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Missional Hermeneutics as Theological Interpretation

Greg McKinzie
Fuller Theological Seminary

Abstract — Recently, scholars suggest that the emerging practice of missional hermeneutics is a form of theological interpretation. This essay develops that notion by arguing that (1) the church's participation in God's mission is constitutive of Christian theology and (2) theological interpretation should be reoriented accordingly. The readerly formation of the church and the interpretive function of the Rule of Faith serve as examples of what this reorientation might entail. When the embodied faith commitments of theological interpretation are understood as the church's practices of participation in the *missio Dei*, mission becomes the *locus theologicus* from which a theological reading emerges. If theological interpretation embraces the ancient way of faith seeking understanding, missional hermeneutics clarifies this as works seeking understanding—a praxeological hermeneutic in which participation in God's mission is an epistemological precondition of faithful interpretation.

Key Words — *missional hermeneutics,* missio Dei, *mission, embodiment, participation, social location, Rule of Faith, readerly formation*

In *Becoming the Gospel: Paul, Participation, and Mission*, Michael Gorman asserts that "missional hermeneutics is a form of theological interpretation."[1] This is a significant statement given that *Becoming the Gospel* is the first major scholarly monograph to emerge from the missional hermeneutics movement associated with the Gospel and Our Culture Network. This essay will explore what it means for the practice of theological interpretation of Scripture if Gorman is right. The theological assumptions of missional hermeneutics entail a significant epistemological

1. Michael J. Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel: Paul, Participation, and Mission*, The Gospel and Our Culture Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 53; see also idem, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis: A Basic Guide for Students and Ministers*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 155–58.

difference from most representations of theological interpretation by its leading proponents. Unlike typical construals of theological interpretation, missional hermeneutics is essentially praxeological. My thesis, therefore, is that ***missional hermeneutics is a radical reorientation of theological interpretation because participation in God's mission is constitutive of Christian theology***.

Gorman claims that missional hermeneutics is a form of theological interpretation and undertakes his own missional exegesis of Paul's letters conscious of the fact that both missional hermeneutics and theological interpretation are contested practices. Comparing one contested set of practices with another contested set of practice is tricky business. The exercise can easily fall into a defense of hypothetical definitions that ultimately have little to do with the actual practices of interpreters. Indeed, considering that hermeneutical theorists often fail to produce exemplary exegesis,[2] the relationship between missional hermeneutics and theological interpretation might be illuminated most brightly by a careful comparison of the exegesis their practitioners have produced. However, the definitional disputes that characterize both missional hermeneutics and theological interpretation are rooted in contentions about what interpreters' practices *should be*, not what they are. For the purposes of this essay, these prescriptive concerns cannot be ignored, because both missional hermeneutics and theological interpretation are corrective movements—critiques of long-standing, dominant interpretive habits and assumptions. One might reasonably expect, therefore, that these movements' own advocates will rarely perform interpretations that exemplify every aspect of what it might mean to be "theological" or "missional," if only because their own ingrained habits and assumptions continue to shape their practices. This is particularly the case for missional hermeneutics, whose development is decades behind theological interpretation.

Consequently, my view of the relationship between missional hermeneutics and theological interpretation is inseparable from certain convictions about what missional hermeneutics should be, apart from what it has been in any given instance. Likewise, although theological interpretation has attained relatively clear contours, my working definition must be provisional and—more to the point—open to the challenge of missional hermeneutics. The critical aspects of missional hermeneutics are present inchoately in various discussions of theological interpretation, corroborating Gorman's assertion. However, these aspects remain less-than-

2. R. W. L. Moberly, "What Is Theological Interpretation of Scripture?" *JTI* 3 (2009): 169–70. This reminds one of Jeffrey Stout's observation that "preoccupation with method is like clearing your throat: it can go on for only so long before you lose your audience"—reference to which is not an adequate apology for more of the same (*Ethics after Babel: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001], 163).

indispensable for the definition—which is to say, the *essential practice*—of theological interpretation. Missional hermeneutics challenges theological interpretation to cultivate these germinal dimensions into constitutive elements of its definition and practice. The following definitions intend, therefore, to be condensed but representative articulations of admittedly complex, evolving ideas.

Theological interpretation is a set of practices meant to cultivate (1) *perceptions* of the subject matter of Scripture as God's revelation, (2) *approaches* to the text of Scripture as canon, and (3) *dispositions* in readers of Scripture as the church.[3] As Richard Hays has succinctly stated, "Theological exegesis is a complex *practice*, a way of approaching Scripture with eyes of faith and seeking to understand it within the community of faith."[4] The perceptions, approaches, and dispositions of theological interpretation can together be abbreviated as *faith*—faith in the God who speaks, through the canon, to the church. In the context of scholarly interpretive practices, however, this is specifically faith over against the "methodological atheism" typical of the modern academy.[5] Although we might refer to this as *methodological faith*, it is important to note that theological interpretation is not a "method" as such, with sequential steps or techniques that determine meaning. The practices that constitute theological interpretation are variable, because the practice of theological interpretation as a whole hinges on the perceptions, approaches, and dispositions in play as readers engage Scripture, not on the formulaic use of particular practices. Theological interpretation does, however, take for granted that certain established practices are known to cultivate the appropriate perceptions, approaches, and dispositions. Among these normal practices are the formative use of the Rule of Faith (particularly the liturgical confession of the ecumenical creeds), prayer and worship, canonical readings (both intertextual and narrative), attentiveness to Christian tradition (especially premodern exegesis), and reading as an ecclesial community with particular conscious commitments.

If Gorman is right that missional hermeneutics is a form of theological interpretation, then missional hermeneutics is also a set of practices.

3. These three components of my definition broadly follow Kevin Vanhoozer's summary of three approaches to theological interpretation, with their interests in (1) "divine authorship, in the God-world relationship 'behind' the text as it were"; (2) "the final form of the text," whether in narrative or canonical terms; and (3) the "function of the aims and interests of the community of readers for which the Bible is 'Scripture'" ("What Is Theological Interpretation of the Bible?" in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005], 23).

4. Richard B. Hays, "Reading the Bible with Eyes of Faith: The Practice of Theological Exegesis," *JTI* 1 (2007): 11.

5. Murray A. Rae, *History and Hermeneutics* (New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 38.

However, the development of missional hermeneutics has been framed most influentially by George Hunsberger as four "streams" or "accents" among its advocates: "These accents have made 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)." Together, they contribute to the development of "a robust missional hermeneutic."[6] Hunsberger's taxonomy has proven generative, though some key contributions might be parsed differently. Regardless, the key introductory concern here is how these "streams" map onto what I have identified as the practices of theological interpretation. The most important point to make definitionally is perhaps so obvious that it goes without saying in Hunsberger's review: what holds these streams together as a single robust missional hermeneutic is the doctrine of the *missio Dei*. David Bosch articulated what became the fundamental point of departure for missional theology: "The classical doctrine on the *missio Dei* as God the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and the Son sending the Spirit was expanded to include yet another 'movement': Father, Son, and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world."[7] To restate the four streams of missional hermeneutics more clearly in these terms: the framework is the canonical narrative of God's mission, the aim is ecclesial formation for participation in God's mission, the approach to the text is the social location of participation in God's mission, and the interpretive matrix is the gospel of God's mission.

My working definition of missional hermeneutics, therefore, takes three of these streams to align respectively with the perceptions, approaches, and dispositions that theological interpretation is meant to cultivate, with the caveat that the *missio Dei* is a controlling theological assumption. Thus, *missional hermeneutics* is a set of practices mean to cultivate (1) a perception that the gospel of God's reconciling mission in Christ through the Spirit is the subject matter of Scripture, (2) an approach to the text of Scripture as the canonical narrative of God's mission, and (3) a disposition in readers of Scripture as the church equipped to participate in God's mission. The articulation of these interpretive aims in terms of the *missio Dei* is the basic challenge that missional hermeneutics issues to theological interpretation of Scripture. A number of advocates of theological

6. George R. Hunsberger, "Proposals for a Missional Hermeneutic: Mapping a Conversation," *Missiology: An International Review* 39 (2011): 319.

7. David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, American Society of Missiology Series 16 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 390; see also the widely influential Trinitarian vision of mission in Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

interpretation already speak in the Trinitarian and teleological terms that are essential to the doctrine of the *missio Dei*, and in this sense the basic challenge is merely to make explicit what is already implicit in theological interpretation. The God who speaks in and through Scripture is the Father who sends the Son, who in turn with the Father sends the Spirit and the church in the power of the Spirit. The canonical narrative of God's redemptive purposes is the story of God's mission, into which the church is drawn. The formation of the church is purposive—the ecclesial community's virtues are *for* participation in God's mission.

The more substantial challenge to theological interpretation is the fourth stream of missional hermeneutics, which insists that the church's location as participants in God's mission is also nonnegotiable for interpretation. This is the premise of the thesis I will explore in the remainder of the article. To restate: *missional hermeneutics is a radical reorientation of theological interpretation because participation in God's mission is constitutive of Christian theology*. Here also, elements of this hermeneutical perspective are already present in some construals of theological interpretation, but the evidence suggests that theological interpretation does not assume Christian theology is necessarily participatory in the way that missional hermeneutics does. If, therefore, missional hermeneutics is a form a theological interpretation, it is a form that pushes theological interpretation to understand the church's participation in God's mission to be an interpretive *sine qua non*.

I unpack my thesis in two sections. First, I argue that the church's participation in God's mission is constitutive of theology. This argument engages Michael Barram's contention that the "sent-ness" of the church is the key consideration in the relationship between missional hermeneutics and theological interpretation, J. Todd Billing's notion of "functional theology," and Lesslie Newbigin's axiomatic claim that the congregation is the hermeneutic of the gospel. Second, I argue that, because participation in God's mission is constitutive of Christian theology, theological interpretation should be reoriented accordingly. In order to exemplify what this reorientation might entail, I highlight two areas in which theological interpretation might cultivate its germinal missional sensibilities and move toward a constitutive commitment to participation in God's mission: the readerly formation of the church and the interpretive function of the Rule of Faith.

Participation in God's Mission Is Constitutive of the Church's Theology

The context of Gorman's claim that missional hermeneutics is a form of theological interpretation is a response to Barram, who asks, "Now that we have large, viable, and respected spaces available for 'theological interpretation' in service to the church, do we really need missional

hermeneutics? Are we simply duplicating efforts that others are already engaged in—and to greater effect?" Barram's answer is that "what distinguishes these two lines of interpretation is the *conscious* and *consistent emphasis* on the church as a 'sent' community that undergirds each of the four streams within missional hermeneutics. . . . The missional 'sent-ness' of the interpretive community of faith has become pretty close to a *sine qua non* for ecclesial hermeneutics." He continues, "Missional hermeneutics may be a necessary enterprise, therefore, precisely because its focus on the 'sent-ness' of the interpretive community may, in some cases, enable it to go beyond forms of 'theological interpretation' that lack this emphasis."[8] It is to this that Gorman responds: "I would, however, still maintain that missional hermeneutics is a form of theological interpretation, even while granting Barram's claim that theological interpretation as a whole needs to make the missional identity of the church a more explicit and central feature of its approach to scriptural interpretation."[9]

Gorman is right to see Barram's claim as a challenge to theological interpretation to become more explicitly missional, not a move "beyond" theological interpretation; theological interpretation is not definitionally unmissional, nor should it ultimately lack an emphasis on God's mission. At the same time, Gorman underestimates the force of Barram's claim that "sent-ness" (like Gorman, I refer to this simply as "participation") is a *sine qua non* for ecclesial hermeneutics. Gorman's own self-identified exercise in missional theological interpretation consciously engages only the "more text-centered" streams of missional hermeneutics, leaving Barram's and James Brownson's contextual approaches for later—as "the ultimate goal of a missional hermeneutic." Gorman seems to recognize that this is reminiscent of Stendahlian meant/means sequentialism, for he immediately points out that his text-centered approaches are "are not 'merely' exegetical and historical in orientation," because they already assume theologically "that there is a continuity in the biblical narrative; that there is in fact a *missio Dei*; that the biblical writings exist, at least in part, to invite and summon us to participation in that divine mission; and so on."[10] The problem is that this misses the point of Barram's claim that the church's participation in God's mission "undergirds" the other streams: all of the church's theological assumptions are already constituted by participation.[11] Barram refers to

8. Michael Barram, "Reflections on the Practice of Missional Hermeneutics: 'Streaming' Philippians 1:20–30" (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature GOCN Forum on Missional Hermeneutics, New Orleans, November, 2009).

9. Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel*, 53.

10. Ibid., 56.

11. Gorman's portrayal of missional hermeneutics in *Becoming the Gospel* parallels his discussion of the practice in *Elements of Biblical Exegesis*. To the benefit of theological interpretation, he highlights the importance of missiological attention to "the questions and per-

mission as the "social location" of the church that shapes the "located questions" of missional hermeneutics—"questions that we ask of the text—and more importantly, questions that the text may ask of us." He states:

> At this point, I would define 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*. This affirmation, which is at once disarmingly simple and dauntingly comprehensive, provides the requisite missional framework and context for asking critical questions. Christian congregations caught up in the *missio Dei* read the Bible from a social location characterized by mission. From this "location," every interpretative question becomes a "missional" question.[12]

Participation, in other words, is not just one hermeneutical stream alongside the others but is the *locus theologicus* of the church that rightly perceives the subject matter of Scripture, that approaches the canonical narrative of God's mission rightly as the church's ongoing story, and that rightly understands the purpose for which it is formed and equipped by Scripture. There is no ecclesial interpretation except that of the sent church.

The obvious difficulty with this assertion is that the church frequently interprets Scripture without reference to, much less participation in, God's mission. That is, in fact, the reality missional theology decries. It seems, therefore, to be a simple misapprehension to say that participation in God's mission is constitutive of the church's theology. To the contrary, the challenge missional hermeneutics issues to the church is to *recognize* that, if the church is, according to its own Trinitarian confession, caught up in the mission of God, then the church's participation *or failure to participate* is hermeneutically determinative.

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spectives on scriptural texts from people of diverse cultures" (*Elements*, 158). Unfortunately, he conflates cultural location and "social location." Thus, his discussion of missional hermeneutics does not suggest that mission itself is a social location with hermeneutical implications. Granted, Gorman does state that "mission must become the governing framework within which all biblical interpretation takes place" (*Elements*, 156). However, he consistently characterizes missional hermeneutics as questions readers ask about God's mission in order to participate in God's mission. Considering participation in God's mission as what shapes the questions readers may ask is nowhere in view. This is not surprising, because he says "the final goal of exegesis is actualization, or embodiment—living the text" (*Elements*, 160). Participation is, for Gorman, a "final goal"—a result. Following Barram, I suggest instead that embodied participation in mission is not simply a result of but a constitutive element of a missional hermeneutic.

12. Michael Barram, "'Located' Questions for a Missional Hermeneutic" (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, GOCN Forum on Missional Hermeneutics, Washington, DC, November, 2006), emphasis added; see also Michael Barram, "The Bible, Mission, and Social Location: Toward a Missional Hermeneutic," *Int* 61 (2007): 42–58.

J. Todd Billings's notion of "functional theology" can be applied helpfully here: "Everything the church does and does not do points to its functional theology, the theology that is exposed by the actions (and omissions) in the lives of its members."[13] He continues: "Theological reasoning is inescapable because action is inescapable. . . . One of the concrete skills of theological hermeneutics is learning how to discern the specificity of one's own theological hermeneutic."[14] Billings is ultimately writing about theological interpretation, so the point is not unidirectionally that observing the church's actions will reveal its theology but that *the theology with which the church approaches Scripture is inevitably embodied.* His emphasis falls on the idea that "the rule of faith provides guidance for our functional theology,"[15] but the corollary is unavoidable: if the Rule of Faith does not become the church's functional theology—if the church does not embody the Rule of Faith—then it is not *actually* the church's theology. Concomitantly, only the church's functional, embodied faith—its participation—constitutes the theology that actually rules theological interpretation.

Theological hermeneutics accepts the fact that theological commitments (conscious or not) always already determine interpretive results. That is, the objectivity of historical criticism was an illusion. Analogously, the church's participation (or failure to participate) always already determines interpretive results. That is, unembodied interpretation is an illusion. Therefore, just as theological interpretation embraced the inevitability of theological commitments and had to ask what those commitments *should* be in order to read the text as Scripture, so theological interpretation that embraces the inevitability of embodied commitment must also ask *which* embodied commitments are necessary in order to read the text as Scripture.[16] Missional hermeneutics assumes that the *missio Dei* guides the church toward the answers to both questions. In order to read the text of the Bible as Scripture, the church should be theologically committed to a Trinitarian understanding of God's mission, and this theological commitment *is* embodied participation in God's mission.

At this point, an aside on missional practices is necessary. If the *missio Dei* theologically directs the church toward particular embodied commitments, and if this participation in God's mission is constitutive of Christian theology, then what are the practices of participation in God's

13. J. Todd Billings, *The Word of God for the People of God: An Entryway to the Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 15.

14. Ibid., 16.

15. Ibid., 22.

16. Barram, "The Bible," 58, makes this connection as well: "In light of postmodern developments, biblical scholars recognize that research can never be fully disinterested. And missiologists naturally advocate 'interested readings' of scripture. Indeed, widespread agreement on the contextual 'locatedness' of all biblical interpretation may prove to be the pivotal prerequisite for fruitful collaboration between biblical scholars and missiologists."

mission? This is an urgent question for two reasons. One, without an answer, the idea of participation in God's mission will remain too vague to be hermeneutically significant. Two, the answer is the substance of my claim that, although many proponents of theological interpretation are implicitly or partially missional, they do not go far enough. Although the explicit doctrine of the *missio Dei* is an important concern, because it directs the church toward these embodied commitments, *explication* does not bear the primary burden of my thesis. That is, the absence of overtly missional language among theological interpreters is not the root issue.[17] Instead, an understanding of participation as a hermeneutical *sine qua non*—and therefore the advocacy of certain practices, a certain social embodiment—is what remains consistently absent in discussion of theological interpretation. Hence the question: what practices?

The first reason this is such a difficult question to answer is that missional practices are essentially contextual. Any attempt to state what participation in God's mission means without discernment of what God is actually up to in a particular place misses the point. Advocating missional practices without specifying what they are is too vague to be helpful, but specifying universal practices is its own variety of mortal generalization. The best we can do is work with categories of typical practices, which presents the second reason this is such a difficult question to answer. Categories of typical missional practices sound a lot like the traditional Christian practices, feeding the misperception that churches were always already missional, that missional theology is saying nothing new, and that *missional* is ultimately unnecessary jargon. For example, the watershed volume *Missional Church* states:

> The ecclesial practices of missional communities are many and varied. Among them are baptism, the Lord's Supper, reconciliation, discernment, hospitality, the reading and interpretation of Scripture, the development and exercise of leadership, the loving care and support of one another, the proclamation of God's Word, the active evangelization of all peoples, the exploration and learning of the faith, as well as the responsible and responsive stewardship of all of God's abundant gifts.[18]

17. Nor is it a nonissue. The tired accusation leveled at advocates of missional theology, that *missional* and *missio Dei* are simply buzzwords, has the appearance of a refusal to face up to the theological implications of reordering the life of the faltering Western church around the mission of God. Resistance is not a surprise, because this reordering entails a far-reaching critique of the theology that has left the Western church where it finds itself today. *Missional* is a neologism, but it is not a buzzword; it signals a theological paradigm shift in a post-Christendom context.

18. Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, Gospel and Our Culture Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 159.

Of the practices listed, only "evangelization" is traditionally qualified as mission work, and none of them is in any way novel.

By reframing these practices in terms of the *missio Dei*, however, they become something that they indisputably have not been in most Christendom churches: a means of forming congregations into missionary communities that engage their local contexts in order to discover and take part in the redemptive work of God. Congregations that regularly engage in the same practices without being formed into such missionary communities (and they are legion) are not, I suggest, actually engaged in missional practices. To borrow language from Ludwig Wittgenstein, missional theology is a change of language game. The forms of life—the practices—of a language game constitute its most fundamental dimension, but the language of the language game is not therefore irrelevant. In fact, the practices of one game may mean something very different in another, depending on their respective rules. Consider, by analogy, the difference between throwing a ball in baseball and throwing a ball in dodgeball. Both games would list "throwing the ball" as an essential practice but not, thereby, mean the same thing. So it is with traditional Christian practices in the language game of missional theology. Many of them may appear to be the same but mean and effect quite different things in the life of a congregation. In order to return quickly to my main argument, I discuss here only one exemplary category of missional practices: hospitality.

A survey of missional literature suggests that hospitality is "a preeminent missional practice."[19] Hospitality framed by missional theology is neither merely fellowship within the community of faith nor simply a warm welcome for visitors to church gatherings and events. Both fellowship with one another and kindness to visitors are good, but in the language game of Christendom theology, the former tends toward exclusion and the latter

19. Mark Love, "Practices as Participation in the Life of God," *Missio Dei: A Journal of Missional Theology and Praxis* 7 (2016), Online: http://missiodeijournal.com/issues/md-7/authors/md-7-love. See, for example, Guder, ed., *Missional Church*, 178–79; Christopher L. Heuertz and Christine D. Pohl, *Friendship at the Margins: Discovering Mutuality in Service and Mission*, Resources for Reconciliation (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2010), passim, which is an extension of Pohl's watershed work on hospitality, published before the proliferation of the missional movement: Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999); Alan J. Roxburgh, *Missional Map-Making: Skills for Leading in Times of Transition* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 154–57; Alan Hirsch and Lance Ford, *Right Here, Right Now: Everyday Mission for Everyday People* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), ch. 8; Craig van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation*, Missional Network (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 132–33; David E. Fitch and Geoffrey Holsclaw, *Prodigal Christianity: 10 Signposts into the Missional Frontier* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2013); 105–7; Elaine A Heath and Larry Duggins, *Missional, Monastic, Mainline: A Guide to Starting Micro-Communities in Historically Mainline Traditions* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014), passim; Michael Frost, *Surprise the World: The Five Habits of Highly Missional People* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2016), ch. 4.

tends toward attractional models of evangelism. The missional practices of hospitality, by contrast, are those of a congregation actively engaged in seeking and embracing the stranger in its neighborhood or local context. Hospitality comprises contextual practices of loving the stranger, such as welcoming the marginalized into the "private" lives of the community, sharing resources, and, of course, eating together. Moreover, the missional practices of hospitality are not a church-growth strategy. They are an "essential ecclesial posture"[20]—an expression of the life of a people graciously welcomed by God and sent to extend the same welcome in turn. Finally, to restate the point of practices in the present discussion, hospitality within a missional language game is *formative*. By engaging locally in contextual expressions of hospitality to the stranger, congregations cultivate a missional imagination. In this way, the church *becomes* a social location in which participation in God's mission is theologically constitutive, and in turn the community of faith reads Scripture anew. In other words, the practice of hospitality is not merely the result of the church's theology and biblical interpretation but is an example of participation in God's mission before and beyond the church by which the church learns to speak of God and read Scripture together.

Returning to my primary argument in this section—that participation in God's mission is constitutive of the church's theology—Lesslie Newbigin's poignant description of "the congregation as hermeneutic of the gospel"[21] carries an implication that is often overlooked. Newbigin is clearly developing an answer to his question, "How is it possible that the gospel should be credible, that people should come to believe that the power which has the last word in human affairs is represented by a man hanging on a cross?" His concern is the church's public witness in pluralist Western society, and he concludes: "I am suggesting that the only answer, the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it."[22]

One may also ask, if the congregation is the hermeneutic of the gospel for society, what is the hermeneutic of the gospel for the congregation? As Newbigin says elsewhere:

> The gospel is not a set of beliefs that arise, or could arise, from empirical observation of the whole human experience. It is the announcement of a name and a fact that offer the starting point for a new and

20. O. Fred Liggin, "Hospitality as Witness and Power: The Role of Hospitality in Congregational Engagement and Embrace in a Culture of Displacement," *Missio Dei: A Journal of Missional Theology and Praxis* 7 (2016), online: http://missiodeijournal.com/issues/md-7/authors/md-7-liggin.

21. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), ch. 18.

22. Ibid., 227.

> life-long enterprise of understanding and coping with experience. It is a new starting point. To accept it means a new beginning, a radical conversion. We cannot side-step that necessity. It has always been the case that to believe means to be turned around to face in a different direction, to be a dissenter, to go against the stream. *The church needs to be very humble in acknowledging that it is itself only a learner, and it needs to pay heed to all the variety of human experience in order to learn in practice what it means that Jesus is the King and Head of the human race.*[23]

Darrell Guder calls this "the essential fact of the gospel-centered community: It is itself experiencing continuing conversion. Its own evangelization is constantly going on. The evangelizing congregation is continuously being evangelized."[24] Regarding Scripture's role in this conversion process, Guder says, "The Holy Spirit shapes God's people for mission through the continuous encounter with the Scripture. Continuing conversion happens as the community 'indwells' Scripture."[25] And, as it happens, Guder takes the language of "indwelling" from Newbigin's essentially postliberal hermeneutic. Guder, however, presents a more cognitive picture of what indwelling the narrative of Scripture entails than Newbigin does. This is because, though Newbigin works with a postliberal framework (explicitly Hans Frei at this point), he blends it with Michael Polanyi's epistemology and Peter Berger's notion of "plausibility structures." Accordingly, Newbigin clarifies his claim that the Christian community indwells the biblical story:

> I am suggesting that to live in this way means to inhabit an alternative plausibility structure to the one in which our society lives. A plausibility structure is not just a body of ideas but is necessarily *embodied in an actual community*. It cannot exist otherwise. In this case the community is that company of people who have been chosen and called by God in continuity with those who have gone before from the very beginning of the story. A plausibility structure is *embodied in an actual historical community* among all human communities, one which carries forward a tradition of rational discourse and argument as ever new situations have to be met and coped with, and it is therefore something which is always changing and developing.[26]

The congregation's own continuing conversion depends on an encounter with the gospel through Scripture that is also mediated hermeneutically by the congregation's embodiment of the biblical narrative.

23. Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 148–49, emphasis added.

24. Darrell L. Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, Gospel and Our Culture Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 151.

25. Ibid., 160.

26. Newbigin, *The Gospel*, 99, emphasis added.

Thus, I suggest the overlooked implication of Newbigin's claim that the congregation in the hermeneutic of the gospel is this: the congregation's lived faith is also the hermeneutic of the gospel for the congregation itself. In other words, the church's life is the embodied interpretation of the gospel, but this does not mean the church's life is the application of an already interpreted gospel or a previously determined theology. Rather, embodied interpretation of the gospel is constitutive of the church's theology. Embodiment is not how the church presents an already interpreted gospel to the world but how the gospel is interpreted both for the world *and for the church*. Missional (participatory) ecclesiology is an interpretive process, not an interpretive result. Through this process, the church too learns the meaning of the gospel. To be the hermeneutic of the gospel is not merely to put on display interpretive results but to be the embodied *locus theologicus* in which interpretation takes place—and through which theology takes shape. In short, *participation* in God's mission is constitutive of the church's theology.

Missional Hermeneutics Is a Reorientation of Theological Interpretation

Because theological interpretation that embraces the inevitability of embodied commitment must ask which embodied commitments are necessary in order to read the text as Scripture, and because the congregation's own continuing encounter with the gospel comes through the hermeneutical mediation of the congregation's embodied life, theological interpretation needs to be reoriented. Moreover, missional hermeneutics specifies theologically that the Christian church's embodied commitments are participation in God's mission. At this point, one might object that theological interpretation of Scripture is not meant to be hermeneutically comprehensive. The concerns of its advocates are limited. My thesis, however, is that those concerns are inherently missional, even though discussions of theological interpretation regularly overlook the missional nature of Scripture's subject matter, narrative, and purpose. This is the reason theological interpretation should be reoriented. Missional hermeneutics is theological interpretation that envisions the complex practice of "approaching Scripture with eyes of faith" in light of the theologically constitutive nature of participation in God's mission.

This section begins to explore what reorienting theological interpretation missionally might look like. I will consider two typical areas of concern for theological interpretation: readerly formation and the Rule of Faith. These two indicate how participation in God's mission affects both poles of the hermeneutical spiral. On one end, theological *interpretation* is reoriented because mission shapes the interpreter. On the other end,

theological interpretation is reoriented because mission shapes the church's theology. Together, therefore, they represent the complete missional reorientation of theological interpretation. These explorations are demonstrative, not comprehensive. Furthermore, to reiterate, the challenge is to cultivate sensibilities latent in theological interpretation. Reorientation is not total reconstruction.

Reorienting Readerly Formation in Theological Interpretation

Adapting Umberto Eco's "model reader," Joel Green represents theological interpretation's concern with readerly formation. The primary question here is "what sorts of communities are open and able to hear the words of Scripture as God's word addressed to them."[27] The question behind the question, however, is: what *makes* the sorts of readers who are able to hear? This puts a fine point on the distinction—and the relationship—between two separate hermeneutical concerns regarding readerly formation. On the one hand is the question of how Scripture forms readers. On the other hand is the question of what formation a reader needs in order to read Scripture well. It is no surprise hermeneutically that these two form a circle. A certain readerly disposition is necessary in order for Scripture to do its formative work; Scripture's formative work is necessary in order to cultivate that disposition. Green captures this reciprocity:

> As model readers generated by this text, we are guarded from too easily colonizing or objectifying the text, instead hearing its own voice from within its own various contextual horizons. At the same time, we remain open to God's challenge of developing those habits of life that make us receptive to God's vision, God's character, and God's project, animating these texts as Scripture and, then, textualized in and emanating from these pages. We come to Scripture with dispositions of risky openness to a reordering of the world, repentance for attitudes of defiance of the grace of God's self-revelation, hospitable to a conversion of our own imagination.[28]

Model readers are both generated by the text and approach the text with dispositions of openness. Taking James as a case study, the remainder of Green's discussion focuses on the way "James wants to shape a reader capable of hearing, of putting into play, his message."[29] But the other question remains: what disposes the reader to such shaping?

27. Joel B. Green, *Practicing Theological Interpretation: Engaging Biblical Texts for Faith and Formation*, Theological Explorations for the Church Catholic (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 9.

28. Ibid., 20.

29. Ibid., 42.

Missional hermeneutics assumes that not only the capability of putting the text into play but also *actually putting it into play* is at stake hermeneutically, not merely as a hermeneutical result but as what disposes the reader to the text's formative work. In part, this is a matter of construing the narrative in explicitly missional terms. Green, like many advocates of theological interpretation, is already near a missional account of the narrative, because narrative is always implicitly teleological, and Scripture's plot is that of God's purposes: "James sculpts his model readers by locating them, that is, us—on the plotline between creation and new creation."[30] Construing the narrative missionally is what the first two of Hunsberger's streams contribute. The "missional direction of the story" and the "missional purpose of the writings" coalesce in the way already represented by Newbigin and Guder above.[31] The purpose of the story is formation, as Green suggests, but it is the story that forms the church specifically for participation in God's mission. This is only one side of the coin, though. The stream in which Hunsberger locates Barram, "the missional locatedness of the readers," is the other side. What disposes readers to the story's formative work? Participation in the story—in God's mission. From this vantage, missional hermeneutics seeks to expand on Green's view of the relationship between theological interpretation and Christian formation: the purpose of the story is formation, this formation is for mission, participation in mission *is* readerly formation, and in this way Scripture makes readers capable of hearing its message. The ideal reader is a participant in God's mission.

Stephen Fowl, a well-known proponent of readerly formation in theological interpretation, also articulates concerns close to those of missional hermeneutics but stops short. For Fowl, "given the ends toward which Christians interpret their scripture, Christian interpretation of scripture needs to involve a complex interaction in which Christian convictions, practices, and concerns are brought to bear on scriptural interpretation in ways that both shape that interpretation and are shaped by it."[32] Again, an essential hermeneutical circularity is evident, but Fowl places the accent on the way convictions, practices, and concerns shape interpretation. His thesis is limited, however, by the narrowness of the ends toward which he believes Christians interpret Scripture: "their primary aim . . . is to interpret scripture as part of their ongoing struggles to live and worship

30. Ibid., 36.

31. Although Hunsberger identifies the "missional purpose of the writings" stream with Guder, and the "missional direction of the story" stream is logically separable, Guder's discussion of Scripture in *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* indicates that Scripture fulfills its formative purpose *as story*.

32. Stephen E. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1998), 8.

faithfully before the triune God in ways that bring them into ever deeper communion with God and with others."[33] Fowl's Trinitarian vision of communion has merit, but it unfortunately leaves theological interpretation with ecclesiocentric ends. This results in two shortcomings from a missional standpoint.

First, Fowl's vision of readerly formation moves in the right direction: "Christians need to be more intentional about forming their members to be certain types of readers, readers who, by virtue of their single-minded attention to God, are well versed in the practices of forgiveness, repentance, and reconciliation."[34] However, forgiveness, repentance, and reconciliation are too limited as specifications of the convictions, practices, and concerns that shape interpretation. One might easily argue, of course, that reconciliation is a primary missional motif and that communion is one way of construing the goal of God's mission. To this extent, Fowl comes close to missional hermeneutics. But his discussion of theological interpretation seems to be keyed to the inner dynamics of a church communion that, like much of Western Christianity, imagines the struggle "to live and worship faithfully before the triune God" without reference to the mission of God. The admission that "there is a vast array of convictions and practices which should shape and be shaped by Christian interpretation of Scripture" theoretically leaves room for missional practices but does not dull the implication that intra-ecclesial practices of forgiveness, repentance, and reconciliation are the truly essential practices of readers well-formed for theological interpretation.[35] The fundamental problem is, perhaps, that the "relationships of self-giving love characteristic of the triune life of God"[36] in which Fowl roots the priority of forgiveness, repentance, and reconciliation are not relationships understood in terms of the *missio Dei*. The triune life of God is marked by redemptive movement *beyond* the inner communion of those relationships.[37] Mission is essential to the church's

33. Ibid., 3.

34. Ibid., 26–27.

35. Ibid., 97.

36. Ibid., 84.

37. This is one way of putting the matter, appropriate for an understanding of the Christian community rooted in a Trinitarian theology in which the accent falls on God's aseity. A prime example is Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 76, who says that "as Christians our concern for humankind must begin 'at home' that is, with the needs of sisters and brothers within the community of Christ (1 John 4:11). But it must not stop there. Rather, we must see the entire world as the object of our care and concern, *just as the love of God spills beyond the boundaries of the trinitarian members to encompass all creation*" (emphasis added). Another approach to the issue is, in one way or another, to collapse the distinction between God's *opera ad intra* and *opera ad extra*, so that God's work *ad extra* (e.g., creation, preservation, or recreation) is not an overflow "beyond" the internal life of the Trinity but is "internal to his being." See John G. Flett, "*Missio Dei:* A Trinitarian Envisioning of a Non-Trinitarian Theme," *Missiology: An International Review* 37/1 (2009): 10. From this it

understanding of the Trinity and, in turn, the church's understanding of itself. Thus, Fowl's argument runs in the right direction but needs to be reoriented missionally. Christians need to be more intentional about forming members *as readers* in the practices of mission rooted in the triune life of the sending God.

Second, Fowl's claim that "reading the Spirit," which amounts to discerning the work of the Spirit in the lives of "others," is an important aspect of theological interpretation seems to move even closer to missional hermeneutics. As another dimension of readerly formation, reading the Spirit also requires certain "practical social structures, practices, and habits,"[38] but the exegesis of Acts 10–15 by which Fowl identifies the these fails to account for the fundamentally missional dimensions of the story. Although Fowl makes much of the hermeneutical role of hospitality (leading to friendship), which is a significant dimension of missional praxis, the "others" in whom hospitality allows one to read the Spirit are Christians.[39] The practices in view are still intra-ecclesial, meant to address interpretive differences between Christians on issues such as homosexuality in the church. Thus, Fowl makes the case that hospitality among Christians is vital for readerly formation, but this stops short of attributing the same formative role to missional practices. Again, the "trinitarian grounding"[40] of his discussion seems to bend toward an ecclesiocentric vision of the Spirit's work. For missional hermeneutics, however, a "plain sense" reading of the Acts narrative suggest the limits of Fowl's communion-centered concerns, for the "others" in view are those in whom the church finds the Spirit at work unexpectedly *beyond* church (Cornelius), prompting fresh

follows that, for a Trinitarian ecclesiology, the church's inner life as a community does not exist in distinction from its relationship to those outside the community. Hence, "it is only as a missionary community that human beings live in correspondence to God's own life of fellowship" (p. 14). The doctrine of the *missio Dei* is not bound to either construal of the Trinity, and both construals indicate in different ways that God is missionary by nature. Whether one claims the church is not itself unless its love overflows the boundaries of the community or one claims that the church is not itself unless its work beyond itself is internal to the very existence of the community, it is fair to say the *missio Dei* reorients the church *beyond* itself.

38. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*, 105.

39. One could easily assume that by "others" Fowl refers to those who are not the hermeneutically engaged church community, particularly when he mentions "welcoming strangers" (*Engaging Scripture*, 119). He states clearly, however: "The only way to counter the privatizing tendencies of contemporary church life, which make it unlikely or impossible that Christians would be in a position to testify about the work of the Spirit in the lives of their sisters and brothers, is to enter into friendships with them" (p. 117). As Fowl applies his hermeneutic to the contemporary discussion of homosexuality in the church, it becomes apparent that his project as a whole is meant to address churches large enough, or at least privatized enough, that the members who are in theological conflict about homosexuality are effectively strangers to one another and in need of practices such as hospitality and reconciliation.

40. Ibid., 98.

interpretation of Scripture regarding how the church should shape its life in order to participate in God's mission among the Gentiles.[41] Furthermore, an account of the Trinity attuned to the *missio Dei* would push Fowl's notion of reading the Spirit beyond ecclesiocentrism. The Spirit that the church must learn to read is the Spirit sent by Father and Son, in whose sending the church is caught up as participants in God's reconciling work beyond and through the church. Murray Rae offers another confirmation that this hermeneutical consideration is already incipiently present in theological interpretation: "I recommend as a matter of considerable importance . . . that the identification of the church as the *primary locus* of theological interpretation be stated in such a way that it not preclude the work of God's Spirit taking place also outside the church. The Spirit blows where it wills!"[42] Fowl's thesis is essentially right, but missional hermeneutics challenges theological interpretation to reorient readerly formation in terms of the missional practices integral to the life of the church caught up in the mission of God.

Reorienting the Function of the Rule of Faith in Theological Interpretation

Like readerly formation, the Rule of Faith and its subsequent articulations in the ecumenical creeds play a critical role in theological interpretation that, from a missional perspective, requires reorientation. Historically and hermeneutically, the Rule of Faith is a missional phenomenon—a notion that some theological interpreters have begun to embrace. Robert Jenson, for one, describes the development of canon and creed by taking the "telephone game" as an analogy. In the game, a phrase whispered from person to person around a circle quickly becomes distorted. Jenson compares the game to the spread of the Christian message in the first centuries after Christ. "In the case of the church, the threat is made especially severe by the need repeatedly so to shape the message as to make it comprehensible for new sorts of hearers, by the need not merely to recite the gospel but to interpret it as its messengers enter new cultural or historical situations."[43] Mission, in other words, was the context of the emergence of both canon

41. It is also worth noting that the practice of hospitality Peter needed to learn for the sake of discerning the work of the Spirit was that of *receiving* hospitality from the "other." Contemporary missiologists have been grappling with the inversion of the practice of hospitality for some time. See Anthony J. Gittins, "Beyond Hospitality? The Missionary Status and Role Revisited," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 21/3 (1994): 164–82.

42. Murray Rae, "Theological Interpretation and the Problem of Method," in *Ears That Hear: Explorations in Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Joel B. Green and Tim Meadowcroft (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2013), 21.

43. Robert W. Jenson, *Canon and Creed*, Interpretation: Resources for the Use of Scripture in the Church (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 4.

and creed, and it continues to be the context of their function in the life of the church:

> The problems that occasioned the emergence of the canon and the creedal tradition were far from the last of that sort that the church would encounter. The second-century appearance of the telephone-game problem was only the first of many. The mission—the mandate for one person to tell another person about the resurrection, who is to tell yet another, and so on—is constitutive of the church; indeed, the pursuit of the mission and the perdurance of the church come to the same thing. Therefore, the church is continually driven to cross geographical and temporal boundaries; for it, the harvest is always whiter on the other side of some cultural or historical fence. And beyond each fence new questions wait.[44]

For the purpose of reorienting theological interpretation, the upshot of this account is that the hermeneutical relationship between canon and creed exists because of and for mission. "The canon without the creed will not serve to protect the church against perversion of the gospel, *and* neither will the creed without the canon."[45] This is not an assertion in abstraction from the mission that constitutes the church. On the one hand, the "plotted sequence of God's acts that Irenaeus called 'the economy'" (referring to the Rule of Faith) is what compelled the church from the beginning to "read the Old Testament as narrative of God's history with his people, the people that is now in mission as the church."[46] On the other hand, the canon compensates for "those essential aspects of the message that the *regula fidei* did not—as our creeds still do not—directly support" precisely because "sophisticated theological reflection à la Paul or the evangelist John belongs to the mission itself."[47]

Again, this is not an antiquarian observation about the Rule's, or even Scripture's, missional origins. Thanks to Bosch, missional theology takes for granted Martin Kähler's assertion that "mission is the mother of theology."[48] The point is, however, that mission is *still* the mother of theology. What Jenson's historical work reveals is that the function of the Rule of Faith in relation to Scripture, which is so integral to theological interpretation, is—continues to be—an essentially missional phenomenon. The Rule of Faith's proper hermeneutical function is to locate the message the church receives through Scripture in the narrative framework of God's

44. Ibid., 63.
45. Ibid., 32.
46. Ibid., 23.
47. Ibid., 41.
48. Martin Kähler, *Schriften zur Christologie und Mission: Gesamtausgabe der Schriften zur Mission*, Theologische Bücherei 42 (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1971), 190.

ongoing mission, which is already constitutive of the church. The Rule of Faith, then, is not an interpretive key merely to the narrative of Scripture but to the *life* of the missional church that interprets Scripture as its story. Rae captures this idea well:

> There is, of course, a dialectical process at work here: the worship, the doctrine and the mission of the Church emerge and develop through engagement with Scripture, and then those same doctrines and practices successively constitute a hermeneutical guide to the reading of Scripture itself. . . .
>
> The story of the Church's life is long and complex of course, but it is possible to offer a brief description of this life and of its place in the divine economy. That brief description is known as the rule of faith. It is an account of God's action from creation to new creation and centered around Jesus Christ, in the course of which the community of faith is called into being as witness to and fruit of the action of God.[49]

Billings helps drive home the point. In a section subtitled "Reading as Acting the Drama," he states:

> The church reads Scripture from within a narrative framework. . . . The rule of faith is a narrative emerging from Scripture that is also a lens through which to view Scripture. But this is not just a story about the past, or a fable of the imagination. This narrative is rooted in the action of God in history, culminating in the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Hence, we do not apply principles from a story to our lives so much as we enter into the ongoing drama being played out by God's work in the world around us. We are actors in the drama of creation, fall, and redemption in Christ, actors and not merely spectators of the triune God's work in the world.[50]

The Rule of Faith specifies the drama in which the church acts, and therefore, *as enacted drama*, the Rule serves hermeneutically to clarify the story of Scripture. This is the sense in which acting in the drama *is* reading. "Reading Scripture for the Christian involves nothing less than acting in our Christ-formed identity by the Spirit's power, in service to the Father."[51]

Missional hermeneutics reorients the role of the Rule of Faith in theological interpretation by bringing its missional origin and, more importantly, its missional function to the surface. Participation in God's mission was constitutive of the Rule's development and is constitutive of its ongoing hermeneutical function. Theological interpretation should continue to

49. Rae, *History*, 146; Rae also discusses human participation in the action and purpose of the triune God (pp. 53–54), deepening the connection to a missional vision of the church's life in the divine economy.

50. Billings, *The Word of God*, 200.

51. Ibid., 202–3.

move in the direction in which works such as Jenson's, Rae's, and Billings's have started. If the church confesses the creed as an interpretive practice apart from participation in mission, there is reason to suspect that it will not help the church hear the message God speaks through Scripture and may even contribute to hearing the wrong story.

Conclusion

I have argued that, because participation in God's mission is constitutive of the church's theology, it is necessary to reorient theological interpretation of Scripture. By missionally reorienting primary areas of concern in theological hermeneutics, such as readerly formation and the function of the Rule of Faith, I have attempted to demonstrate that the germinal elements of missional hermeneutics are already present in the work of various proponents of theological interpretation who are not yet overtly and fully missional. Missional hermeneutics, indeed, is a form of theological interpretation that issues a challenge to the whole complex practice to place the church's participation in God's mission front and center as a hermeneutical *sine qua non*.

What is ultimately at stake in this challenge is an epistemological shift without which the church's eyes of faith remain half healed. Recall Hays's definition of theological interpretation as "a complex *practice*, a way of approaching Scripture with eyes of faith and seeking to understand it within the community of faith." He describes these "eyes of faith" as "the epistemological precondition" and then compares biblical scholarship to the blind man in Mark 8:22–26 who requires a second touch from Jesus to see clearly.[52] In the comparison, of course, theological interpretation is the second touch. Importantly, theological interpretation generally assumes that faith is *embodied*. There are, in other words, some things the church can only see from a position of embodied faith. Extending the point, missional hermeneutics contends that the practices of participation in God's mission are the particular embodiment of faith that constitutes the epistemological precondition for approaching Scripture faithfully. The eyes of faith are the eyes of the church in mission.

Theological interpreters are accustomed to the need to make rather obvious observations: among others, Scripture belongs to the church, God is the subject matter of Scripture, and well-formed readers have better sensibilities than unformed readers. Missional hermeneutics adds another: embodied faith is participation in God's mission. The need for this observation is unsurprising, because the misconstrual of faith is virtually as old as the church. Faith without works, James needed to write, is dead (2:14–26). There is no faith without works, and to the interpreter who attempts

52. Hays, "Reading the Bible," 6.

to show James eyes of faith without works, James replies, "I will show you my faith by works" (2:18).

In this sense, missional hermeneutics accepts that the complex practice of theological interpretation is "a way of approaching Scripture with eyes of faith and seeking to understand it within the community of faith" but insists that faith seeking understanding is *works seeking understanding.* Consider Gustavo Gutiérrez's clarification of Anselm's *credo ut intelligam*:

> Discourse about God comes second because faith comes first and is the source of theology; in the formula of St. Anselm, we believe in order that we may understand (*credo ut intelligam*). For the same reason, the effort at reflection has an irreproachable role, but one that is always subordinate to a faith that is lived and receives guidance within the communion of the church.
>
> The first stage or phase of theological work is the lived faith that finds expression in prayer and commitment. To live the faith means to put into practice, in the light of the demands of the reign of God, these fundamental elements of Christian existence. Faith is here lived "in the church" and geared to the communication of the Lord's message. The second act of theology, that of reflection in the proper sense of the term, has for its purpose to read this complex praxis in the light of God's word.[53]

Prayer and commitment as the expression of faith determine the meaning of faith seeking understanding. This is the genius of the praxeological hermeneutic that liberation theology pioneered. Missional hermeneutics operates with the same basic assumption, which can be stated more starkly as *works seeking understanding.* This entails both commitment to embodied participation and intentional practices of reading and theological reflection in light of those experiences of God's mission.

> *Missional* reading of Scripture needs to arise out of our *missional praxis.* As we (re)learn the Bible as a means of (re)aligning with God, we will discover that the practice of mission will enhance our understanding of Scripture. There is no way forward unless we are actively and intentionally present in the world.
>
> As we seek to implement a missional reading of the Bible, it is imperative that we actively engage in missional activity. There is something of a hermeneutical circle in this process. A missional reading ought to fuel the actual practice of mission; the practice of mission brings the Church back to the Scriptures.[54]

53. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, trans. and ed. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988), xxxiii–iv.

54. Brian D. Russell, *(re)Aligning with God: Reading Scripture for Church and World* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2016), 180.

Participation in God's mission is not merely a call the text makes on the church through a missional reading but is the *locus theologicus* that finally occasions a missional reading. The church's "work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thess 1:3) should become works seeking understanding—a missional hermeneutic of embodied participation that is an epistemological precondition of theological interpretation.