

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

our most basic assumptions, our most cherished commitments? What if it judges that our hopes are misplaced and determines for us a new and living hope? What if we don't read *it* so much as it reads *us*?

3. *We think about interpretation and application in largely individual terms.* It is true enough that each one who hears the biblical texts is brought to a place of decision: "Do I receive this, do I believe this, do I commit myself to this?" But along the way, in a society that has so deeply ingrained in us a sense of our individual identity, we get in the habit of asking "What does this mean to me? How does this apply to my life?" Even in group Bible study, we each share what we see to be the application to "my life" and are hardly capable of considering what this means to, about, and for *us*, or how it applies to our life together. Our approach to the Bible is oriented to the expectation that it speaks with *personal*, not communal, reference. But what if the Bible addresses *communities*, and not only people as individuals? What if its point of reference is to communities of people called into faithful life as the body of Christ and to each member as part of that called community?

On all three accounts, what if Lesslie Newbigin is right that the Bible is "that body of literature which—primarily but not only in narrative form—renders accessible to us the character and actions and purposes of God"?¹ What if God is *doing* something by presenting us with these scriptural words and texts? What if God is "rendering accessible" to us what God is like, what God is doing, and what God purposes for the world?

Tracing the Formative GOCN Conversation

What difference does it make if the Bible is approached from the perspective of the mission of God and the missionary nature of the church? This question has been at the center of a deliberate and serious conversation among scores of scholars who have been meeting annually since 2002 within the context of the annual meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) and the American Academy of Religion (AAR).² From its beginnings as an informal, early-morning breakfast meeting hosted by Tyndale Seminary of Toronto, the conversation became from 2005 onward a semiformal Additional Meeting in the AAR/SBL program under the sponsorship of GOCN.³ In 2009 the conversation was formalized as an "Affiliate Organization" related to SBL and continues annually as the "GOCN Forum on Missional Hermeneutics."

As this conversation unfolded over its first six years, there were signs that two things were true of the various presentations.⁴ On the one hand, there seemed to be some sharp differences emerging between the various proposals being made about what a missional hermeneutic *is*. As both participant and observer, it seemed to me that we had not achieved a uniform definition, and perhaps not even a uniform way to pose the question. Increasingly, 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 is a sign of maturation in this emerging field of hermeneutical reference.

On the other hand, there was a richness of texture and nuance with which each presentation addressed the matter of a missional hermeneutic. Apart from any other reflections about their respective accents or differences, this seemed significant. There *is* a swelling tide of imagination that converges here, arising from the influence of many disciplines and out of varieties of lived experience; we begin to see 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!

My aim here is to tease out from these conversations 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 to test whether these differences represent alternative and incommensurate paths, or complementary and synergistic ones. Or maybe both.

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 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, that controlling impulse, in each of the proposals we have heard that I will examine. I sense 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 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. And there is an important corollary to this 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.

The Missional Direction of the Story

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

Christopher Wright is perhaps the prime exemplar of this model and the one who most thoroughly and extensively plays it out. His 2005 presentation, published previously⁵ and later incorporated as the introduction to his book *The Mission of God*,⁶ offers 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 speaking of "the missional basis of the Bible."⁷ "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.' "⁸ "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."⁹ "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."¹⁰

This frames for Wright a sense of the project on which a missional hermeneutic embarks: it "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."¹¹ It rests on the fundamental judgment about "the 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."¹² 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."¹³

Two other presenters in this series followed essentially this same path. Grant LeMarquand's 2004 presentation reflected on the general topic "What the Bible Says about Mission."¹⁴ The straightforward simplicity of that stated topic belies the richness of the nuances that follow. He is deliberate about reading the Bible from the situation and experience of missional engagement, in his case in East Africa. He wrestles with holding together what often are two competing 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 (Gen. 1–12) and the ending (Rev. 4–5) of the story. In this way, he is not declaring the

principle of a missional narrative core as fundamental to a missional hermeneutic, but he is illustrating and underscoring the principle 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."¹⁵ He echoes and receives Wright's framework as the starting point for his own reading of Scripture in a missional way, while adding notes that 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 the Trinity and to God's sending of Israel and the church.¹⁶ 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."¹⁷ This he does with reference both to the mission of God and to the mission of the church.

Goheen does not explore Wright's 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 evident, as his excellent book on Lesslie Newbigin's "missionary ecclesiology" shows.¹⁸ This subtle difference between Wright and Goheen is worth further exploration.

Two comments may be added with respect to this first stream of emphasis. 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,¹⁹ to Richard Bauckham's important book *The Bible and Mission*.²⁰ Bauckham owns the sense that the Bible presents a metanarrative of a sort. But, he contends, it is one that 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, a certain circularity in this line of argument 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 circularity needs to be continuously attended to, in part by frankly acknowledging it, 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. Some of James Brownson's suggestions along this line may help.²¹ 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 "transforms 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 transformation produces a kind of "dislocation" that, 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.

The Missional Purpose of the Writings

Here, the *aim* of biblical interpretation is to fulfill the equipping purpose of the biblical writings. If the first stream of emphasis regarding a missional hermeneutic lies within the arena of biblical theology, this second one 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 most forcefully makes 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.”²² 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.²³

This purpose of equipping or forming the churches for mission 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’s 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.”²⁴ Guder concludes that “the 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.”²⁵

While Guder’s display of the importance of scriptural purpose leans most heavily on the character of the New Testament writings, others suggest a similar thing with respect to the earlier testament. Goheen, for example, affirms that “the Old Testament scriptures were written to ‘equip’ God’s people for their missional purposes.” The New Testament, he goes on to say, was also written in order to “form, equip, renew the church for their mission in the world.”²⁶

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?”²⁷ To put it another way, “How did this particular text continue the formation of witnessing communities then, and how does it do that today?”²⁸

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, 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 or 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.”²⁹

The Missional Locatedness of the Readers

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. 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.”³⁰

For this kind of reading, a particular approach is needed, 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.”³¹

There are several important features here. First, Barram takes seriously the believing community’s ownership of the Scriptures being “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?”³² 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.

James Miller, from the vantage point of his teaching in Kenya, moves with the same fundamental instinct. He affirms that a missional hermeneutic “belongs primarily in the context of the local church.” It is there that “habits of reading, practice, praying, and thinking within a missional understanding of the church *must* take root, grow and bear fruit.” A missional hermeneutic arises both from and for shared ecclesial identity and vocation, discernment and practice.³³

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, offers fascinating suggestions about the notion of “hermeneutical space,” which he defines as “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.”³⁴

Traditionally accepted hermeneutical spaces include the academic space, where “the subject of the Bible’s interpretation is the expert, the exegete, the biblical professor, the graduate of biblical sciences and other related sciences.” Another is liturgical space, in which the ordained priest or authorized layman reads and interprets the Bible “in the context of the ordinary teaching and magisterial function of the church.” Both of these, Richard says, remain legitimate, useful, and necessary. But he claims that “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.” This he calls “communitary space.”

Richard does not intend to drive a wedge between these spaces. Rather, he wants to open the church to this third and largely overlooked space, because it is here that the “spiritual, mystical, prophetic and apocalyptic creativity” of the People of God flourishes.

Barram moves one step farther. He emphasizes “an approach to biblical texts that privileges the missiological ‘location’ of the Christian community in the world as a hermeneutical key.”³⁵ His accent is not only on the approach to the text, and on the community that approaches it, but it is precisely on the community’s locatedness, as a sent community, in the world. He is convinced that “the ‘social location’ of the people of God is at the very heart of a missional hermeneutic.”³⁶ In other words, the sent community as location immediately implicates other layers of location. The community was sent to be the people of God “at this time, in this place,” to borrow the title of an excellent book by Michael Warren.³⁷ “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. The community’s mission itself is the proper location from which the Bible is interpreted.

Barram illustrates the kinds of questions he is imagining as those that arise from a community's missional location. He affirms GOCN's five missional Bible study questions³⁸ and the use Guder made of them in his Presbyterian Church (USA) General Assembly Bible Studies several years ago.³⁹ But he presses for sharper specificity and locatedness, as the following examples⁴⁰ demonstrate:

- 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?

Something very interesting is going on in the form of these questions. 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, Barram says, “precisely the kinds of critically important missional questions that my social location has conditioned me to overlook or avoid.”⁴¹ The questions then provide a kind of critical criteria by which not only our questions but also our conclusions are continuously tested. The accent on “our reading” serves 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, it is being read!

To speak about the locatedness of the community's efforts to faithfully read 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 hearers and readers. They come with questions located in their own time and place, and that puts in motion the conversation between former times and places and current ones. A fourth stream in our conversations focuses on the dynamic this sets in motion.

The Missional Engagement with Cultures

Here the gospel functions as the interpretive *matrix* within which the received biblical tradition is brought into critical conversation with a particular human context. Brownson in many ways pioneers the terms of this conversation. So far as I am able to determine, he was the first to use the phrase “missional hermeneutic.”⁴² His address at the first breakfast meeting in this series in many ways structured the paths along which the conversation moved.

By proposing in his earlier work what he calls “elements of a missional hermeneutic,” Brownson brings 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 as biblical writers address the people of their own times and places in terms of the received religious 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? While this dynamic was present within the Old Testament period, Brownson 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 doing in this regard has a parallel with what Christ followers in every place and culture are doing when they 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 finds a great deal of help in the work of his mentor J. Christiaan Beker, a Pauline scholar who engaged this dynamic in terms of the relationship between coherence and contingency in Paul's work. Brownson, however, wonders whether something else was going on for which those categories do not yet account. Investigating this question leads him ultimately to posit a third, perhaps less tangible but nonetheless critical element in what New Testament writers were doing. That is, there was some inner guidance system, an inner gyroscope, that guided these writers 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 third element was the gospel. Taken together, the dynamic interaction between tradition and context, "regulated by the gospel," comprises what Brownson calls the "interpretive matrix."⁴³

Brownson lays out his argument in this way. His foundational theological mooring place, or "discrimen" (to use David Kelsey's term),⁴⁴ is that "the mode in which God is present among the faithful is irreducibly *multicultural*."⁴⁵ 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."⁴⁶ The gospel, Brownson takes it, is most fundamentally the good news that "in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God has revealed the completion of a saving purpose for the world, to be received by faith."⁴⁷ As told to us in the New Testament, the gospel exhibits the following 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.⁴⁸

Ross Wagner 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."⁴⁹ 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 interpretations, while based on methods widely in use in his cultural context, do not find close parallels in the writings of other Jewish groups."⁵⁰ 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."⁵¹ Paul provides an example of "a bold and sweepingly revisionary rereading of scripture."⁵² Any enculturated 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 Lesslie Newbigin, Andrew Walls, Robert Schreiter, Lamin Sanneh, David Bosch, Stephen Bevans, and Kwame Bediako, to name a few. Newbigin's way of bringing into focus the dynamic involved in missional life and witness is to speak of a "three-cornered relationship . . . between the traditional culture, the 'Christianity' of the missionary, and the Bible."⁵³ The dynamic he identifies is relevant not only when the culture in view is that of another, important though that may be. It is the dynamic of the daily life and witness of every local Christian community, with respect to its own culture. As I argue elsewhere, the church always finds itself "sitting on both sides" in the encounter of the gospel with its culture.⁵⁴ Because the culture is never merely "out there" somewhere but is one in terms of which Christians—like others—imagine and navigate their world, the church sits very much on the culture side in the encounter. It is involved in what Newbigin called the "inner dialogue" as the gospel continually approaches it with life-altering good news. In this dialogue, by reading the Scriptures faithfully and welcoming its own "continuing conversion," the church is being shaped day by day to be a faithful expression of the gospel in its social setting, in life, word, and deed. Because of that, the church finds itself

sitting on the gospel side in the encounter as well as the culture side. It was in this sense that Newbigin spoke often of the congregation as “the hermeneutic of the gospel.” Yuckman notes how essential a component this is for 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?’”⁵⁵

Confluence and Synergy

Teasing out these four streams of emphasis for grounding a missional hermeneutic runs the risk of suggesting that they are mutually exclusive, perhaps even competing, visions. Certainly, each emphasis makes a somewhat discrete contribution toward a faithful missional hermeneutic. But “somewhat” may be the operative word. None of them is so independent of the others that it can stand alone. Each depends on and begs for the other accents. A certain kind of synergy begins to exhibit itself, and that is what makes this ongoing conversation promising. In addition, there is an interesting way these accents spread across matters to which any hermeneutical proposal must attend. These accents make proposals regarding the *framework* for a missional hermeneutic (the narrative of the *missio Dei*), the *aim* of a missional hermeneutic (ecclesial formation for witness), the *approach* of a missional hermeneutic (socially located questions), and the interpretive *matrix* of a missional hermeneutic (the gospel as the interpretive key). In substance and girth, these conversations have provided foundations for the continuing development of a robust missional hermeneutic.

The GOCN Forum on Missional Hermeneutics continues to build on these foundations. In its self-definition and in its annual call for papers, the forum identifies these four contributing and converging streams of emphasis as a working hypothesis of sorts, inviting work in specific biblical materials in order to test their adequacy and give further development to the field. In fact, the forum’s current purpose statement shows with the addition of a fifth point of accent the kind of maturation that is underway. It is also an invitation to the conversation!

The Gospel and Our Culture Network Forum on Missional Hermeneutics . . . explores the intersections of missiology, ecclesiology, and biblical interpretation, focusing on hermeneutical issues that arise in view of the Church’s missional character. In particular, presenters and participants at the Forum explore how faithful interpretation of Scripture needs to pay attention to a number of interlocking realities in the text: (1) the ways in which the biblical text renders the identity of the *missio Dei*, the God who is engaged in mission to the whole creation; (2) the ways in which the biblical text is shaped for the purpose of forming a people of God who are called to participate in God’s mission to the creation; (3) the ways in which the biblical text evokes and challenges a missionally located community’s interpretive readings and questions; (4) the ways in which the biblical text relates the received tradition to a particular context in light of the good news of the reign of God in Jesus Christ; and (5) the ways in which the biblical text discloses its fullest meaning only when read together with the culturally and socially “other.”⁵⁶

Epilogue: Six Years on—A Fellow Traveler’s Response to the Journey Thus Far

The 2002–7 presentations in this conversation attempted to answer a definitional question: What is a missional hermeneutic? Following the development of the rubric described above, the 2009–14 meetings of the forum addressed the question: How does a missional hermeneutic play out in the actual engagement of texts? That is to say, the forum was testing the thesis that the rubric hammered out in the earlier period is sufficiently robust to lead to fruitful and faithful interpretations of texts, rooted in a sense of God’s purposes and the missional nature of the church. This it did by engaging particular scriptural texts—either texts related to a particular theme (exile, for example) or texts within a particular portion of the biblical corpus (Gen. 1–11, for example). The process included peer selection of proposed paper topics, prepared formal responses, and, many times, small cluster conversations around particular texts. On several occasions, a book of importance to the field was explored in conversation with its author, in particular, C. Kavin Rowe’s *World Upside Down*, Michael Gorman’s *Reading Revelation Responsibly*, and N. T. Wright’s *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*.⁵⁷

A review of the forum’s body of work since 2009, in this participant’s estimation, leads to the

conclusion that the fivefold rubric in the forum's self-definition (as stated above) stands the test of time. It proves to be generative and sustains a vigorous conversation among scholars of various fields. By its continued use, a significant degree of reception is presumed.

In addition to that general note, several characteristics of the recent conversation are worth noting and reflecting upon. They also may serve to focus areas in which further, deliberate work would be useful.

Subtle but Important Shift in Language

Is there any significance to be attached to the forum's shift from the phrase "missional hermeneutic," the focus of conversation in the early period, to the phrase "missional hermeneutics," which has been embedded in the forum's self-description since 2009? I think there is, and it was the fruit of conscious reflection by the steering committee (of which Michael Barram is the chair). In one sense, the shift reflects a sense that the forum was not claiming or pursuing one particular *missional hermeneutic*. Rather, while seeking what might be said in common, it did not want to foreclose dialogue among different, even competing, *missional hermeneutics* (in its true plural sense).

But that is only one side of the added "s"—its pluralizing sense. More important is the "plural but singular in construction" sense of *hermeneutics*. It is a singular thing, as much as a hermeneutic is a singular thing. But they are different kinds of thing. The Merriam-Webster online dictionary puts it this way. A hermeneutic is "a method or principle of interpretation." Hermeneutics is "the study of methodological principles of interpretation." (Compare ethic, ethics, etc.) On the one hand, this seemed to be more conducive to the forum's location within SBL. But that aside, it seemed to represent better the ongoing enterprise with which the forum was engaged, not to establish *a* missional hermeneutic but to explore *the kind of* hermeneutics that is informed by a missional sense.

I believe this is an important shift in the stated purpose of the forum. For one thing, it cautions us against treating "mission" as a kind of hermeneutical key, riding roughshod over a whole range of hermeneutical matters that are equally at stake in biblical interpretation, missional as well as otherwise. The circularity that at one level must be frankly acknowledged carries with it the danger that the meanings of texts may be prejudged and therefore not heard in their fullness.

Elasticity of the Phrase "Missional Hermeneutics"

Richard Hays called our attention to this in the course of his response to a paper presented by Michael Barram in one of the forum's sessions in 2012. Hays asked what the meaning of "hermeneutic" might be if not in regard to "Paul's interpretation of scripture." As I understood it, Barram was discerning in Paul a kind of hermeneutic operating in his conversation with the church in Corinth that provides for us a *hermeneutic for embodying the gospel* in our own day. This broadening of the use of the term was evident in many ways from the beginning, and the rubric itself hints at that. Barram's earlier proposal about "located questions" envisions the way the Bible is to be understood and also the way the present day community and context are to be understood. This elasticity shows up in the range of corollary conversations that intersect with the missional hermeneutics (proper) conversation—missional theology, missional construals of church history, missional practical theology, and so on. In these and other aspects of the theological curriculum, hermeneutics is at stake (see Darrell Guder's and Michael Goheen's last two chapters in this volume). Barram saw Paul as an interpreter not only of scriptural texts but of being-gospelized communities as well. The forum's conversation has, as Hays noted, opened up an expanded range of meaning for the phrase "missional hermeneutic." This I believe is an advantage, not a detriment.

Disproportionate Attention to the First Two Streams

It becomes clearer to me as I reflect on our experiences in the forum that among the four streams of definition identified above, the accents of the first two are more located in the text (the spaces behind and within the text, as Lois Barrett suggests), and the accents of the latter two are more located in the readers (the spaces before the text). This, of course, highlights the "two horizons" in biblical interpretation: then

and there—here and now. The first pair focuses on the missional dimensions of the text (direction and intent), and the second pair focuses on the missional dynamics of the church’s life and social situation into which those texts are speaking (context-probing, and gospel as matrix). South African New Testament scholar Elna Mouton notes something similar in her book *Reading the New Testament Ethically*, in which she is calling for “an ongoing dialogue” between biblical scholarship and Christian ethics.⁵⁸ She describes what she calls “the creative dimensions of reception” in which the reader community is accountable both to the “free imaginative role of readers and their contexts” and the “inherent nature and constraints of the biblical texts.”⁵⁹

As I reflect back over our work of the last six years, it is my growing sense that our work was more directly attentive to the first pair (behind and within the text) and far less directly attentive to the second (before the text). To be sure, the latter pair is not entirely absent. But it seems that in the manner in which we crafted our sessions, and by the fact of our vocations (mostly in academe) and our location as a forum in the context of the SBL, attending to the latter in such a setting proved difficult. After all, the latter two streams are by nature local and communal practices that fall more naturally elsewhere than in the academy.

Even more disturbing, though, is the observation that, in much of the popular literature and conversation touching on missional hermeneutics, the same is true. The weight falls on the side of the first pair. Perhaps it feels safer. Perhaps people are more confident there. There are more helps on the shelf; there is more to rely on. Whatever the reasons, there are consequences regarding notions of leadership, teaching, and preaching when this is the case. The resources for a more complete missional hermeneutic appear to be unavailable to stir imagination for the Christian community’s routines and practices of its theological calling. If a missional hermeneutic provides the fruit of an overall vision of the Bible’s message (discerned and passed on) without the fruit of a robust set of habits of receiving the Scriptures and being formed by them in local missional responses, the project will have failed to achieve its full potential.

I believe that the forum needs to set as a priority a more thorough attention to the second pair of streams (the locatedness of the readers and the engagement with culture) along with the added feature: reading with the other. This might implicate specific forms of collaborative work between (or in) annual sessions. But by their nature, the second pair are located in particular contexts, and they implicate local congregations as the theologians, the acting subject that theologizes and interprets. The work that is required must involve close companionship, therefore, between academy and parish, between scholars who care about local reception of the Scriptures and local missional communities who are reading and learning to read texts in, with, and for their contexts and their missional callings.

1. Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 59.

2. These two large academic associations (AAR and SBL) draw upward of ten thousand people in combined attendance for their annual meetings, which until 2008 were held jointly on the same dates and in a common venue. Since then, they have met on different dates and at different places, but they resumed meeting jointly in November 2015.

3. The conversation began in response to an invitation extended by Tyndale Seminary of Toronto and its then Academic Dean Jeff Greenman to gather for an early-morning breakfast meeting each year. Greenman and others at Tyndale were associated with developments in the North American Gospel and Our Culture Network (GOCN) and particularly proposals for testing a model for “Missional Bible Study” (George Hunsberger, “Missional Bible Study: Discerning and Following God’s Call,” *The Gospel and Our Culture* 11.3 [1999]; available at gocn.org). They wanted to encourage scholars in biblical and other theological fields to give explicit attention to a missional hermeneutic for biblical engagement.

4. The breakfast conversations included presentations in 2002 by James V. Brownson (entitled “An Adequate Missional Hermeneutic”), in 2003 by Michael D. Barram (“Toward a Missiological Hermeneutic: The Bible and Mission in Current and Future Discussion”), and in 2004 by Grant LeMarquand (based on his “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*, ed. Ian T. Douglas [New York: Church Publishing, 2002], 9–34). The upgrade to an Additional Meeting in 2005 meant that there would be more time for extending the conversation (a two-and-a-half-hour session). In 2005, three papers were accepted for presentation, response, and discussion: by Christopher Wright (“Making Missional Sense of the Old Testament: Does It Work?”; available at galileo.stmarys-ca.edu/mbarram/Chris-Wright-SBL.htm), Colin Yuckman (“An Ulterior Gospel: The Mission of Critical Hermeneutics and the Critical Hermeneutics of Mission”; available at galileo.stmarys-ca.edu/mbarram/ColinYuckman-AARSBL2005.htm), and James Miller (“Missional Hermeneutics: An Experiment in Implementation and Reflection”; available at galileo.stmarys-ca.edu/mbarram/JimMiller-AARSBL2005.htm), with responses by James Brownson, Michael Barram, and Grant LeMarquand, respectively. In the next two meetings, keynote speakers were invited to give presentations:

in 2006 by Michael Goheen (“Notes toward a Framework for a Missional Hermeneutic”; available at gocn.org/resources/articles/notes-toward-framework-missional-hermeneutic) and Michael Barram (“‘Located Questions’ for a Missional Hermeneutic”; available at gocn.org/resources/articles/located-questions-missional-hermeneutic), and in 2007 by Darrell Guder (cf. “Missional Hermeneutics: The Missional Authority of Scripture—Interpreting Scripture as Missional Formation,” *Mission Focus: Annual Review* 15 [2007]: 106–21) and Ross Wagner (cf. “*Missio Dei*: Envisioning an Apostolic Reading of Scripture,” *Missiology* 37.1 [2009]: 19–32), faculty colleagues presenting their experience of team-teaching a seminary course on Philipians.

5. Christopher Wright, “Mission as a Matrix for Hermeneutics and Biblical Theology,” in *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Craig Bartholomew et al. (Carlisle: Paternoster; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 102–43.

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

7. Wright, “Mission as a Matrix,” 103–6.

8. Wright, “Mission as a Matrix,” 104.

9. Wright, “Mission as a Matrix,” 108–9.

10. Wright, “Mission as a Matrix,” 104.

11. Wright, “Mission as a Matrix,” 105.

12. Wright, “Mission as a Matrix,” 103–4.

13. Wright, “Mission as a Matrix,” 122.

14. LeMarquand’s presentation was based on his earlier publication: “From Creation to New Creation.”

15. Michael Goheen, “The Urgency of Reading the Bible as One Story,” *Theology Today* 64 (2008): 469–83.

16. Goheen, “Notes toward a Framework.”

17. Wright, “Mission as a Matrix,” 104.

18. Michael Goheen, *As the Father Has Sent Me, I Am Sending You”: J. E. Lesslie Newbigin’s Missionary Ecclesiology* (Utrecht: Boekencentrum, 2000).

19. Yuckman, “Ulterior Gospel.”

20. Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003).

21. James V. Brownson, “Speaking the Truth in Love,” expanded in *Speaking the Truth in Love: New Testament Resources for a Missional Hermeneutic* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 1998).

22. Darrell Guder, “Biblical Formation and Discipleship,” in *Treasure in Clay Jars: Patterns in Missional Faithfulness*, ed. Lois Barrett (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 62.

23. Guder, “Missional Hermeneutics,” 107–8.

24. Guder, “Missional Hermeneutics,” 108.

25. Guder, “Biblical Formation,” 62.

26. Goheen, “Notes toward a Framework”; see also Goheen, “Continuing Steps towards a Missional Hermeneutic,” *Fideles: A Journal of Redeemer Pacific College* 3 (2008): 49–99.

27. Darrell Guder, *Unlikely Ambassadors: Clay Jar Christians in God’s Service* (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church USA, 2002), 5.

28. Guder, “Missional Hermeneutics,” 109.

29. James V. Brownson, “An Adequate Missional Hermeneutic,” unpublished presentation notes, AAR/SBL meeting, Toronto, November 2002.

30. Barram, “Located Questions”; cf. Barram, “The Bible, Mission, and Social Location: Toward a Missional Hermeneutic,” *Interpretation* 61.1 (January 2007): 42–58.

31. Barram, “Located Questions.”

32. Barram, “Bible, Mission, and Social Location,” 52.

33. Miller, “Missional Hermeneutics.”

34. Pablo Richard, “Word of God—Source of Life and Hope for the New Millennium” (manuscript), available at sedosmission.org/old/eng/richard.html (accessed November 2008).

35. Barram, “Bible, Mission, and Social Location,” 42–43.

36. Barram, “Located Questions.”

37. Michael Warren, *At This Time in This Place: The Spirit Embodied in the Local Assembly* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 1999).

38. Hunsberger, “Missional Bible Study.”

39. Guder, *Unlikely Ambassadors*. The five questions are: How does this text read us and our world? How does this text evangelize us with good news? How does this text convert us in personal and corporate life? How does this text orient us to

the coming reign of God? How does this text send us and equip our witness? See Hunsberger, “Missional Bible Study.”

40. Barram, “Located Questions.”
41. Barram, “Located Questions.”
42. Brownson used the phrase in a workshop at a GOCN gathering in 1992 and again in a major presentation at a GOCN consultation in 1994. That presentation was published as Brownson’s “Speaking the Truth in Love” and expanded in *Speaking the Truth in Love*.
43. Brownson, *Speaking the Truth in Love*, 42–43. It is important to note that Brownson’s use of the term “matrix” is different from the way Wright uses it in “Mission as a Matrix.”
44. David Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975).
45. Brownson, *Speaking the Truth*, 22.
46. Brownson, *Speaking the Truth*, 39.
47. Brownson, *Speaking the Truth*, 49.
48. Brownson, *Speaking the Truth*, 50–51.
49. Ross Wagner, *Heralds of the Good News: Isaiah and Paul “in Concert” in the Letter to the Romans* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 1.
50. Wagner, *Heralds of the Good News*, 348n22.
51. Wagner, *Heralds of the Good News*, 357.
52. Wagner, *Heralds of the Good News*, 357.
53. Lesslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, and Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 147.
54. George R. Hunsberger, “Acquiring the Posture of a Missionary Church,” in *The Church between Gospel and Culture: The Emerging Mission in North America*, ed. George R. Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 289–97; cf. Hunsberger, *The Story That Chooses Us: A Tapestry of Missional Vision* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 101–19.
55. Yuckman, “Ulterior Gospel.”
56. GOCN 2011 Forum on Missional Hermeneutics.
57. C. Kavin Rowe, *World Upside Down: Reading Acts in the Graeco-Roman Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Michael Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly: Uncivil Worship and Witness: Following the Lamb into the New Creation* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011); and N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013).
58. Elna Mouton, *Reading the New Testament Ethically* (Atlanta: SBL, 2002). Dan Beeby’s work bringing together the hermeneutical implications of both canonical reading and missional reading lends support for this emphasis. See Beeby, *Canon and Mission* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 1999).
59. Mouton, *Reading the New Testament Ethically*, 251.

Theological Interpretation and a Missional Hermeneutic

Craig G. Bartholomew

Two stars in the firmament of biblical interpretation today are theological interpretation and a missional hermeneutic. Both hold real promise for a recovery of biblical teaching that is directed toward the life of the church, the flourishing of the world, and the glory of God. Alas, both of these movements are “broad churches” with considerable diversity of opinion as to what precisely they entail. Theological interpretation has gained traction in the academy, but what precisely is it? Is it . . .

- academic reading of Scripture for doctrine?
- the application of a canonical hermeneutic in academic interpretation?
- ecclesial reception and interpretation of Scripture?
- a theological hermeneutic for academic biblical interpretation?
- a dialogue between theology and biblical studies?

There are, similarly, many different views about what a missional hermeneutic might look like. George R. Hunsberger, for example, distinguishes four major streams:¹

- The framework for hermeneutics is the biblical story of the mission of God and of the people of God who are sent to participate in that mission.
- The goal of hermeneutics is to fulfill the Scriptures’ function of equipping God’s people to engage in the mission of God.
- Christian communities read Scripture from a particular social location. Out of this context, they bring questions to the text, in service of the mission of God. Here the focus is on the community and what it means for the people of God to read Scripture faithfully in light of their missional context.
- The gospel functions as an interpretive matrix, which enables the canonical tradition of Scripture to engage our various cultural and social contexts.

Dean Flemming proposes that the first two of Hunsberger’s approaches are foundational for missional interpretation. He suggests we think of two essential dimensions: the first approach concerns what Scripture *is about*, the second what Scripture *does*:

We will read Scripture more faithfully if we read it with an ear tuned to the music of God’s mission. This does not mean that a missional hermeneutic will explain *everything* in our interpretation of Scripture. Nor is a missional reading exclusive of other ways of approaching biblical texts. For example, Wright affirms that we can properly speak of a messianic/christological reading that sees Christ as a hermeneutical key for our understanding of both Testaments.²

Flemming’s approach suggests that a missional hermeneutic is comprehensive. It deals with what Scripture *is about* and what Scripture *does*. It is hard to imagine a more comprehensive perspective! And yet Flemming asserts, “This does not mean that a missional hermeneutic will explain *everything* in our interpretation of Scripture. Nor is a missional reading exclusive of other ways of approaching biblical texts.”

Similarly, Michael Goheen and Christopher Wright assert that

On the one hand, mission is an essential hermeneutical key to reading the whole of Scripture. Mission is not just one of the many subjects that the Bible talks about. Rather it is a way of reading the whole of Scripture with mission as a central concern. On the other hand, it is not the only lens we employ to read the entire canon of Scripture since mission does not constitute the comprehensive subject matter of the biblical narrative.³