forms of human living together that are nourished by the Sinai covenant, of the suffering servant, of Jesus's proclamation and enactment of the kingdom, of his rejection and cross, of the discipleship and martyrdom of his followers. For resisting the subversion of mission by the human will to power, the first four chapters of 1 Corinthians are seminal. What Paul encounters there is not some gnostic spiritualizing of the gospel message, but a desire that the gospel message serve the projects of self-promotion and self-advancement that formed the social dynamic of Corinthian society. Paul confronts such projects with the cross of Christ that shows the gospel to be radically unassimilable to such projects. When he states that in his preaching at Corinth he decided to know nothing but Christ crucified (1 Cor. 2:2), he does not mean that he said nothing about God except the cross. He means that he spoke of that God whose narrative identity inescapably includes the cross. It is significant that Paul's account in fact appeals not only to the cross but also extensively to the Old Testament characterization of God as the God who characteristically chooses the powerless and the insignificant (1:19–21, 27–31; 3:18–20). In the cross, God acts in character, insofar as he is known from the biblical story, but also in a way that is decisive for the plot of the biblical narrative's movement from the particular to the universal. Here is God's self-identification as one human being identified with all human beings, the particular that is also the universally salvific; and that self-identification is not with humanity in its self-aggrandizement, but with humanity in its degradation, humanity victimized by the human will to power.

Paul's account of the cross as the critical test of the content of the church's witness is also—the themes are intertwined in these early chapters of 1 Corinthians—an account of the cross as the critical test of the

form of the church's witness. The way that, as an apostle of Christ, Paul lived and preached could serve the gospel only by not conforming to the social values and strategies that the message of the cross contradicts but that the Corinthian Christians still espoused. That the church's mission is inseparable from the church's community life as the living of an alternative way in contradistinction to its sociocultural context is not always noticed to be as important in Paul as it is in the Sermon on the Mount or in James. But whereas God has, so to speak, plotted his own narrative identity irrevocably in the cross of Christ, the church's narrative identity in its mission remains unstable, insofar as its conformity to the cross is in question at every new juncture of its story, and its faithfulness to the crucified God has to be sought and received in the face of ever new temptations to self-aggrandizement.

A further twist of the postmodern critique regards even the message of the cross as a sophisticated form of manipulation of others.⁷ In the notion that the cross has a transformative effect on human lives is hidden, it is alleged, the same inescapable will to power, seeking only a more subtle way of dominating others. But here the real issue becomes the nature of human autonomy and its absolutizing in postmodern thought. Such an application of the hermeneutic of suspicion can never be satisfied, for it presupposes that the hidden agenda in all human relationships is the will to power and must therefore never cease to suspect. Against this corrosive cynicism, so prevalent in our culture, the biblical message of the cross asks us to trust that the will to power is not the ultimate reality of things, that the true God is the God who is different.

Further Reflection on the Nature of the Biblical Metanarrative

Although the biblical narrative has a plot—I have mentioned some key elements in the plot—the narrative is by no means as simple and obviously coherent as any attempt to summarize it might suggest. Remarkably, I think that nowhere in Scripture itself is there anything we could call a summary of the whole story from creation to consummation. In the collection of many narratives of different kinds, and of other kinds of literature that compose the canon, it is easy to lose sight of any overall direction in the larger narrative. For example, the movement from the particular to the universal that has been my main concern is by no means apparent in large parts of the Old Testament histories read apart from their larger canonical context. As well as the relative coherence, the relative incoherence of the biblical story needs stressing against the suspicion that the coherence is achieved at the expense of suppressing the incalculable diversity, the aporias and resistance to meaning that belong to all human experience of life. The biblical plot is not a procrustean bed, but more like a compass on a highly adventurous and dangerous journey. Scripture does not always make it easy for us to find the way, and it gives far more space and attention to those we might suppose to have lost the way or never known it than a narrow orthodoxy might expect. There is the book of Job confronting a perplexity at the heart of biblical faith, but virtually without reference to the Old Testament story of God and his people. There is Ecclesiastes, almost postmodern in its inability to make sense of the story. There is the book of Esther, in which something like the Old Testament story goes on, but in a narrative world as apparently godless as that of contemporary secular people. From the perspective of the main plot of the biblical narrative, these and others may seem marginal books, but they should not be too readily pushed to the neglected edge of the canon or too easily assimilated to the rest of Scripture. Actually in their problematic and marginal character they too may be resources for a missionary church.

As well as this complexity and diversity in Scripture, we should notice also the relative openness of the biblical narrative. The conclusion of the story, though describable only figuratively, is in important respects specified, and alone makes it possible for the biblical writers or ourselves to construe the world as a narrative. But, *in medias res* and on the way to this conclusion, the church's immediate future is always open. If Scripture, as some recent writers propose, can be seen as a script that we are to perform, then there is not only scope for improvisation; there are directions from the author that positively *require* improvisation. The narrative identity of the church in its mission, I said before, is unstable. That suggests the possibilities for failure and apostasy, but more positively we can say it is unfinished, on the way to the conclusion that in some sense we know, but open to all kinds of possible ingredients in the making of that

conclusion. The biblical narratives constantly set the church's mission moving from the right starting point and in the right direction, but every subplot is unique, and its contributions to the whole and to the conclusion are not calculable.

This is where, to our canonical and narrative hermeneutic, we must add, as essential to the church's mission, an important element of contextualization. Not all practitioners of narrative hermeneutics take the contexts of the readers of Scripture seriously. There is a real danger of absorbing these contexts into the narrative world of Scripture in a way that suppresses their own narrative particularity. A missionary hermeneutic cannot tolerate that. Rather, we must stress that the biblical narrative in its openness to the future is open to the inclusion of other narratives in their own particularity and diversity, narratives of other times and places, other groups and individuals, narratives with which the church's mission brings the biblical metanarrative into relationship. From the New Testament itself we could tell very different stories of the church of Jerusalem or Corinth or Antioch, or of the lives of Lydia or Apollos or Barnabas. The diversity can only increase with the diversity of times and places and cultures encountered as the church follows its calling to universality via every particularity. Of course the gospel's encounter with other narratives is far from uncritical. We have noticed how the message of the cross in Corinth proved so alien as to threaten the Corinthian Christians with a degree of narrative disruption they at first strongly resisted. The biblical particularity of God's own narrative identity is non-negotiable. But the effect of its encounter with other narratives is not uniform or predictable, since they each have their own particularity. This is where the element of contextualization in a missionary hermeneutic is required. It is also the point at which missionary praxis turns out to be itself a necessary part of a missionary hermeneutic.

Summary Argument

I offer the following as a summary argument of the chapter above.⁸

1. A Hermeneutic for the Kingdom of God

Following the events of September 11, 2001, Jonathan Sacks (then the Chief Rabbi in the United Kingdom) spoke of these events as the clash of two universalizing cultures and their metanarratives: Islam, on the one hand, and global capitalism, on the other. (Since 2003, Sacks's comments have become, if anything, even more relevant to the catastrophic dynamics of our contemporary world.) Sacks made a contrast between such universalizing metanarratives, with their intolerance of diversity, and a postmodern valuing of diversity and particularity. This argument raises a key contemporary question about Christianity and its biblical metanarrative. Does the evident universalism of the biblical metanarrative align it with universalizing ideologies that suppress diversity and override the particular? We might pursue an answer by exploring the relationship of the universal and the particular in the biblical metanarrative, with specific reference to Christian mission. This takes the shape of a missionary hermeneutic or hermeneutic for the kingdom of God, with the three forms of movement from the particular to the universal that were discussed earlier in the chapter: the temporal movement, the geographical movement, and the movement of people.

2. From the One to the Many

Three broad patterns in the movement of God's purpose in history according to the biblical narrative are identified as having the same shape: in each case God's purpose moves from the choice of a particular and singular person or group and moves toward the universal. They are "from Abraham to the ends of the earth," "from Israel to all the nations," and "from the king who rules from Zion to the ends of the earth." In all three cases the movement of God's purpose is already established in the Old Testament with the choice of one person (Abraham), one nation (Israel), one king (David), and one place (Zion), but in each case, already in the Old Testament, the particular starting point has a universal direction. The fourth biblical movement from the particular to the universal has a different shape: it is "to all by way of the least." The priority of the poor and the unimportant in God's mission is also for the sake of all, such that his saving purpose can reach the wealthy and the powerful only by way of the least.

3. Geography—Sacred and Symbolic

The relationship of the particular to the universal is elaborated in Scripture, not only in history, but also in geography. Biblical geography must be given its due place in our understanding of the biblical narrative. While the literal geographical horizon of the biblical world is naturally limited to the actual known world of the Bible's times and places, this geography also has a representative character that enables it to stand for the furthest possible geographical horizon. The biblical narrative works with the idea of a center of the world (Zion) and how this relates to images of mission as centripetal (the nations come to Zion) and centrifugal (the word of God goes out from Zion). In the New Testament, this orientation to a literally geographical center is transcended by metaphor. This does not deprive mission of the geographical particularity that is essential to human life, but it clears the way for an understanding of mission as from *this* particular place (wherever it may be) to *that* (wherever it may be).

4. Witness to the Truth in a Postmodern and Globalized World

In engaging the postmodern critique of all metanarratives as oppressive, it is important to distinguish the biblical metanarrative from the modern metanarratives at which the postmodern critique was originally directed. The former has distinctive characteristics that resist assimilation to such modern grand narratives as the Enlightenment idea of progress. In particular, the direction of the biblical metanarrative toward the universal is a quite different sort of globalization from the economic globalization that is the dominant global force in the contemporary world. In the light of its own metanarrative, including the priority of the poor, Christianity should be critical of, and actively resist, key aspects of global capitalism. Finally, in the face of the postmodern critique of all claims to universal truth, the concept of noncoercive witness to the truth needs emphasis. The biblical story is apt to clash with global narratives of power and with local narratives that ape them, but it is not opposed to cultural diversity as such. Its universalism does not erase the integrity of the particular, but gives the particular its essential place on the way to and within the universal kingdom of God.

1. Cf. Lesslie Newbigin's notion of "the congregation as hermeneutic of the Gospel," in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), chap. 18.

2. A useful example of such a study is Johannes Blauw, *The Missionary Nature of the Church: A Survey of the Biblical Theology of Mission* (Guildford/London: Lutterworth, 1962).

3. This was Jerome's explanation, but his statement that the Greek biologists reckoned 153 kinds of fish is open to question; for this and other explanations, see Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, Anchor Bible 29a (London: Chapman, 1971), 1074–76.

4. Ernst Bloch, "Zur Ontologie des Noch-Nicht Seines," in *Auswahl aus Seinem Schriften*, ed. Hans Heinz Holz (Hamburg: Fischer, 1967), 41.

5. E.g., Blauw, *Missionary Nature*; and Joachim Jeremias, *Jesus' Promise to the Nations*, trans. S. H. Hooke, *Studies in Biblical Theology* 24 (London: SCM, 1958).

6. Cf. Vinod Ramachandra, *Gods That Fail: Modern Idolatry and the Christian Mission* (Carlisle: Paternoster; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996).

7. E.g., Stephen D. Moore, "God's Own (Pri)son: The Disciplinary Technology of the Cross," in *The Open Text: New Directions for Biblical Studies?* ed. Francis Watson (London: SCM, 1993), 121–39.

8. These themes have been developed at greater length in my *Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World* (Carlisle: Paternoster; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003).

Mapping the Missional Hermeneutics Conversation

George R. Hunsberger

Proposals for developing what came to be called a missional hermeneutic reflect a range of basic notions about what such a hermeneutic is and how it affects biblical interpretation. In a set of recent conversations among biblical scholars, missiologists, and scholars in other theological fields, four distinct emphases can be observed for defining a missional hermeneutic: the *missio Dei* as the unitive narrative theme of the Bible, the purpose of biblical writings to equip the church for its witness, the contextual and missional locatedness of the Christian community, and the dynamic of the gospel's engagement with human cultures. In their convergence, these streams of emphasis provide foundations for the continuing development of a robust missional hermeneutic.

Prologue: "Why Isn't Bible Study More Transformational?"

Several years ago, I was invited by a friend to lead a couple of workshops among congregational leaders, clergy and otherwise, on the theme of biblical engagement. He had been a fellow traveler with many of these leaders in his capacity as director of a lay and clergy learning program at Grand View University (Iowa). Groups of pastors had for some time worked to cultivate Bible study in their congregations, believing as he did that this would be the key to transformation for the churches. After some time, they reflected on their respective experiences, and for the most part, they found that this hoped-for outcome had not materialized. As if with one voice, they asked, "Why isn't Bible study more transformational?"

I was invited to engage that daunting question with them. By that time, the Gospel and Our Culture Network (GOCN) conversation about a missional hermeneutic, which this chapter reports, had gained considerable momentum. In the prior year, it had been my role in the conversation to trace the proposals of previous years for defining "missional hermeneutics" and to explore whether some emerging framework could be discerned. I argued that in fact the seemingly disparate proposals, if taken together, displayed an intriguing confluence and gave promise for developing a robust vision for being engaged by the Scriptures in light of the missionary nature of the church.

It seemed to me that the fruit of that more academic conversation had relevance to the practical, grounded concerns of these leaders. The question and the occasion, however, demanded something more of me. What was the connection between an appropriately missional hermeneutic for reading Scripture, and the formation—the transformation—of the church? Might it be that a missional hermeneutic breaks assumed approaches to a study of the Bible? Is there inherent in a missional hermeneutic a different way of studying the Bible, a way that isn't any longer studying so much as it is imbibing? I was convinced that the answer was "yes" and that a missional hermeneutic turns on at least these three hinges.

1. *We inherit habits of a subject/object relationship to texts, ancient texts, sacred texts.* Treating the Bible as the object of our rational inquiry has brought many gains, to be sure. We have grown to treat biblical texts as occurring in particular times and places, among particular people. But along the way, the habits have the unfortunate consequence of producing a *psychological distance* between us and the text: *we* consider *it*. It is something out there, beyond us. But what if the Bible *is the acting subject*? What if we are being addressed here by God? What if God intends the reading of it to change us and makes of us a different kind of student—a disciple, in fact?
2. *We make judgments about what the text may have meant originally and what it might mean now, here, for us.* We must, of course, come to such conclusions, or at least to a sense of our difficulty in arriving at them. But along the way, this habit settles us into the judgment seat. We decide what meanings texts may have had when they were written, and what meanings they have for us now. We hold *interpretive control* in the process. But what if the Bible *makes judgments about us*? What if it calls into question