
Proposals for a Missional Hermeneutic: Mapping a Conversation

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Proposals for the development of what has come 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.

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 November meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) and the American Academy of Religion (AAR).¹ From its beginnings as an informal, early-morning breakfast meeting hosted by Tyndale Seminary of Toronto, the conversation became from 2005 onward a semi-formal "Additional Meeting" in the AAR/SBL program under the sponsorship of the Gospel and Our Culture Network (GOCN).² In 2009, the conversation was formalized as an "Affiliate Organization" related to the 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.³ 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

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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, I believed, and continue to believe, 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 had 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 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 of it might also be brought into view, those tend to remain closely allied with what is taken to be the fundamental point of it all. It is that gravitational center, that controlling impulse, in each of the proposals we have heard that I would like to examine. I have sensed that there have been at least four differing streams of emphasis. The primary exemplars of each do in fact reflect on a missional hermeneutic in broader terms, and there is considerable overlap among them. Yet, I would argue, the diversity of primary accent is sufficiently strong that teasing out the differences can allow us to see something of the range of the territory we are engaging. I suggest that these four points of gravity comprise an expanding and rich force field. Their spheres of interest and imagination intersect and produce synergy. 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.

1. *The Missional Direction of the Story*

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

Christopher Wright is perhaps the prime exemplar of this model, and is the one who has most thoroughly and extensively played it out. His presentation in 2005, which had been published previously (2004) and was later incorporated into his book *The Mission of God* (2006) as its Introduction, offered a detailed rationale for interpreting the Bible in light of the mission of God as the heart and core of the biblical narrative.

It is what the Bible is about. He does not deny that the narrative is multivocal, and comes in a variety of literary expressions. But taken as a canonical whole, the Bible, he says, tells the story of God's mission in and for the whole world, and with it the story of the people of God whom God has called and sent to be implicated in that mission. Interpreting any specific biblical material requires attending to this pervading story of which it is a part. The parts must be read in light of the whole. That, he says, is what comprises a missional hermeneutic. The mission of God provides the framework, the clue, the hermeneutical key for biblical interpretation.

Wright envisions a shift from speaking of "the biblical basis for mission" to "the missional basis of the Bible" (2004:103, 106). "Mission is not just one of a list of things that the Bible happens to talk about, only a bit more urgently than some. Mission is, in that much-abused phrase, 'what it's all about'" (104). "We are thinking," he says, "of the purpose for which the Bible exists, the God the Bible renders to us, the people whose identity and mission the Bible invites us to share, and the story the Bible tells about this God and this people and indeed about the whole world and its future" (108–109). "For that reason, mission could provide the framework both for our hermeneutical approach to reading the Bible and for organizing our account of biblical theology" (104).

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

Two other presenters in this series have followed essentially this same path. Grant LeMarquand's presentation in 2004 (based on his 2002 publication) reflected on the very general topic, "what the bible says about mission." The straightforward simplicity of that stated topic belies the richness of the nuances that follow. He is self-conscious of reading the Bible from the situation and experience of missional engagement, in his case in East Africa. He wrestles with holding together what many times are two competing streams or threads with respect to notions of mission: great commission and liberation from oppression. He works to put them together in the context of a comprehensive sense of the biblical narrative. For that purpose, he provides a "reading" of fundamental, paradigmatic texts, particularly the beginning (Gen. 1–12) and the ending of the story (Rev. 4–5). In this way, he is not declaring the principle of a missional narrative core as fundamental to a missional hermeneutic, but 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" (2008b).⁴ 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 (Goheen 2006). 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" (2004:104). This he does with reference both to the mission of God and the mission of the church.

Goheen does not explore his observation further, even though his own sense of the importance of God's sending is more present throughout his own work, and the missional ecclesiology that results from that is evident, as his excellent book on Lesslie Newbigin's "missionary ecclesiology" shows (Goheen 2000). 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 (2005), to Richard Bauckham's important book, *The Bible and Mission* (2003). 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, there is a certain circularity in this line of argument which needs to be frankly acknowledged and owned: from the scriptures is discerned the core narrative that becomes the key or clue for understanding the scriptures. This circularity will need 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 (2002). 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," which Brownson says "accompanies the experience of being called and sent" and "generates the critical principle by which

a missional hermeneutic becomes self-correcting.” Bauckham’s book has much to contribute along these lines as well.

2. *The Missional Purpose of the Writings*

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

If the first stream 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 is the one who has most forcefully made this case. “Jesus personally formed the first generation of Christians for his mission,” he argues. “After that, their testimony became the tool for continuing formation” (2004:62). Thus, “the apostolic strategy of continuing formation of missional communities became the motivation of their writings.” The New Testament writings have as their purpose to equip the churches for witness (2007:107–108).

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’ disciples and accompanying him through his earthly ministry on the path to the cross. . . . In this preparation of disciples to be become apostles, missional formation is happening in the Gospels” (Guder 2007:108).

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

While Guder’s display of the importance of scriptural purpose leans heaviest on the character of the New Testament writings, others suggest a similar thing with respect to the earlier testament. Goheen, for example, affirms that “[t]he Old Testament scriptures were written to ‘equip’ God’s people for their missional purposes.” The New Testament also, he goes on to say, was written in order to “form, equip, renew the church for their mission in the world” (Goheen 2006; cf. Goheen 2008a:92–99).

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?” (Guder 2002:5). To put it another way, “How did this particular text continue the formation of witnessing communities then, and how does it do that today?” (Guder 2007:109).

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/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" (2002).

3. *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" (2006; cf. Barram 2007).

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" (2006).

There are several important features here. First, Barram takes seriously the believing community's ownership of the fact that the scriptures are "for our equipping." He is not waiting for the scholars and pastors to decide how this or that text equips us in the community. He positions himself with the community itself to ask, "How shall the church read the Bible faithfully today?" (2007:52). In doing so, he shifts the vantage point from the subject of the equipping (biblical authors and their interpreters) to the community being equipped. He envisions the community as the active subject of interpretation, not merely a passive recipient of it. In this, Barram warns our academic

and pastoral selves not to presume that *we* provide interpretation *for* them. Even our own legitimate work in service to the community's *reading* of the word is called to be done in community, as part of the community.

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 (2005).

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

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 three 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" (2007:42–43). His accent is not only on the approach to the text, and on the community that approaches it, but it is precisely on the fact of that community's locatedness in the world as a sent community. He is convinced that "the 'social location' of the people of God is at the very heart of a missional hermeneutic" (2006). In other words, the sent community as location immediately implicates other layers of location. The community has been sent to be the people of God "at this time, in this place" (to borrow the title of an excellent book by Michael Warren). "Located" questions, then, are those that arise out of that tangible place and time in which the sent community lives and in terms of which it seeks to discern its particular charism and vocation. 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 the GOCN's five Missional Bible Study

questions (Hunsberger 1999), and the use Guder made of them in his Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) General Assembly Bible Studies several years ago (Guder 2002).⁵ But he presses for sharper specificity and locatedness as the following examples demonstrate (2006):

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

There is something very interesting going on in the form of these questions. There is an interplay between questions about the text and questions about our reading of it. The questions are not only about what the text is getting at, but about what “our reading(s)” of the text are doing with it! In that way, the questions are “precisely the kinds of critically important missional questions that my social location has conditioned me to overlook or avoid” (Barram 2006). The questions then provide a kind of critical criteria by which not only our questions but our conclusions as well 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 “read faithfully” the biblical texts “today” sets in place the bridging that is proper to a hermeneutic. The community engages the texts, knowing that they bore particular meanings in the time and place of their original 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.

4. *The Missional Engagement with Cultures*

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

James Brownson has in many ways pioneered the terms of this conversation. So far as I am able to determine, he was the first to use the phrase “missional hermeneutic.”⁶ His address at the first breakfast meeting in this series in many ways structured the paths along which the conversation has moved.

By proposing in his earlier work what he called “elements of a missional hermeneutic,” Brownson was bringing together his pastoral experience, his deep resonance with matters of missiology, and his area of formal training and work in New Testament studies. Working from these locations, his model focuses on what is taking place in the

missional moment 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 found a great deal of help in the work of his mentor J. Christian Beker, a Pauline scholar who engaged this dynamic in terms of the relationship between coherence and contingency in Paul’s work. Brownson, however, wondered whether something else was going on for which those categories do not yet account. Investigating this question led 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” (1998:42–43).⁷

Brownson lays out his argument in this way. His foundational theological mooring place, or *discrimen* (to use David Kelsey’s term in *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology*), is that “the mode in which God is present among the faithful is irreducibly *multicultural*” (Brownson 1998:22). In the dynamic of expressing the tradition in each unique place, the gospel functions as the interpretive matrix, “the implicit set of rules that govern the way tradition is brought to bear in a particular context” (39). The gospel, he takes it, is most fundamentally the good news that “in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God has revealed the completion of a saving purpose for the world, to be received by faith” (49). 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 (50–51).

Ross Wagner’s work provides an important example of the dynamic of which Brownson speaks. Wagner, in his book *Heralds of the Good News*, says that “From the opening words of his letter to the Roman churches, Paul reveals himself to be both a ‘missionary theologian’ and a ‘hermeneutic theologian.’ That is, Paul presents

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

Brownson's view and Wagner's example have correspondence with some of the most important missiological models developed in recent years by people such as 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" (Newbigin 1995:147). The dynamic he identifies is not only relevant 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 have argued elsewhere, the church always finds itself "sitting on both sides" in the encounter of the gospel with its culture (Hunsberger 1996). 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." Colin Yuckman has noted 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?'" (2005).

Conclusion

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 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). In substance and girth, these conversations have provided foundations for the continuing development of a robust missional hermeneutic.

What is now called the GOCN Forum on Missional Hermeneutics (formalized in 2009 as an Affiliate Organization of the SBL) 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 current purpose statement shows with the addition of a fifth point of accent the kind of maturation that is under way. 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' (GOCN Forum on Missional Hermeneutics 2011).

Notes

1. These two large academic associations (AAR and SBL) draw upwards toward 10,000 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 are scheduled to resume meeting jointly in November 2011.
2. 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 (7:30am!) breakfast meeting each year. Greenman and others at Tyndale had been associated with developments in the North American Gospel and Our Culture Network (GOCN), and particularly proposals for testing a model for "Missional Bible Study" (Hunsberger 1999). They wanted to encourage scholars in biblical and other theological fields to give explicit attention to a missional hermeneutic for biblical engagement.
3. The breakfast conversations included presentations in 2002 by James V. Brownson (2002), in 2003 by Michael D. Barram (2003), and in 2004 by Grant LeMarquand, (see LeMarquand 2002). The move to an "Additional Meeting" in 2005 meant that there would be more time for extending the conversation (a 2 1/2 hour session). In 2005, a call for papers was issued and three submissions were accepted for presentation, response and discussion. Papers

were presented by Christopher Wright (2005), Colin Yuckman (2005), and James Miller (2005), with responses by James Brownson, Michael Barram, and Grant LeMarquand, respectively. In the next two meetings, particular people were invited to give presentations that would carry the conversation forward. The presentations in 2006 were given by Michael Goheen (2006) and Michael Barram (2006), and in 2007 by Darrell Guder (cf. Guder 2007) and Ross Wagner (cf. Wagner 2009), faculty colleagues presenting their experience of team teaching a seminary course on Philippians.

4. Dan Beeby's work bringing together the hermeneutical implications of both canonical reading and missional reading lends support for this emphasis. See *Canon and Mission* (1999).

5. 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 1999, available at www.gocn.org.

6. Brownson used the phrase in a workshop at a GOCN gathering in 1992, and again in a major presentation at a 1994 GOCN consultation. That presentation was published in the *International Review of Mission* in the same year (Brownson 1994), and re-published in expanded form in the *Christian Mission and Modern Culture Series* (Brownson 1998).

7. It is important to note that Brownson's use of the term *matrix* is different from the way Christopher Wright uses it (in Wright 2004).

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