

**INVESTIGATING THE MODEL OF JESUS AND THE
GOSPEL OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD AS AN ANSWER TO THE
CULTURAL CHALLENGES OF CONTEXTUALIZATION
FOR THE CHURCH IN AFRICA**

By

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
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Submitted to the faculty of
Commonwealth Open University

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis examines the seductive challenge inherent in contextualization: are all cultures at liberty to enjoy their own versions of the gospel of the kingdom of God or is there one gospel expressed in multiple cultures?

Throughout its history the church has grappled with the tensions between the kingdom of God and the challenges of critical contextualization. First-century Israel tried to jam the kingdom of God into a nationalistic model and nearly throttled it. In contrast, the early church took the gospel and changed the key but kept the melody intact, as Michael Green argues. However, the coming of Christendom and colonial expansionism brought discord as missionaries and merchants, Bibles and gunpowder sailed to Africa in the same vessel. When decolonization arrived, its concerns were hatched in imperial incubators thus European interests managed to survive liberation movements. Today many African leaders have bought into Western materialism yet simultaneously retain traditional concepts of control. The result is a silencing of the prophetic voice: the church looks and acts no differently than its surrounding cultures. It is, to use Walter Brueggemann's metaphor, "*in exile*" along with the church in the West. In addition, although liberation has restored the land to the people of Africa, in reality one oppressor has been replaced by another.

African theology has responded with an "Emmaus Road" experience: turning back not to fishing in this case but to relationship with God according to tribal custom. This is the equivalent of *post exile* and it stands in direct contradiction to our understanding of liberation.

This thesis proposes a change from culturally dogmatic/ doctrinal constructionism to behavior that is based on an experiential identity with Jesus Christ and the supernatural indwelling of the Holy Spirit as the answer to liberation from the oppression of disease, poverty, and abuse of power. It suggests a theology for Africa that is embedded in Scripture, guided by the Holy Spirit and conducted by the church as the hermeneutical community, a *tertium genus*: the people of the kingdom of God. *This* is liberation ... although it may not look like what Africa thought it would.

The paper includes a chart showing five worldviews: Hebrew, Greek, Colonial, African and the worldview of the kingdom of God and calls the church in every culture to unhesitatingly present God' crystal clear message to a confused world.

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CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

When speaking of the 48 countries that comprise sub-Saharan Africa, it is possible to view the region as a whole, for although there are differences from one country to another there are substantial similarities both in cultural values and religious understanding.¹ These enable one to speak in broad terms.

Africa is both first world and third world. The division of first world and third world is not solely confined to an urban/rural split as there is a large population of third world people living in urban environments. However, there is a “fault line” as urban culture is associated with Western values while rural culture reflects traditional African principles.

Africa is the world’s poorest continent. While there has been significant growth in the economies of other third world areas such as China, India and Latin America, Africa has gone backwards in terms of foreign trade, investment, per capita income; and forwards in terms of oppression, poverty and disease. This is due in part to the effects of corrupt governments, despotism and constant conflict, as well as to the results of cultural traditions which infringe on the humanity and dignity of people.

¹ There are 42 countries in the sub-Saharan African mainland as well as 6 island nations.

The people of Africa profess a wide variety of religious beliefs with Christianity and Islam being the two most widespread. Approximately 46.3% of Africans are Christian.² Roughly 11.8% follow indigenous religious beliefs known as African Primal Religion³ or African Traditional Religion: a “power religion” based on manipulation and coercion of spiritual forces.⁴ Recently, through movements such as the African Renaissance and Afro-centrism, there has been an attempt to revitalize and revalorize African traditional cultures and spiritual traditions.

The Evangelical Christian views the world from a Kingdom of God perspective: God rules over this world. The “good news” or gospel is that God in Jesus Christ has broken into the history of mankind, defeating the powers of Satan and establishing His sovereignty. Contextualization is central to an attempt to weave together this good news to individual cultures. In Africa the gospel “must be served in an African cup.”⁵ Nevertheless, the gospel cannot be swallowed up by any culture it confronts. Should culture become the sieve

² <http://www.wikipedia.org>

³ John Mbiti argues that African religion is too general a term since African religion is not universal but tribal or national. Therefore, he advocates using the term African Tribal Religion. (Mbiti 1989a:4) Idowu (1973:104) holds a contrary view: the people of Africa have a common racial, cultural and religious origin which he describes as “negritude.” They share a similar concept of God as Supreme Creator. Therefore, Idowu speaks of African Tribal Religion in the singular. Magesa also argues that Africa shares a fundamentally common world view. (*African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*, (New York; Maryknoll, 1997) pp. 14 – 18)

⁴ Gailyn Van Rheenen, “Distinctively Christian, Distinctly Mongolian.” Symposium, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, March 11, 2003. <http://missiology.org/mongolianlectures/worldviewandsyncretism.htm>

⁵ Allan Turner, “Contextualizing the Gospel in Africa.” <http://allanturner.com/article09.html> Accessed 2007

through which the gospel must first pass syncretism and dual allegiance result. On the other hand, the gospel cannot be held as counter-cultural or there is a backwash of superficiality and dual allegiance.

The church in Africa is both western and eastern in ethos. To a large extent the upper and middle class church (mainly urban) has adopted or accommodated the values and goals of the West: settling down into materialism; pseudo-capitalism; etc. It is, to use Walter Brueggemann's metaphor, "in exile" along with the church in the west.⁶ Liberation has not produced the freedom that was expected; consequently the "eastern" African church (mainly rural) is also "in exile" in that it, too, has settled down: either continuing to hold the religious concepts and values of African tribal religions or reverting to them in times of crises. Many leaders have bought into western materialism while at the same time retaining traditional concepts of control. The result for both branches of the church is that they look and act no different than their surrounding cultures. Therefore, the message to the exiled church in both situations is "the kingdom is here, repent and be baptized:" be transferred into and transformed by the kingdom of His dear Son.⁷

At the same time, the African church is not just experiencing exile it is also experiencing the disorientation (or liminality) of "post exile." For although Africa is liberated from colonial oppression and the land is once again restored to

⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home: Preaching Among Exiles*, (Louisville, Kentucky; Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), p. 1

⁷ Colossians 1: 13

the people of Africa, in reality one oppressor has been replaced by another. This has led to an “Emmaus Road” experience: the church has turned back, not to fishing as was the case with the early disciples, but to a relationship with God according to tribal religion and custom. An oft-heard reason for this regression is that Christ has only been presented as the answer to the questions a white man would ask. If He were to appear as the answer to the questions that Africans are asking, what would he look like? ⁸

In view of the above, I believe it is appropriate to revisit the issue of how the church is to incarnate the gospel of the kingdom of God.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

African scholars have long been attempting to solve the problem of how to contextualize the gospel without modifying it. Most often this is seen as a struggle between the gospel and culture, the result of limiting the gospel to a non-supernaturally initiated mandate, holding it instead as another “religious expression:” a root cause that follows liberal theology. There is also a tendency towards “mnemonic hermeneutics” (Tiénou) and a certain ambivalence towards Scripture as the word of God and the source for theology (Mbiti on occasion; Mosala; Maluleke; and Mofokeng; for example). Absent is the fundamental

⁸ Kwame Bediako, *Jesus in Africa: The Christian Gospel in African History and Experience*, (Carlisle, U.K.; Regnum Africa, 2000), p. vi

understanding that the struggle is one between the gospel and the “powers” within culture that dehumanise and enslave. The crisis is a spiritual one. Therefore, it must be dealt with in a spiritual rather than an anthropological, psychological, or political manner.⁹

Both exilic and post-exilic experiences are exacerbated by an African contextual model which separates African theological issues from the rest of the church in rhetorical moves designed to distinguish who is allowed to speak into African theological issues and who is not. The assertion is that only the black evangelical African church can speak into the black evangelical African church. However, as an Evangelical, I submit that colour is not the main issue in this limited view of “African-ness.” The principle contention is that culture takes precedence over the gospel. In this sense African theology is culture-bound instead of culture-challenging.

There is a need to re-assess how the church can embody the gospel of the kingdom of God in Africa. It is the conviction of the author that the manifestation of God’s kingdom is a visible phenomenon, demonstrable in any culture.

Matthew 1:28 - “...the kingdom of God has come upon you.”

Luke 17:21 - “...the kingdom of God is in your midst.”

The church’s focus and definition is the kingdom of God. Where kingdom concepts stand in contradiction to local cultural expressions, it is culture that

⁹ Zechariah 4: 6

must give way.¹⁰

Africa's liberation from the oppression of disease, poverty, and abuse of power will only become an effective reality when Christian belief is changed from culturally dogmatic/doctrinal constructionism to behavior that is based on an experiential identity with Jesus Christ and the supernatural indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

3. AIMS (or Sampling) OF THE RESEARCH

The aims of the research are:

To explore how Jesus modeled the kingdom to post-exilic first-century Jews.

To explore how similar the first century Jewish culture is to the present African worldview.

To explore and analyze the views of scholars and lay people in this subject by means of a literature study, including literature on the internet.

To discover what questions Africa is asking of Jesus.

To explore how the interaction of Jesus with the people of His day might be applied to the people of the church in Africa today.

To draw conclusions on the above and make recommendations.

¹⁰ George Eldon Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom: Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God*. (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 95 - 106

4. THE VALUE OF THE RESEARCH

The research is expected to make a contribution to the understanding of the gospel's incarnational ability and expression in Africa, addressing real life situations and to propose possible ways of facilitating the needed paradigm shift.

5. HYPOTHESIS

God's kingdom is a visible phenomenon. It is seen as the incarnational ability of the gospel effects a subversive transformation of culture as it moves by the Holy Spirit through the lives of Christians into their social and cultural settings. It is this "participatory hermeneutic" (that is, in attendance with the Holy Spirit) that moves Christians to see what God has done and takes us from the first century text through our contemporary culture, lifting our seeing and hearing to God's view of the world. This is how it is possible to live out the call to the church to inculturate Christ.

6. RESEARCH APPROACH

This will be largely based on an exposition of passages of the New Testament that contain Jesus' interaction with first century Hebrew culture and

also contemporary published literature, including articles published on the internet.

This, plus my personal experience of approximately 20 years of Christian ministry, ongoing in a South African context, including 15 years spent teaching students at All Africa Bible College and in local churches as well as a number of African countries.

7. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The aim is to come up with a perspective useful to the African church. Relevant interdisciplinary literature and exiting research will be examined for both relevance and application.

8. DEMARCATION

Although the gospel is able to transform every culture, for the purposes of this study the focus will be on African culture.

The interest in this research was ignited by an increasing awareness of the impact culture has on our lives and the necessity to see our identity as firmly rooted in Christ; although we remain in our culture, we are still "His." Misperception of what Jesus has done and lack of understanding of His

sovereignty has led to a consequent lack of freedom that much of the African church experiences.

CHAPTER 2

DEVELOPING AN ANALYTICAL MODEL OF WORLDVIEW: CONTEXTUALIZATION AND THE GOSPEL OF THE KINGDOM

1. The Epistemic Status of Worldview

“For as he thinks within himself, so he is.”

Proverbs 23:7

As humans we relate to our world through socio-historical situations which, although particular, appear to the individual as implicit. Referred to as the process of the “sociology of knowledge”¹¹ this “*relationatürliche Weltanschauung*,”¹² or “relative-natural world view” varies from one society or culture to another but is intricately woven into the fabric of our lives. Described in another way, Paul Hiebert refers to a worldview as the glasses we look *through*, as distinct from what we look *at*.¹³

There is a kaleidoscope of views on worldviews depending on the approach: whether from the perspective of socio-economics (Marx, Nietzsche); philosophy

¹¹ Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, (New York; Anchor Books, 1967), p. 3

¹² Max Scheler, 1960 as cited in Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, (New York; Doubleday, 1966), p. 8

¹³ Paul Hiebert, “Conversion and Worldview Transformation,” *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, Vol. 14:2, April – June, 1997. Accessed January, 2003

(Kierkegaard); anthropology (Kraft, Nida, Hiebert) or unconscious rationalizations and fears (Freud). Worldviews change as perspectives move. But fundamental to all worldviews is a set of beliefs which explain what is true (and therefore what is not true); how things are (or how they should be).¹⁴ Therefore, a worldview looks at events and information with two eyes: normative and descriptive.¹⁵ Through this dual focus, we attempt to make sense of the world around us by setting our behavior within larger frames of significance. These frames not only ratify our visions and our verdicts practically, morally and behaviorally, they also obscure from our view whatever does not fit. In this way we are enclosed in webs of signification we ourselves have spun.¹⁶ Reality outside our heads is explained, evaluated, reinforced and integrated in terms of existing reality inside our heads.¹⁷

Until the early 1900's, the worldview and theology of Western culture was thought to be trans-cultural and universal, and therefore directly accessible to all cultures. Transference of cultural influence from one person or one culture to another depended on persuasion and if necessary, force. It was taken for granted

¹⁴ G. Linwood Barney, "The Supracultural and the Cultural: Implications for Frontier Missions," unpublished manuscript, n.d., 2. The original version of this manuscript was a chapter by the same title in *The Gospel and Frontier Peoples*, ed. R. Pierce Beaver (Pasadena: William Carey, 1973) p. 48 – 55, as quoted by David Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally: An Introduction to Missionary Communication*, (Grand Rapids; Zondervan 1991), p. 101 – 102

¹⁵ Clifford Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays by Clifford Geertz*, (New York, Basic Books, 1973), p. 93

¹⁶ Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology*, (New York; Basic Books, 1983), p. 182.

¹⁷ Charles Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, (New York; Orbis Books, 1979, p. 53

that Western culture was superior to any other culture. The darkness of the “uncivilized” world’s religions could be dispelled using the blinding light of reason and science. Missionary endeavours were undertaken using the Enlightenment’s logical, propositional, “hard data” approach plus persistence. In the process two truths were overlooked. First, all people do not perceive reality in the same way. The West perceives the world in terms of a multiple split-level world: reason and intellect; experience and practice; politics and belief. However, Africa sees reality in the context of relationships.¹⁸ Second, the concept of prevenient grace, or *missio Dei* was missing. God is already at work in whatever culture people live. Although transcendent, He has not left Himself without witness.¹⁹ Like a watermark on paper, the entire universe bears His image and inscription: his authority and sovereignty is indelibly imprinted and visible for all to see, for He is the “Sovereign Lord who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them.”²⁰ His presence alerts mankind to His reality. Thus every person has some knowledge. However, this does not provide a solution to man’s sin: general revelation is not is not salvic.

¹⁸ John Pobee, “Two Species in a Genre and Two Carriages of a Moving Train.” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 99, November 1997, p. 122 – 129

¹⁹ Acts 14: 17

Lesslie Newbigin remarks that *Missio Dei* “has sometimes been used to support concepts of mission which bypass the Church and even bypass the name of Jesus. That is a radical misuse of the concept.” *Foolishness to the Greeks*, (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1989), p. 135

²⁰ Acts 4: 24; c/f Psalm 19; Romans 1

N. T. Wright contends that worldviews are "like the foundation of a house: vital but invisible."²¹ I will argue that one can see a foundation by looking at what is built on it.

1.1 Culture is the Praxis of Worldview²²

Cultures are dialectically and interactively produced: that is, they are shaped by the same individuals who participate in them. Therefore, although taken for granted, culture is precarious and open to change because it is a human construct.²³ Both new information and feedback have the potential to modify culture; however regardless of the reality, information is interpreted in such a way that it "fits" into the prevailing worldview or as Charles Kraft writes, "at least does not disconfirm the worldview."

People who believe that God has a hand in every event of life are continually confirmed in this concept because they understand and interpret every event in terms of the participation of God in that event. Those who conceive of every event as the result of purely naturalistic forces, on the other hand, interpret the same events in such a way that their naturalistic worldview is confirmed.²⁴

²¹ N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, (Minneapolis; Fortress Press, 1992), p. 125

²² Charles Kraft holds worldview to be subordinate to culture: "Cultures pattern perceptions of reality into conceptualizations... These conceptualizations form what is termed the 'worldview' of the culture." (Charles Kraft, *Christianity in Culture*, 1979, p. 53). However, N. T. Wright, Paul Hiebert, David Bosch and others maintains the opposite: worldviews produce culture.

²³ The term describing the process of change is *inculturation*, as new principles "dress in local clothing."

²⁴ Charles Kraft, *Christianity in Culture*, p. 74

All worldviews are profoundly theological.²⁵ Geertz writes that religion lies at the heart of culture, giving shape to culture and meaning to data.²⁶ John Pobee holds a similar opinion, “Culture has always been the solvent of religion.”²⁷ Cultural values reflect underlying religious beliefs but few are harmonious with the kingdom of God.

While the gospel supports some cultural affirmations and fulfils some unrealised cultural aspirations, allowing for local expressions of Christian faith, it also addresses the self-serving and demonic elements present in every culture.²⁸

Challenges to a society’s worldview threaten the foundations of its world. Change seldom happens without a struggle.²⁹ When change does occur, the leaders within the existing system have the greatest reluctance to participate, “because to move beyond is to move away from one’s power base.”³⁰ Every society assigns certain groups or individuals, such as politicians, professionals, teachers, intellectuals, or religious leaders as expert definers of social reality. Therefore, it is from these groups that challenges are met with strong resistance and deep emotion. Charles Kraft uses the example of the Pharisees, who refused

²⁵ N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, p. 122

²⁶ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, (London; Hutchinson, 1973), p.89 – 90

²⁷ John Pobee, “Two Species in a Genre and Two Carriages of a Moving Train.”

²⁸ Eddie Gibbs, *Church Next: Quantum Changes in How We Do Ministry*, (Downers Grove; InterVarsity Press, 2000), p. 149

²⁹ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, (New York; Orbis Books, 1996), p. 184

³⁰ R. A. MacDonald, “Beyond Pentecost: A Pentecostal-Charismatic Hermeneutic Model in a Postmodern Context,” Doctoral Thesis, 2006, <http://www.scripturewise.com/DISSERTATION.pdf>

to alter their conceptualization of the Messiah in spite of Jesus' miracles. Their preconceptions of how Messiah would come and how He would act blinded them. However, many of the common people schooled in those same concepts changed their minds because they allowed their experience to alter their conceptualization.³¹ Eugene Nida suggests a reason for the disparity:

It would seem that we possess a kind of grid which we can employ to reinterpret experience in terms of some other conceptual framework, *provided, of course, that there is a measure of willingness to do so* and a degree of good will inherent in the activity.³²

However, Nida's statement bears inspection. Experience can be of such intensity that it shatters worldview lenses, regardless of the thinking. For example, the resurrection of Lazarus exploded the mindsets of many Jews.³³ Their reaction was irreconcilable with Jewish thinking and yet they believed, but not because of their willingness or inherent good will. Whether faith *remains*, however, is influenced by willingness or resistance to change.

1.2 Summary

A culture's view or perception of the world may be true, partially true, or completely false. Unfortunately regardless of accuracy or inaccuracy, cultural

³¹ Ibid.

³² Eugene Nida, *Toward a Science of Translating: With Special Reference to Principles and Procedures Involved in Bible Translating*, (Brill Academic Publishers, 2003), p. 55. *Italics not in the original.*

³³ John 11: 18 - 45

values and worldview shape a person's behavior. This means that *unless one's worldview is changed, there is no change in behavior.*

2. Contextualization

*"Nothing is so incredible as an answer to an unasked question."
Reinhold Niebuhr.³⁴*

Both Reinhold Niebuhr and Lesslie Newbigin make the salient point that if the gospel is to make sense, it has to be communicated both in the language of those hearing and clothed in symbols which are meaningful to them.

... the gospel does not come as a disembodied message, but as the message of a community which claims to live by it and which invites others to adhere to it, the community's life must be so ordered that it "makes sense" to those who are so invited. It must, as we say, "come alive." Those to whom it is addressed must be able to say, "Yes, I see. This is true for me, for my situation." But if the gospel is truly to be communicated, the subject in that sentence is as important as the predicate. What comes home to the heart of the hearer must really be the gospel, and not a product shaped by the mind of the hearer. ... [and] not a self portrait.³⁵

Over the years successive artists have painted Jesus in the portrait of the age: a Byzantine Emperor; or the Medieval Age's pain-drenched, pale-faced semi-corpse; a fair-haired Anglo-Saxon lad; the liberator Che Guevara; and the Jesus of

³⁴ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, (New York; Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941 – 43), Vol. 2, p. 6

³⁵ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1989), pp. 141 – 142

Christian movies where, according to Rob Bell's indictment, He is usually depicted,

... wearing a white bathrobe with a light blue beauty pageant sash, and his hair is blow-dried and his eyes are glazed over ... and he's Swedish.³⁶ [sic]

Jesus was dressed in the reigning cultural ideal; and this is how the gospel "comes alive" in different cultural contexts.³⁷ The challenge is how it remains authentic: and that is the challenge of critical contextualization.

Today geographical distances do not present the greatest barrier to communication; cultural barriers are now the most formidable.³⁸ Yet humanity shares much in common: we are all created in the image of God; we are all fallen, all in need of redemption;³⁹ we are all objects of God's intended salvation.⁴⁰ "God's love and holiness," writes Gailyn Van Rheenen, "define both why and how God relates to humankind. He did not merely create culture and leave it. He loved those He created and desires to live in a relationship to them. Yet He desires that human culture reflect His nature (1 Peter 1:16; Lev 11:44, 46).

³⁶ Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith*, (Grand Rapids; Zondervan, 2005), p. 131

³⁷ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, p. 142

³⁸ David Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally*, p. 95 – 96

³⁹ Romans 8: 18 – 23

⁴⁰ Calvinists would disagree.

... God does not disengage from culture but works for spiritual revitalization of culture from within.”⁴¹ Any boundary between cultural anthropology and theology is artificial. As theology and anthropology merge, missiology gains a theology of culture that includes an awareness of Satan’s intentions, tenacity, methods and resources. This highlights the importance of correct discernment:

... If Christian ministers and missionaries only perceive God working in culture, without the concurrent working of Satan, they will conclude that humankind, as well as the culture in which they live, is intrinsically good. Christian ministry will, therefore, affirm the value of culture, rather than work in opposition to it. ... Satan (as well as God) is active in shaping human culture. The Bible shows Satan as a distinct, malevolent personality who has opposed the work of God “from the beginning (1 John 3:8). ... Because of his control over contemporary culture, he is called “the god of this age” (2 Cor 4:4), who blinds the unbelievers so that they cannot see the light of the gospel; the ruler of the kingdom of the air” (Eph 2:2), who works in the disobedient; and “the tempter” (1 Thess 3:5), who causes new Christians to fall away from their relationship with God. He is a real being, not a mere projection of evil upon a spiritual personality and thus a creation of the human mind (Wink 1986, 26 – 20). He is the great usurper who attempts to stand in the place of God.⁴²

Van Rheezen compares a theology of mission to the engine of a ship that provides the power for the gospel to traverse the tide of culture and the powers operative within it. He defines these powers or basic principles (*stoicheia*) as human institutions, traditions, rituals, and philosophies of religion.⁴³ The

⁴¹ Gailyn Van Rheezen, “A Theology of Culture: Desecularizing Anthropology,” (January, 1997) International Journal of Frontier Missions, http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/14_1_PDFs/05_Van_Rheezen.pdf, Accessed 2005.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

churches in Galatia and Colossae provide examples, “although [they] considered themselves to be in Christ, they were still controlled by Satan’s rules.”⁴⁴

In 1974 The Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization brought together more than 2,300 evangelicals with the aim of being more intentional about world evangelization. In what is known as The Lausanne Covenant, their conclusion reflects the above assessment of culture -

We affirm that there is only one Savior and only one gospel, although there is a wide diversity of evangelistic approaches. We recognize that everyone has some knowledge of God through his general revelation in nature. But we deny that this can save, for people suppress the truth by their unrighteousness. We also reject as derogatory to Christ and the gospel every kind of syncretism and dialogue which implies that Christ speaks equally through all religions and ideologies.

... Culture must always be tested and judged by Scripture (Mark 7:8, 9, 13). Because man is God’s creature, some of his culture is rich in beauty and goodness (Matt 7:11; Gen 4:21, 22). Because he is fallen, all of it is tainted with sin and some of it is demonic. The gospel does not presuppose the superiority of any culture to another, but evaluates all cultures according to its own criteria of truth and righteousness, and insists on moral absolutes in every culture.⁴⁵

If we hold to the above statement, in particular that the gospel evaluates every culture according to the criteria of truth and righteousness, then a culture which more closely embraces biblical moral absolutes is superior to a culture with less. Judging by *ethnicity* is amoral. However, it is not prejudicial to judge a culture that justifies or embraces evil. A judge is not prejudiced by identifying a particular action as illegal because the question of legality is determined by the

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ The Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, Gospelcom.net, <http://www.lausanne.org/Brix?pageID=12891>

legislative body standing behind the court. If a culture's legislation conflicts with God's legislative decisions, in that aspect it stands guilty. I agree that all cultures are guilty, but in varying degrees. Scripture indicates that all sins are not alike, although they all deserve the same penalty: the least along with the greatest.

2.1 The Genesis of Contextualization

Contextualization was an established principle for the early church. Paul's first letter to Christians in Corinth illustrates -

Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessing.⁴⁶

Paul did not adopt the Corinthian's worldview but shaped his message to the context of his audience. To Jews in a synagogue, he presented the gospel as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy in order to open their eyes. To Greeks, he made use of Greek poetry and an altar to the unknown god to pry open their minds.

⁴⁶ I Corinthians 9: 19 – 23

To contextualize is to understand the language, longings, lifestyle patterns, and worldview of the host community and to adjust our practices accordingly without compromising the gospel.⁴⁷

The gospel challenges and confronts. The result is penetration, not harmonization.

2.2 The Slippery Edges of Authentic and False Contextualization

The challenge of contextualization emerges over and over again: how to be faithful to the gospel and the historical tradition of Christian life while being relevant to local culture. A great deal has been written on contextualization in the past years. I am not going to endeavor to trace these historical arguments or the developments in contextual theory except to note that in 1972, the TEF made a distinction between what it called “authentic and false contextualization.”

False contextualization yields to uncritical accommodation, a form of culture faith. Authentic contextualization is always prophetic, arising always out of a genuine encounter between God’s Word and his world, and moves towards the purpose of challenging and changing the situation through rootedness in and commitment to a given historical moment.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st Century Church*, (Peabody, Mass.; Hendrickson, 2003), p. 85

⁴⁸ Chuang Chua, The Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, Gospelcom.net.
<http://www.lausanne.org/Brix?pageID=12891>

2.2.1 Syncretism

Syncretism is the hybrid that results when two (or more) religious systems intertwine. One, or both, lose their basic structure and identity. The chickens that come home to roost are neither fish nor fowl. We need not look far to see cultural and religious influences in Western Christianity: Christmas trees and hot cross buns; wedding rings and white bridal dresses are examples. However, these have been filled with new meaning to such an extent that the majority of people are unaware of their original significance.⁴⁹

Theologians such as Louis Luzbetak,⁵⁰ Robert Schreiter,⁵¹ Gailyn Van Rheen, ⁵² D. A. Carson,⁵³ David Bosch,⁵⁴ John Orme,⁵⁵ among many others,

⁴⁹ The modern use of an evergreen tree has been explained as a Christianization of the pagan representation of a renewal of life. The earliest reference has been traced to 16th century Germany, where a small fir tree was decorated with apples, nuts and paper flowers. Today many understand the Christmas tree as representative of the cross on which Jesus died. The buns were seen as a dangerous hold-over from Catholic belief in 18th century England and were banned until Elizabeth I passed a law permitting their sale at Christmas and Easter. The wearing of wedding rings began in the Roman Empire during the 2nd century. A carry-over from Greek culture, it was believed that a small artery, the “vena amoris,” or the “vein of love,” ran from the heart to the third finger of the left hand. Christian Overman, *Assumptions that Affect Our Lives: How Worldviews Determine Values that Influence Behavior and Shape Culture*, (U.S.A.; Ablaze Publishing Co., 2006), p. 14. Wearing a white wedding dress is a tradition that began with Queen Victoria. Etiquette instructs that a white dress should not be worn for any subsequent marriages; however, this is increasingly ignored in contemporary times. <http://www.wikipedia.org>

⁵⁰ Louis Luzbetak, *The Church and Cultures: New Perspectives in Missiological Anthropology*, (New York; Orbis Books, 1989)

⁵¹ Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, (New York; Orbis Books, 2001), p. 99

⁵² Gailyn Van Rheen (Ed.), *Contextualization and Syncretism: Navigating Cultural Currents*, (William Carey Library, 2006)

⁵³ D. A. Carson, “Domesticating the Gospel,” in *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times*, (Wheaton; Crossway Books, 2004), Millard Erickson, Paul Kjoss Helseth and Justin Taylor Eds.

⁵⁴ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*

consider the single most urgent question facing local theologies is to discern what in culture is genuinely kingdom and what is not. Orme writes that syncretism is like an “odorless, tasteless gas, likened to carbon monoxide seeping into the atmosphere.” While I believe he is correct in that syncretism often goes unnoticed, it is not necessarily a slow process: it can pounce on the contextualization bandwagon faster than a rat up a drainpipe.

Conversion involves more than mental assent and superficial change: it necessitates the reordering of all reality around God and His purposes for mankind. The critical issue, as William Willimon underscores, is that Christian conversion *without worldview change* is in reality, syncretism.⁵⁶

The persistent problem is not how to keep the church from withdrawing from the world but how to keep the world from subverting the church. In each age the church succumbs to [the] notion that we can get a handle on the way the world is run.⁵⁷

Authentic contextualization keeps the authority of Scripture as the locus of control for all forms of cultural expression. Syncretism reverses this priority.

⁵⁵ John Orme, *The Paradox of Peace: Leaders, Decisions, and Conflict Resolution*, (New York; Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), p.1 as cited in Gailyn Van Rheenen, “Contextualization and Syncretism,” <http://www.missiology.org/mmr/mmr38.pdf>

⁵⁶ William Willimon, “A Crisis of Identity,” *Sojourners Magazine*, 15 (May 1986), pp. 24 – 28

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

2.2.2 Dual Religious Systems

It is often a “frog’s life” when Christianity and traditional religion operate side by side: a disturbance in the water and the frog jumps to dry land; a disturbance on the land and it leaps back to the water. In a dual religious system people live in two separate worlds at the same time: the world of traditional religion and the world of Christian faith. Old beliefs and customs remain in reach. If the front foot rests on Christianity, the back foot rests on old beliefs which lie out of sight, coming to the fore in times of crisis.⁵⁸

A second type of duality, termed “double belonging,”⁵⁹ occurs when nationalism and Christianity are understood to be mutually exclusive to some degree. Citizenship in a particular nation or ethnic group is inextricably linked to religious tradition and identity: for example, being Arabic and Muslim; Japanese and Shinto; African and _____. What we place in the blank may show a connection either to African traditional religion or to ethnicity. Can one be African and white?⁶⁰ Or to take the analogy even further, a pastor and female?

Dual religious expression may take the form of a “mild schizophrenia,” used as “a form of protocol for dealing with foreigners,”⁶¹ or as a way of dealing with issues that are as yet unresolved. An example of the latter would be how African

⁵⁸ Romans 7

⁵⁹ Robert Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, p. 148 – 149

⁶⁰ That question has particular relevance in South Africa at present.

⁶¹ Robert Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, p. 155

Christians might continue to respect their ancestors if firstly, the ancestors were not Christian; and secondly, if the traditional form of veneration involves religious ritual.

2.3 Contextualization in the Era of Globalization

Christian theologizing requires a worldwide conversation between Christians, what David Clark calls “dialogical contextualization,” or theological responses to “mind-blowing, gut-wrenching” contemporary questions such as,

Should Japanese Christians go to the Shinto shrine on New Year’s Day and pay their respects to the emperor? Is this worshipping evil spirits or expressing patriotism (like saluting the Stars and Stripes)? Should Turkish Christians offer small fees to government officials to get them to act on requests for permits or licenses? Is this bribery or tipping? ... Or what of a really hot question: could a Christian identify himself as a Muslim, hold a somewhat modalist view of the Trinity, wear traditional Muslim dress, participate in Muslim customs like Ramadan ... and be saved?⁶²

Responses to these contemporary questions must first of all be sensitive to the specific frames of reference; but secondly, must reinterpret the questions in more fundamental categories of Scripture that consistently challenge the conceptual framework of all cultures.⁶³ The imperative is that this conversation takes place between Christians: those whose hearts, minds and imaginations are

⁶² David K. Clark and John S. Feinberg, *To Know and Love God: Method for Theology: (Foundations of Evangelical Theology)*, (Wheaton; Crossway Books, 2003), pp.117 – 118

⁶³ *Ibid*, p. 118

captive to the reign of God. Non-standard, non-Western readings of Scripture do bring new insight. By seeing events or concepts in a different context one may understand Biblical truth *more fully*. However, creative understanding is neither innovation nor *invention*. Thinking theologically means “thinking Christianly,” as Kevin Van Hoozer affirms:

... formulations must lead people in different contexts in the same basic direction, namely, in the way of truth and life as these are defined by the story of God’s words and deeds that culminate in Jesus Christ.⁶⁴

David Clark and John Feinberg insist on a further requisite to this dialogical process: that the ground of Biblical truth does not reside in the community’s acceptance of it as truth but in the Bible’s inherent authority. In other words, the authority of Scripture, although it may induce agreement is not dependent on that agreement.⁶⁵

... the *ontological ground of the text’s authority* is not the same as the *epistemic acceptance of the text’s authority*. For evangelical theology, the first idea, the ontological ground of authority, lies rooted in the objective reality of the triune God speaking through the Spirit’s inspiration. The second concept, the subjective recognition of the Bible as God’s Word by a believing community, is the appropriate human response to the authority of Scripture. These two ideas work together and are absolutely necessary. The subjective recognition of the Bible as authoritative guards against a dead orthodoxy that pays lip service to divine truth even as it pursues other agendas. Evangelical theology’s affirmation ... involves a dual commitment to the innate authority of the Bible and to an explicit, functional submission to that authority. Evangelicals hold the ontological

⁶⁴ Kevin Van Hoozer, “One Rule to Rule Them All? Theological Method in an Era of World Christianity,” in *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity*, Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland, Eds. (Grand Rapids; Baker Academic, 2006), p. 124

⁶⁵ David K. Clark, and John S. Feinberg, *To Know and Love God: Method for Theology*, pp. 62 – 65. Italics in the original.

and epistemic principles together; indeed, their integration is essential. The painstaking tasks of biblical exegesis and of theological reflection – interpreting all of life in light of the Bible – begin with this understanding.⁶⁶

2.4 Contextualization and Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics has been referred to as an elementary and idealistical “three horizon” concept. The first horizon places the gospel meaningfully and normatively into the cultural, social, historical and linguistic context of the first century and requires careful exegesis to best understand the author’s original intent. The second horizon is contemporary culture, or an “insider view” which operates by fusing local culture with the horizon of the text. The third is contextual missiology which transports the gospel from one culture to another and in this respect, genuine friendship is the best vehicle.⁶⁷

Are these three horizons enough? What if both biblical cultures and local culture have inherent injustices in them? Life for women in Africa, for example, often mirrors life in early Palestine: the experience of famine, ethnic divisions, levirate marriages and polygamy are all part of life today. Musimbi Kanyoro calls attention to the crisis presented when African theologians affirm cultural issues:

⁶⁶ Ibid, p. 65

⁶⁷ This should not be understood as *koinonia*, which refers specifically to fellowship or communion with God and other Christians. The “gospel flow” is from those who know Christ to those who as yet do not.

African theologians who subscribe to the theology of inculturation would tend to wholeheartedly affirm cultural issues in Ruth. They applaud Ruth for her faithfulness to her mother-in-law and they consider it normal that Elimelech's relative Boaz should care for Naomi and Ruth. They justify the levirate marriage and use the text to enforce widow inheritance, the African form of levirate marriage. They glorify the fact that Ruth gives birth to a son. ... They pronounce all cultural practices in Ruth as normal and good and recommend them for emulation by African women. Tokunboh Adeyemo, a Nigerian theologian, urges all African women to be like Ruth, 'a woman of excellence' in faith in God, industriousness, fidelity and moral purity. Thus the book of Ruth for African theologians, more specifically male theologians, is a perfect enhancement of the theology of inculturation. It puts no responsibility on males, but underscores the fact that women ought to be good.⁶⁸

African women theologians on the other hand, critically address the issues from the gender-sensitive perspective of African women. They see Naomi, Orpah and Ruth as victims of culture: women whose choices were limited because of the death of their male protectors and the restrictions of custom.

My own personal experience endorses their assessment. In 2004 during a Bible study with black African women, I focused on the story of Ruth. Afterwards the women had many questions and submitted a variety of answers. They asked why this family left their home in the first place. Maybe they were trying to disappear because they had borrowed something and did not want to give it back. Why did all three men die in such a short space of time? Maybe they neglected to visit the graves of their ancestors and pay them respect. What would have happened if Naomi and Ruth had not returned to Bethlehem? Would the nation of Moab have let Naomi, an Israelite, remain with them? What

⁶⁸ Musimbi Kanyoro, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics: An African Perspective*, (Cleveland; Pilgrim Press, 2002), pp. 36 - 37

alternatives did she have since as a widow she could own no property, no farm? It seemed she had little choice but to return to her homeland. What about Orpah and Ruth, women who had married outside of their ethnic group? What would the Moabites' attitude to them be? And, although Ruth eventually married Boaz did this guarantee her happiness? If she had given birth to a daughter, would there have been the same expressions of joy? Does the age difference between Boaz and Ruth justify the practice of child marriages?⁶⁹

Culture has more influence on the interpretation of Biblical texts and the manner in which these texts are used than historical interpretations of them. However, the fundamental question is: just how local should theology become? Should every village have one? Every community? Should it be restricted to every tribe? Every nation? Obviously these are the wrong questions. Theology must address people and powers in such a way that it encounters and impacts cultural understanding and values with the announcement of the reign of God. That is the reason I believe a *fourth horizon* is necessary, not the horizons of gender or culture but the horizon of the Holy Spirit. Our knowledge is

⁶⁹ The consensus of opinion was that the family must have been cursed for all three men to have died within such a short space of time. The family had most likely left their homeland owing money to someone. Maybe this person even followed them and killed the men. Both Ruth and Orpah would have in all likelihood become prostitutes because no man would marry them after they "polluted" themselves with foreign men. Levirate marriage continues to be practiced in some cases and child marriages are not uncommon. Polygamy is excused by the euphemism that women are precious, or even weak, and therefore in need of male protection. In addition, more women means that the workload for each woman is lessened. If that were true, however, the practice would be polyandry: each woman would have several husbands to protect her and work with their superior strength. Polygamy thrives in patriarchal cultures which believe in the superiority of men because it conveniently exploits women and children's labors and enhances the culture's stereotype of masculinity.

incomplete.⁷⁰ *The Holy Spirit is the only objective element we have.* He is our “outside referee:” the one who brings God’s perspective to issues. A quaint description of God is that He is the One who “sees around corners.” How is this possible? Because He stands on the roof of the building! A “participatory hermeneutic” moves the first-century text through our lives and lifts our seeing and hearing to God’s view of the world.

The gospel is not just another “religious expression.” It is a supernatural, God-initiated mandate and effects a subversive transformation of culture as it moves through those who follow Christ in their local social and cultural setting. The incarnational ability of the gospel makes the kingdom of God a visible phenomenon: we inculturate Christ.

2.5 The Significance of Being “In Christ”⁷¹

The church by its very nature is expressed in local communities; therefore, we need to encourage interaction between the gospel and culture. Because the values and worldview of the kingdom of God differ radically from those of culture, there is a tension between the cultural dynamics that shape people and the gospel’s intentional call to see things in an entirely new way. Those who enter the kingdom must change, a point made clear by David Hesselgrave who

⁷⁰ I Corinthians 13

⁷¹ Colossians 2:9, 11, 12

contends that without replacing old glasses [worldviews] "... it is impossible to see Christianity no matter how sincere one may be in his or her determination to be a Christian."⁷² Hesselgrave is echoing Jesus who said, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."⁷³ The new community is not enslaved by its memories nor immobilized by its new place in society, as Walter Brueggemann indicates:

What must survive is not simply the physical community; what must survive is an *alternative community* with an alternative memory and an alternative social perspective rooted in a peculiar text that is identified by a peculiar genealogy and signed by peculiar sacraments, by peculiar people not excessively beholden to the empire and not lusting after domestication into the empire.⁷⁴

Miroslav Volf disagrees with Brueggemann. Volf echoes Justo L. Gonzales, who rejects the concept of an alternative community, referring to it as a "paradoxical notion that in the midst of a world already fractured by racism, God has created a third race."⁷⁵ Volf and Gonzales seem to have overlooked the critical distinction between community or culture and *race*. Race and culture are not identical: one can be guilty of racism even within one's own culture.

Gonzales and Volf may consider the notion of race as problematic because the

⁷² David Hesselgrave, "Fitting Third-World Believers with Christian Worldview Glasses," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 30:2, June 1987, p. 215

⁷³ John 3: 3

⁷⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home: Preaching Among Exiles*, p. 108. Italics in the original.

⁷⁵ Justo L. Gonzalez, *Out of Every Tribe and Nation: Christian Theology at the Ethnic Roundtable*, (Nashville, Abingdon, 1992), p.110 as cited in Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, (Nashville; Abingdon Press, 1996), p. 49

biological aspect almost exclusively denotes a global or geographically local group distinguished by common physical features and genetic characteristics and therefore, they conclude that the word cannot apply to Christians. However, the word “race” is also used to denote a genealogical line or a common lineage and here the word is unequivocally applicable to Christianity. This is distinctly made clear in 2 Corinthians 5:17, “... if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” Christians are a new “*ktsis*”: a new “creation.” The early church called people to become part of a new people, a “holy nation,” a contrasting community. “Evangelism,” writes Rodney Clapp, “was not a matter of inviting individuals to recall what they somehow already knew. It was rather a matter of inviting them to become part of nothing less than a new humanity, reborn of the last Adam who was Jesus the Nazarene. It was a call to life “in Christ,” ... to constitute and organic unity and, to transcend division, conflicts, bondages.”⁷⁶

There was no more profound way, in Paul’s day and culture, to cut up and define the world than by Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female. Some of these categories no longer occur to us as the most significant markers of people. But Paul’s message stands: no matter how the world is divided ... none of these categories are more basic to identity or formative of the self than belong to God and one another in Christ.⁷⁷

Peter, writing some ten years after Paul, is just as specific: “But you are a chosen *race*, a royal priesthood, a holy *nation*, a *people* for God’s own possession

⁷⁶ Rodney Clapp, *A Peculiar People: the Church as Culture in a Post-Christian Society*, (Downers Grove; InterVarsity Press, 1996), p. 166

⁷⁷ Ibid. c/f Galatians 3:28

so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; for once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”⁷⁸ The words Peter uses here are the Greek words γένος or *genos*, indicating a descendant, nation, or race; ἔθνος, *ethnos* again a race or nation; and λαός, *laos* defined as people. Peter’s contemporaries would have understood the word in racial or ethnic terms: a new species; a new race. He is even more specific in 2 Peter 1:4 as he explains, “Through these He has given us His very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.”

Although I respect Volf’s writing, I believe he makes an additional error again based on his focus on race as a genetic trait. For he goes on to say:

The proper distance from a culture does not take Christians out of that culture. Christians are not insiders who have taken flight to a new “Christian culture” and become outsiders to their own culture; rather when they have responded to the call of the Gospel they have stepped, as it were, with one foot outside their own culture while with the other remaining firmly planted in it. They are distant, and yet they belong. *Their difference is internal to the culture.*
... Distance from a culture must never degenerate into flight from that culture but must be a way of living in a culture.⁷⁹

The difficulty I have with Volf’s description is that he has Christians somewhat awkwardly straddling the boundaries of their culture: one foot outside and one foot inside. This sounds uncomfortably close to those “froglike”

⁷⁸ 1 Peter 2:9 – 10, italics mine.

⁷⁹ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, pp. 49 - 50

dual religionists who can never quite make a commitment to either land or lake. I believe we do need to stand in our culture in the sense that although we are not *of* the world, we are not *out of* it either. But our hearts must beat to the rhythm of the kingdom of God. Our minds, empowered by the Holy Spirit, adjudicate between kingdom and world.

The early church invited people to be part of a “third race,” chosen as a people by the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. A new creation: for *all* things have become new. Both 2 Corinthians 5:17 and Galatians 6:15 use the words *καὶνὸς κτίσις*, (*kainos ktisis*), “new creation.” Nothing else signifies.

3. The Gospel of the Kingdom

As this paper has outlined thus far, beliefs and assumptions influence actions therefore, what one thinks about the message of the gospel is important not only as it regards academic biblical interpretation but also as a matter of personal and social living.

3.1. The Gospel as the Content of the Kerygma – A Brief Overview

An enquiry into the central message of the gospel involves both exegetical and hermeneutical elements, whether these are seen as separate exercises or as part of the same endeavour. Which ever way the issues are seen, attempts to

articulate the essence of the gospel encounter two differing problems: first, the varied expressions within the New Testament (issues related to exegesis); and second, the differing expressions evidenced in contemporary arenas of Christianity (issues related to hermeneutics).⁸⁰ Within this foundational matrix of exegesis and hermeneutics, however, there is evidence that the authors of the New Testament operated with an underlying awareness of a central focal point that shaped and directed their discourse as a whole and their appropriation and adaptation of tradition in particular. The focus is rooted in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ: in the conviction that in the person of Jesus resides “good news” of public significance, a *euangelion* to proclaim to every man and woman.⁸¹ The uniqueness of this news can be appreciated by considering the following four points.

⁸⁰ Gordon Fee, *Gospel and Spirit: Issues in New Testament Hermeneutics*, (Peabody; Hendrickson, 1991), pp. 2 – 5

⁸¹ It was in an attempt to clarify the essence of the gospel that James D.G. Dunn identified three motifs present throughout early Christian preaching: the proclamation of the risen, exalted Jesus; the call for faith; and a promise (grace, mercy, forgiveness, salvation, etc.) held out to faith. In *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity*, (SCM Press, 2006), p. 30. C. H. Dodd adopted a similar basic approach to explaining the gospel: expanding the definition to six basic elements seen in the early church. These cover the birth, death, burial, resurrection, exaltation and return of Jesus Christ and were followed by a closing appeal to repent of sin, to be baptized and to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Each of these significant events in Jesus’ life and ministry was interpreted in the light of Old Testament prophecies concerning the dawning of a messianic age. *Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1936). Similarly, Robert C. Worley points out that “there was a basic core [to the gospel] but also a wide variety in the way it was presented. *Preaching and Teaching in the Earliest Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967): “Evangelism is never proclamation in a vacuum; but always to people, and the message must be given in terms that make sense to them,” pp. 35 – 36.

3.2 The Uniqueness of the Gospel as Euangelion

3.2.1 Early Christians might have continued in the legacy of Old Testament

Mosaic Law: referring to the gospel as “Torah,” “guidance,” “instruction,” or “wisdom.” These terms certainly are found in New Testament writings but only the term “gospel” is used to report the universally significant news that God has broken into the history of mankind. However, it is important to note that at the time of these writings there was no “New Testament.” The good news was not that Jesus had come to introduce Torah, but that He had come to *fulfill* Torah: visibly and incarnationally demonstrating it as the Paschal lamb and initiating the long hoped for messianic age.

3.2.2 The significance of the particular use of “euangelion” (εὐαγγέλιον)⁸² is clearly seen against the background of other words which could have been chosen to articulate the essence of Christianity: for example, Christians are encouraged to continue in “the faith” (πίστις) in Acts 14:22; in “knowledge” (γνῶσις) in Phillipians 3:8, Colossians 1:9 and 10; and in the “mystery” (μυστήριον); to continue in “present truth” (ἀλήθεια). Other words, although not as quickly associated with news of great import, might also be relevant:

- * Acts 9:22 syncheo – confound
- * Acts 9:22 symbibazo – prove

⁸² “*Euangelion*” originally indicated a reward for good tidings. However, over time, the idea of a reward dropped, and the word stood for the good news itself. W. E. Vine, W. E. Vine, *The Expanded Vines Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, (Bloomington; Bethany House, 1984), p. 497

- * Acts 9:27 diegeomai - describe
- * Acts 9:29 syzeteo - argue
- * Acts 9:29 laleo - talk
- * Acts 18:4 dialegomai - reason with
- * Acts 18:4 peitho - persuade
- * Acts 20:31 noutheteo - admonish, warn
- * Acts 20:24 diamarturomai - testify
- * Acts 21:21 katecheo - inform, instruct
- * 2 Cor 5:20 deomai - beg, beseech
- * 2 Tim 2:4 elencho - reprove
- * 2 Tim 2:4 epitimao - rebuke
- * I Peter 2:11 parakaleo - exhort, urge

Yet none of these words are used for “the generic status of the term ‘gospel,’ which identifies Christian faith as news that has significance for all people, indeed for the whole world.”⁸³ It is a proclamation of a king and kingdom: God’s kingdom which brings peace, freedom, and abundant life in the Spirit, against which there is no law.

The scandalous nature of the gospel is that it looks like sheer folly: the one who was born in the lowliest of circumstances and who died a crucified criminal on what Michael Green describes as “the lowest of all Roman scaffolds,”⁸⁴ is Lord (Phil 2:11). And “... he (not fate),” writes Green, “holds the world in his mighty and merciful hands.”⁸⁵ Jesus by His death on the cross has secured redemption for all mankind.

⁸³ James V. Brownson, *Speaking the Truth in Love: New Testament Resources for a Missional Hermeneutic (Christian Mission and Modern Culture)*, (Philadelphia; Trinity Press International, 1998), p. 251

⁸⁴ Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 2003), p. 70

⁸⁵ Ibid.

3.3 The Uniqueness of the Gospel as Kerygma

The term *kerygma* appears only eight times in the New Testament:⁸⁶

- Matthew 12:41 Kerygma is used in reference to the act of preaching.
- Luke 11:32 The example used is Jonah's mission to Nineveh: the Ninevites responded with repentance and faith toward God.
- Rom 16:25 Paul's doxology: "To Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel (*euangelion*) and the preaching *kerygma*) of Jesus Christ..." This passage depicts the direct link between *kerygma* and the person of Jesus Christ. As with the above verses, the expectation is that the appropriate response is the "obedience of faith."
- I Cor 1:21 Paul writes that God saves through the "foolishness of the *kerygma*." The content of preaching the message of Christ crucified appears foolishness, but leads to faith and salvation.
- I Cor 2:4 Paul communicates the *kerygma* in the simplicity of knowing nothing but "Jesus Christ and Him crucified." The result is faith towards God.
- I Cor 15:14 The *kerygma* is based on the resurrection of Christ.
- 2 Tim 4:17 The *kerygma* is also for the Gentiles, it is universal news.
- Titus 1:3 The *kerygma* refers to the promise made to Abraham, now displayed in the message of Paul.

The gospel is inextricably tied up with the identity, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. However, it must be noted that His identity, death and

⁸⁶ Kerygma is also used in the "shorter conclusion" of Mark. The New American Standard is one of the few English Bibles that includes it.

resurrection are inextricably tied to the kingdom of God. In Jesus the kingdom was incarnated.⁸⁷ Earl Stanley Jones writes,

In Jesus the Kingdom became not intimation but an incarnation. ...He was the Kingdom, not merely expounded, but exposed. Men saw it and did not merely hear it. He was *it*.⁸⁸

Jesus was, in the words of Origen, the *autobasileia*: the kingdom in person. The principles of the kingdom of God were completely embodied in Him.⁸⁹ Jesus was not just talking about the coming rule of God. He demonstrated the present reality of the kingdom: lepers were cleansed; the blind saw; the demon-possessed were freed. What a tragedy that so much of the contemporary church continues to seek the kingdom in a futuristic realm, missing its power today.

Virtually every time Jesus spoke about the gospel, he talked about the kingdom of God.⁹⁰ He said it is the gospel of the kingdom: nothing less than news of the long-awaited Messianic kingdom, actually breaking into history in His person and work. A new age. The days of salvation have arrived. God has come to rescue the world!

⁸⁷ Earl Stanley Jones, *The Unshakable Kingdom and the Unchanging Person*, (New York; Abingdon Press, 1972), p. 25

⁸⁸ Earl Stanley Jones, *The Unshakable Kingdom and the Unchanging Person*, p. 25. An interesting note is that Jones, a missionary to India for 14 years, shaped the missiology of Lesslie Newbigin.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ Jesus' first sermon was about the kingdom. (Mark 1:14) He defined the gospel as the gospel of the kingdom. (Matt 4:23) He said that an understanding of the kingdom provided the key to His teaching. (Luke 8:10) It is the first thing we should seek. (Matt. 6:33) It is the foremost petition in what we refer to as "The Lord's Prayer:" "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." (Matt 6:9 – 13) The kingdom was the focus of His teaching during the forty days after the resurrection. (Acts 1:3)

If Jesus had said the gospel was the forgiveness of sins only, then people could accept Jesus' gospel and go on living the same way as before with no change in their racist, adulterous or materialistic lifestyles. The gospel of forgiveness would be a one-way ticket to heaven and we could "live like hell" till we get there. But Jesus said His gospel was the good news of the kingdom and now hearts and lives must be directed to God.

The claims and credentials of Jesus cannot be adequately addressed apart from his proclamation, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (Matt 4:17).⁹¹ His teaching on the kingdom of God formed the structure and dynamics for his entire ministry. He corrected traditional Jewish understanding of the kingdom of God by using it as a sharp polemic for retelling Israel's story, cracking open the worldview of His hearers.⁹² The parables Jesus told are more than shrewd stories of daily life. *They are rooted in the narratives of Jewish Scripture.*⁹³ For example, the parable of the sower illustrates how Jesus employed sowing and reaping as the controlling metaphor for both the return from exile and God's plan of redemption.⁹⁴ It reflects Isaiah 6: 11 – 13 which speaks of the promise of renewal, as well as Jeremiah 12:15 which speaks of God both uprooting and

⁹¹ Douglas Groothuis, *Jesus in an Age of Controversy*, (Eastbourne; Kingsway Publications, 1998), p. 224

⁹² N. T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is*, (Downers Grove; InterVarsity Press, 1999), pp. 32 – 52

⁹³ Other parables also follow this theme: a prodigal son, weeds, a mustard seed, yeast, hidden treasure, a valuable pearl, the fishing net, vineyard workers, the wedding feast, etc.

⁹⁴ N. T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus*, p. 40

bringing back. Hosea 2:2 specifically promises that God will sow Israel again, that He will once again have compassion, once again call the nation “My people.” Isaiah 6: 9 – 10 hold a key that Jesus quotes in Matthew 13:14 – 15: Israel is being summoned to be God’s people in the radical way first intended, that is, to be a light to the Gentiles.⁹⁵

The kingdom and Israel’s return from exile is here, Jesus says. Earl Stanley Jones maintains that “it turned out to be something quite different and other than what the prophets announced,” and what the people expected.⁹⁶ However, I disagree with Jones (and also N. T. Wright) on this point. I believe Jesus went to Israel’s Scriptures and there found the kingdom model God intended all along: the kingdom was to bring justice and mercy to the world through a people who demonstrably lived the reign of God. Jesus’ words called the nation “to repent.” Repent from what? From the old covenant? From the law? No. Jesus is not “antinomian.” He is calling Israel to repent of their *interpretations*: from their political agenda, their dreams of national revolution, and their exclusionary practices. I do not believe Jesus was calling them to be a new people disconnected from Israel of the Old Testament. I believe Jesus was fulfilling Torah: showing and summoning Israel to live the God’s kingdom way; to pick up Israel’s true vocation to be light and salt, a city on a hill. He was correcting

⁹⁵ This is also in Mark 4:12; as well as Luke 8:10.

⁹⁶ Earl Stanly Jones, *the Unshakable Kingdom and the Unchanging Person*, p. 25, 29

Israel's erroneous worldview which demanded that deliverance must include political freedom and independence.

What then is the true nature of this kingdom? The following quote from Earl Stanley Jones is important:

[The kingdom of God] is God's total order, expressed as realm and reign, in the individual and in society; and which is to replace the present unworkable world order with God's order in the individual and in society; and while the nature of the Kingdom is social the entrance into it is by a personal new birth now; the character of that kingdom is seen in the character of Jesus – the Kingdom is Christlikeness universalized; while it comes on earth in the time process it is eternal and is the same rule which is in heaven and because it is Christlikeness this makes it heaven – there and here; and while it is a total order demanding a total obedience, it brings total freedom.

... Jesus did not gradually come to the point, by an oblique approach, but came straight to the point without preliminaries: 'The people that lived in darkness saw a great light, light dawned on the dwellers in the land of death's dark shadow. From that day Jesus began to proclaim the message: 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is upon you'." (Matt 4:16 – 17)⁹⁷

The gospel of the kingdom, therefore, is the "good news" that the King of the Universe has personally come in Jesus, the Christ, to seek and to save those who are enslaved to the kingdom of this world. The Word has become flesh (John 1: 14) and now everyone has opportunity to serve under the King and to rule with Him forever.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Earl Stanley Jones, *The Unshakable Kingdom and the Unchanging Person*, p. 75

⁹⁸ Matthew 24:14; 1 Corinthians 15:24 – 28; 2 Timothy 2:12; Revelation 20:6.

3.4 The Gospel of Salvation

Nowhere in Scripture is the “good news of the kingdom” referred to as the “gospel of salvation.” When Jesus spoke of salvation it was in the context of a personal response to the invitation to enter the kingdom by repentance and new birth. Without new birth it is impossible to even see the kingdom.⁹⁹ A gospel of salvation without a concurrent understanding of kingdom, as Brian McLaren disputes, “reduces the good news to a formula for getting a man or woman’s soul into heaven after death.”¹⁰⁰

Evangelicals such as Dallas Willard, Richard Foster, Leonard Sweet (and others) make a daring counter-proposal: that the gospel connects the kingdom of God to God’s will being done here now on earth. Going further, others like Joel Green and N. T. Wright suggest, the gospel is not appropriately understood as atonement-centered but rather that atonement is the prolegomenon to the gospel. It is groundwork that prepares the way: “... perhaps but one facet of a glimmering diamond which is centered not in a proposition but a Person.”¹⁰¹ Although this concept may represent something of a “Copernican revolution,” it demands thoughtful consideration for as N. T. Wright indicates; Paul (for

⁹⁹ John 3: 3

¹⁰⁰ Brian McLaren, “The Strategy We Pursue,” <http://www.allelon.org/articles/article.cfm?id=131>, Accessed 2004.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

example) reduced the gospel to “Jesus is Lord” not “God loves you.”¹⁰² We can reduce it in other ways also.¹⁰³ Earl Stanley Jones lists a few:

We have made it innocuous by reducing it to ecclesiasticism, the church is the Kingdom; denominationalism, the particular denomination is the Kingdom; the nation is the Kingdom; the particular type of experience is the Kingdom; and so on. The constricting hand of littleness has been at the throat of the Kingdom, so when it spoke it was a squeak instead of a world-shaking call to acceptance and action.¹⁰⁴

3.5 Gospel of the Kingdom – the Full Gospel

Someone is reputed to have remarked that Western people do something very silly: they cut up a dog to study its parts in order to understand what a dog is. Worse still, they believe that putting the parts back in their proper places results in having a dog again. It does not. The dog is now dead. By taking it apart, the most important piece went missing – life.¹⁰⁵ In the same way, we cannot separate the gospel of Christ from the kingdom of God because the whole is greater than its parts. The kingdom of God was the central message of Jesus’ ministry. Its rediscovery is the greatest human need. Loss of the essential

¹⁰² N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1997), p. 45

¹⁰³ Perhaps this is something worth considering for future studies.

¹⁰⁴ Earl Stanley Jones, *The Unshakable Kingdom and the Unchanging Person*, pp. 29 – 30

¹⁰⁵ We often spoke of this at All Africa Bible College and I believe it was one of the students who first related this story.

understanding of the gospel as the “gospel of the kingdom” hobbles Christianity leaving a hamstrung model in its wake.

The kingdom constitutes a present dynamic, authoritative work in the person of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit in and through Jesus’ followers; and will be ultimately established at the second coming of Christ at the end of the age. The kingdom *has come into history*, the kingdom *is here*; and the kingdom *will come at the end of the age*. This structure is best seen in Jesus’ teaching of “this present age” and “the age to come.”¹⁰⁶ The heart of Jesus’ proclamation and the key to his entire mission is that before the final manifestation of God’s rule ushering a new age, during “the latter days” there is forgiveness of sins and the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit. There is a *present* reality which brings the power and blessings of redemption to daily life and *this* is the kingdom. It is not a military kingdom or a Jewish political kingdom, but a *visible new order*.¹⁰⁷ And this new order, the kingdom of God on earth, reflects

¹⁰⁶ This view of the kingdom, being “present and not yet,” was not accepted by British scholars T.W. Manson and C.H. Dodd. In Manson’s book, *The Teaching of Jesus*, he asserts that the kingdom is fully present, consisting of doing the will of God here and now on earth. If mankind could be persuaded to be obedient to God’s will, the world would experience the consummation of the kingdom. All eschatological concepts faded into the background. Similarly, C.H. Dodd contended that Jesus preached only a present kingdom, (“realized eschatology”). He denied the genuineness of some of Jesus’ sayings regarding the future fulfillment of the kingdom. Opposing these views were German scholars J. Weiss and A. Schweitzer, both of whom maintained that the kingdom was wholly eschatological with no present application. Others followed this opinion: it had an effect on Bultmann, who regarded Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet who expected the imminent arrival of the kingdom; also M. Werner and R. H. Fuller, both of whom claim that Jesus taught an eschatological and not a present kingdom. The kingdom *has come into history*, the kingdom *is here*, and the kingdom *will come at the end of the age*. This structure is best seen in Jesus’ teachings of “this present age,” and “the age to come.” Matthew 12:32; 13:38 – 43; 24:3; Mark 10:30; Luke 20:34 – 35

¹⁰⁷ This coincides with C. H. Dodd’s concept of the *kerygma* as proclamation involving six major facts or doctrines:

1. That the Old Testament prophecies concerning an age of fulfillment have been fulfilled.

who God is. Salvation is the threshold into the kingdom. One commits oneself “unto Christ” and then remains “in Him.” First trust; then faith in Him.¹⁰⁸

The church is a colony of the kingdom: not only witnessing and proclaiming the good news that God’s government has come but also visibly demonstrating it in the world. There is a sense, therefore, that our Christology (who we say Jesus is) determines our soteriology: how we understand salvation and whether we will avail ourselves of it or not. Soteriology then defines missiology: how we understand our mandate to go into the world and to make disciples of all nations.¹⁰⁹ Ultimately, missiology defines ecclesiology: how we model this in a corporate sense for the world to see.

3.6 Summary

As outlined in this chapter, worldviews define reality for those individuals born into specific cultures and at specific times. Therefore, I believe it is useful to examine four worldviews in broad terms and their response to the gospel:

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2. That this has taken place through the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus.
 3. That by virtue of the resurrection Jesus has been exalted to the right hand of God.
 4. That the Holy Spirit is a sign of Christ’s power as demonstrated in and through the church.
 5. That the Messianic Age will shortly reach its consummation as Christ returns.
 6. Therefore, an appeal is made for repentance, the offer of forgiveness and the promise of salvation.
- C. H. Dodd, *Apostolic Preaching and Its Development*, p. 21

¹⁰⁸ J. R. Stott (as cited in Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, p. 213), points out the importance of the word ἀπολύτρωσις in Acts 3:26, translated as “turning from wickedness;” and in Acts 15:19 and 26:20 as “a turning to the Lord;” a turning “from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God” in 26:18.

¹⁰⁹ Matthew 28: 18

Hebrew; Greek; Colonial; African; and the worldview of the Kingdom of God and these are the subject of the following chapter.

CHAPTER 3

RELEVANT KINGDOM ISSUES

No one sews a patch of un-shrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse. Neither do men pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst, the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved.
(Matthew 19:16 – 17)

During the past thirty years that I have lived in Africa, and in particular the past twenty years of ministry here in South Africa, I am increasingly convinced that the principal call of the church is not to make the gospel more plausible or palatable to nonbelievers but rather a call to live in a manner that is faithful to the biblical message of the kingdom of God. The practical question then is what cultural consequences result from living the gospel, since as Christians we are committed to a particular view of creation and of human nature. In other words, how “different” should we be from the world around us? Tokunboh Adeyemo suggests that “Those who follow Jesus, who claim to be His disciples, demonstrate a truly counter-cultural life, whatever culture they come from.”¹¹⁰ How? “... by living their lives in terms of the values that prevail in the kingdom of heaven.”¹¹¹ Christians make no secret about their faith or of its demands. Writing some thirty years before Adeyemo, Jones writes that conversion to the kingdom of God is “conversion unlimited:”

¹¹⁰ *Africa Bible Commentary*, Tokunboh Adeyemo General Editor, (Grand Rapids; Zondervan, 2006), p. 1117

¹¹¹ Earl Stanley Jones, *The Unshakable Kingdom and Unchanging Person*, pp. 81 – 82

The entrance into that kingdom is personal and by a new birth, but the nature of that kingdom is social; everything comes under its purview, for all life, individual and collective, is to become subject to the Kingdom. ...Conversion to the kingdom of God is conversion unlimited.¹¹²

1. Keys to Cultural Change

As long as the early church remained essentially Jewish, converts shared a common history and culture. However, that situation quickly changed when Gentiles began to believe in Christ. The new pluralism presented two major challenges. The first related to social order: should the Gentile believers form their own separate churches? The second related to theology: how much of the Old Testament law must new Christians keep? How important were dietary laws? Was the "Lord's Day" the seventh day or the first of the week? Must Gentile converts first become Jews in order to become Christians? In the process of answering a myriad of questions like these the fledgling church discarded many Old Testament customs that Jewish Christians believed were essential to the gospel. "Entry to the people of God," writes Michael Green "was now offered on equal terms to Greeks and barbarians alike, without any insistence on the costly repentance involved in the symbolic cutting away of Greek impurity in circumcision."¹¹³ To Jews, a "truly appalling" change.¹¹⁴

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, p. 54

Those who were “scattered abroad” (Acts 19) struggled to express the message of the gospel in culturally relevant ways while maintaining its central truths. Of importance to this paper is that their answer to the challenge of contextual relevance was not to split the church into culturally distinct communities. Remarkably, not only did they overcome difference, they found deep communal life ... but not without difficulty; and not without consequence.

... moving from the Jewish culture to pagan (Greek) culture ... amounts to turning an entire theological and cultural grid upside down and inside out. The idea that Gentiles could become followers of Christ was a fundamental challenge that led Peter and then the early church way beyond their comfortable boundaries, forcing them to re-examine their worldview and theological convictions.¹¹⁵

The Jerusalem Council (70 AD) resolved the debate of whether Gentile converts had to meet the requirements of the old covenant. However, a variation of the question is echoed in contemporary Africa: “Must we first become western in order to become Christian?” Many of the issues the early church in Africa faced have in more recent years been resolved: controversies over clothing styles, hair styles, music, seating arrangements, etc. Conversely, theological issues have grown more confused. In the aftermath of Christendom and western cultural domination, the church in Africa is again encountering the question of theological unity in the face of cultural diversity. Most evangelicals, at least in theory, would confirm the right of churches in different nations to read and

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Leonard Hjalmarson, “Paradigms, Conversion and Paradox – Acts 10 – 11,” <http://www.nextreformation.com/?m=200605>. Accessed 2006

interpret Scripture in their own cultural contexts. However, as Paul Hiebert attests to, “in practice most feel deeply threatened at the prospect.”¹¹⁶ I believe this is understandable. The gospel is not a “Rorschach inkblot,” into which everyone reads their own beliefs.¹¹⁷ The response of the early New Testament church to questions of contextualization was not to forge dogma but to establish theological processes.¹¹⁸ One of the severe handicaps the church in Africa faces is that although it has many African culturalists, it has few African theologians. One of the great needs is for church leaders to improve their theological understanding and Biblical competence. All theology must be tested against the gospel as it is revealed in Scripture. As Norman Kraus argues, first century church leaders looked to Scripture and to the gospel as it had been given to the apostles and elders. “The test was made by the church and its leaders acting as a hermeneutical community.”¹¹⁹ They did not compromise the gospel’s content although they no longer dressed it in Jewish clothes.

At the same time, I believe there is no “God-shaped” wineskin. Wine, like water, will fill any container. It is the *capacity of the container* that dictates the amount of wine it is able to hold. No one is *a-cultural*. None of our cultural containers are completely empty. The message of Christ is meaningful when it

¹¹⁶ Paul Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections*, pp. 95 – 97

¹¹⁷ Ibid. p. 97

¹¹⁸ Paul Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections*, pp. 94 – 95

¹¹⁹ C. Norman Kraus, *The Authentic Witness: Credibility and Authority*, (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1979) as cited in *Anthropological Reflections*, Paul Hiebert.

creates both resonance and dissonance with the worldview of a culture in what Schreiter refers to as “patterns for identity” and “patterns of threat to identity.”¹²⁰

When a culture is confronted on a regular basis with new data that need to be dealt with, one of two things happens to the culture. Either it becomes invigorated ... [or it] ceases to provide cohesion and continuity to a culture, resulting in breakdown ... When a tradition breaks down, it loses the allegiance of its members.¹²¹

Schreiter argues that identity is formed by cultural boundaries and pathways are worn by tradition. Repeated transgression of a boundary is what initiates change. Restructuring boundaries restructures identity and changes society.¹²² Does this mean the elimination of boundaries? No. However, it should mean the unmasking of oppressive cultural boundaries and alert us to the fact, as Musimbi Kanyoro contends, that culture has the ability to “socialize [us] into a state of numbness where various traditional prescriptions are dished out in the name of culture.”¹²³

Culture is a double-edged sword. In some instances, culture is like the “creed” for community identity. In other instances culture is the main justification for oppression and injustice especially to those who culture defines as “the other” or “the outsider.” Culture sometimes demarcates distinctions between those with voice and those without. In Africa, women and children are among those that culture does not accord voice. Dialogue on matters of culture is still largely undeveloped, because the word bears in itself the power of disengaging honest dialogue. To make

¹²⁰ Robert Schreiter, *Local Theologies*, p. 68

¹²¹ Ibid. pp. 106 – 107

¹²² Ibid, p. 65

¹²³ Musimbi Kanyoro, “Engendered Cultural Hermeneutics: African Women’s Contribution to Theology, Graduation Address Trinity Lutheran Seminary, 6th May, 1999, http://www.globalhealth.org/conference_2001/speeches/kanyoro_speech.php3 Accessed August, 2003

the claim that “it is our culture” often means that nobody has a right to question it.¹²⁴

Tradition fights against change as Jesus confirmed by His remarks to the religious leaders of the day, “...you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that.”¹²⁵ Jesus restructured the Jewish perception of the boundaries of the kingdom of God: who would enter; who would not; who would have first place. By breaking the preconceived boundaries of the kingdom of God, Jesus broke the stereotype of the people of God and gave a distinctly different image of what it meant to be His people.

2. The Hebrew Worldview and the Gospel Message¹²⁶

The Hebrew nation lived, not as unconcerned, uninvolved spectators but as a community fervently committed to God’s person, message and cause.¹²⁷ Hebrew religion was extraordinary. Norman Gottwald writes that it was,

¹²⁴ Musimbi Kanyoro, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics: An African Perspective*, (Cleveland; Pilgrim Press, 2002), p. 13

¹²⁵ Mark 7: 13

¹²⁶ This section relies heavily on the work of Walter Brueggemann.

¹²⁷ Millard Erickson, *The Word Became Flesh: A Contemporary Incarnational Christology*, (Grand Rapids; Baker Books, 1999), p. 130

“totally without parallel in the ancient world and inseparable from its actions as a people.”¹²⁸ He continues:

... Israel is a total community that confronts and challenges us to join in its way of living. To do this we have to relinquish voluntarily or involuntarily the old forms of sociopolitical domination, including the old religious ideologies. Israel calls us to a new form of social relations which destroys class privileges. For those of us enjoying class privileges there is nothing but the prospect of loss as Israel grows stronger. For those of us who have been exploited by the privileged classes there is the uncertain promise of a better life in the Israelite alternative. Others of us, neither at the top nor at the bottom of the social order, enjoying both advantages and frustrations as agents of class rule, are torn in our responses to Israel. All of us in the old feudal social order respond to Israel and her religion in terms of perceived threat or promise to our whole existence in society.¹²⁹

Israel’s view of itself was an intentional, alternative community committed to a theological focus, ideology and social organization.¹³⁰ Israel’s orthopraxy modeled both her ontology and orthodoxy. God had committed to redeem His creation and was singularly committed to Israel as His covenant people through whom He would bring this redemption about. It was a “story-formed” community:¹³¹ a Torah-led, highly conscious “retribalization.”¹³²

¹²⁸ Norman Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250 – 1050 BCE*, (Sheffield, England; Sheffield Academic Press Ltd., 1999), p. 594

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 596

¹³⁰ George Mendenhall, *The Tenth Generation*, (Baltimore; Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), pp. 19 – 31 as cited in Brueggemann, *A Social Reading of the Old Testament: Prophetic Approaches to Israel’s Communal Life*, (Minneapolis; Fortress Press, 1994) p.17

¹³¹ Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, (Notre Dame; University of Notre Dame Press, 1981) p. 15

¹³² Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250 – 1050 BCE*, (England; Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), p. xiii

... the theological self-understanding of Israel permitted a new people that had no other identity – linguistic, racial, ethnic, or territorial – except exclusive allegiance to God.¹³³

Israel was a people on a journey, living consistently with the conviction that God is the Lord of history. Although the Bible records that they continually struggled between being *'am qādôš*, “a people holy to the Lord,” (Deut 7:6) and “imitating the nations around them” (2 Kings 17:15); and that at times they tried to be both, wavering between following God and following the gods of the nations around them (I Kings 18:21), their story was one of great adventure, courage and hope. It was told in terms of the unveiling of God’s plan, bringing his sovereignty to bear on Israel and the world.¹³⁴ It was enacted in memories such as the opening question of the Passover remembrance meal, “Why is this night different from any other?” and the response, “Because this is the night when our God, the Holy One of Israel, came down to Egypt and rescued us ...”

Hebrew thinking was not incapable of metaphysical thinking although philosophy was not a primary concern. As Erickson remarks, “There were prophets, and there were priests and these two groups were the formers of

¹³³ Walter Brueggemann, *A Social Reading of the Old Testament*, p. 19

¹³⁴ Erickson writes that narrative in theology can perform several different roles. He outlines three:

1. A Communication role: seen in the rabbinic way of answering a question not with didactic or discursive responses but rather with a story. Narrative theologians understand the power of imagination and its “pictorial ability” to convey the propositions of doctrine.
2. A hermeneutical role: as the narrative portions of Scripture cross barriers (such as age or culture) to become normative factors.
3. A heuristic or epistemological role: as understanding grows with the ongoing narratives of the nation (the history of the church) and each individual.

opinion and convention.”¹³⁵ Israel had no philosophers who spent time reflecting on the ultimate questions of reality. Knowledge was intuitive: apprehended directly rather than by reason because some things are known absolutely and the ramifications of these truths can then be deduced through further reasoning. Psalm 19:1 illustrates, “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of His hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge.” The mind was used to reason secondary truths through discursive knowledge or dialogue.¹³⁶ A practical example is seen in the Hebrew method of discipleship through interaction with the teacher and study of his life. Rob Bell writes that one of the sages from the Mishna is, “May you be covered in the dust of your Rabbi.”

Rabbis are passionate and animated. They would spend their days taking their disciples around teaching them, and as they traveled from place to place, they would literally kick up a cloud of dust. And because the disciples were following the Rabbi, at the end of the day, they would actually be covered in the dust their Rabbi kick up – May you be covered in the dust of your Rabbi...¹³⁷

Discipleship was complete when the student was able to demonstrate he could do what his teacher did. In other words, learning was by doing and knowledge was experiential.

¹³⁵ Millard Erickson, *The Word Became Flesh*, p. 512

¹³⁶ Spinoza maintained that of the three types of knowledge – opinion, reason and intuition, only intuitive knowledge is eternal. <http://www.wikipedia.com>

¹³⁷ Rob Bell, “Covered in the Dust of Your Rabbi,” http://www.offqueue.com/archives/dust_rabbi.pdf. Accessed 2007

2.1 Israel in Exile

The destruction of the Temple in 587 BC created tension between Israel's faith in God (their controlling story), and the reality of life now lived in Babylonian exile. As Walter Brueggemann explains,

The exiled Jews of the Old Testament were ... geographically displaced [but] they also experienced a loss of the structured, reliable world which gave them meaning and coherence, and they found themselves in a context where their most treasured and trusted symbols of faith were mocked, trivialized or dismissed.¹³⁸

The Jews in Babylon were allowed to build homes, hold to religious traditions, earn a living and settle down. It had both positive and negative results. Positive in that some Jews rose to high position.¹³⁹ For example, ultimately it was through Nehemiah's concern for both the people and the city of Jerusalem and his position of trust as cupbearer to the king that led to a third group of exiles' return and the rebuilding of the city walls. However, in contrast, comfort colluded with the subtle seduction of settlement and roots which were firmly planted in foreign soil caused many to become so accustomed to their life in exile, they refused the opportunity to return.

¹³⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home: Preaching Among Exiles*, (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), p. 2

¹³⁹ Daniel occupied posts in government under Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar and Darius. Nehemiah was cupbearer to Artaxerxes.

At the time, two social groups were evident: the pragmatic, accommodating priesthood who identified with those in political power; and the visionaries who were shut out of power but held a hope that God would reverse the present reality and bring them to power.¹⁴⁰ Jeremiah records the responses of these two groups to the crisis of Judah's captivity: burn the scroll that holds God's words! Silence the prophetic voice! Muzzle the call for true repentance and deep grief: the voice that offers newness.¹⁴¹

Walter Brueggemann has used the metaphor¹⁴² of "exile" to address the present danger of social and political accommodation which the church in the West faces. I believe this critically applies in specific ways to the church in Africa as well, as I will show later in this chapter. Brueggemann explains the appropriateness of the word "exile:"

In ancient Israel the exile is an overwhelming reference point for faith. Exile is the decisive event in the Old Testament for faith as for history. The notion of exile is initially geographical. It suggests physical dislocation. Exile, however, is not primarily geographical. It is a cultural, liturgical, spiritual condition; it is an awareness that one is in a hostile, alien environment where the predominant temptation is assimilation, that

¹⁴⁰ Paul Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic*, (Minneapolis; Fortress Press, 1975) as cited in Brueggemann, *A Social Reading of the Old Testament*, pp. 35 – 36

¹⁴¹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, (Minneapolis; Fortress Press, 2001), pp. 47 – 57

¹⁴² A metaphor is useful in assisting understanding by referring or describing one thing in terms of another, either similarities or differences. It is the replacement of one word by another or an identification of one thing, concept or person with any other. The positivism of Descartes persuaded the academy that metaphors were artifacts useful for discourse but that science ("good science") should steer clear of them. However, more recently (since the mid 20th Century, it was recognized that all languages are incomplete and contain ambiguity and therefore metaphors are useful to gaining knowledge. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson go further, arguing that our conceptual system is primarily metaphoric. *Metaphors We Live By*, (Chicago; University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 3. Israel often used "heuristic metaphor," which usually does not reveal all possible understandings. There is an element of discovery – something not yet clear.

is, to accept and conform to the dominant values that are incongruent with one's faith and destiny.¹⁴³

2.2 Israel Post Exile

First century Jews knew their forefathers had gone into exile because of persistent disobedience and idolatry. Those who returned from *geographical* exile continued in *theological* exile: for although they were once again in their promised land, they were not free. Oppressor Babylon had been replaced by another: oppressor Rome. Jews were now slaves in their own land. The great promises and prophecies of Ezekiel and Daniel as yet unfulfilled. N. T. Wright in agreement with E. P. Sanders, argues that for the majority of Jews living in first-century Palestine, the past centuries of oppression by foreign nations and the present rule of Rome stood in direct challenge to their understanding of election and eschatology.¹⁴⁴ If Israel was truly the people of God, why were pagan nations ruling her?

... Thus, though some of them had returned from *geographical* exile, most believed that the *theological* state of exile was still continuing. They were living within a centuries-old drama, still waiting for the turn in the story that would bring them out on top at last.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³ Walter Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home*, p. 115

¹⁴⁴ N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, (Minneapolis; Fortress Press, 1992), pp. 332 – 333. Wright's critics encompass a broad range of theological camps, from conservatives to liberals. However, most of these balk at his teachings and definition of justification, which contradicts Protestant ideas of the righteousness of God as "imputation," rather than his insistence on first-century context.

¹⁴⁵ N. T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus*, (Downers Grove; InterVarsity Press, 1999), p. 36. *Italics in the original.*

The significance of their crisis was the opportunity it provided for a “retooling,”¹⁴⁶ or paradigm shift, because of the anomaly between their faith and their present situation. The prophetic voices of Isaiah and Jeremiah called the people to remember their past and to project a future which held a renewed covenant and freedom.

Two pathologies manifest both in exile and in post-exile. First a numbness and despair that results in the meaningless and hopeless repetition of old patterns; and secondly, rage which seeks for an end to socio-political oppression by violence if necessary. Both erode from the inside and produce ambivalence: “... exiles do not want to choose; depressed people do not want to act, and despairing people think it does not matter,” as Brueggemann argues.¹⁴⁷ In any event, the seething discontent of some Jews boiled over only to be met with brutal suppression by Rome. Both pathologies of despair and rage are evident in the disciples: Matthew a collector of taxes for Rome; and Simon the zealot who sought to overthrow Roman rule.

The period we see as “post-exile” at best more resembles captivity or an “internal exile” than it does freedom. While the Herods and Romans continued their rule, Israel’s dreams of liberation and God’s sovereignty remained just that: dreams. Not until Israel’s God liberated Israel and thus demonstrated that He

¹⁴⁶ T. S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, (Chicago; Chicago University Press, 1970), p. 65

¹⁴⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, p. 72

was indeed the God of the whole earth, would the Jews be satisfied that covenant relationship with Him was restored.¹⁴⁸

2.3 The Kingdom of God and Those in Exile

Jesus' proclamation, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand..." must have riveted the attention of those within hearing.¹⁴⁹ This was theological language at a time when Messianic expectation was white hot.¹⁵⁰ Kingdom speaks of covenant and God's sovereign faithfulness. Surely Israel's longed-for day had arrived! God was returning to Zion and prodigal Israel was truly returning from exile! The statement invited hope that God's promises might yet be fulfilled. Implicit in the announcement, however, is its counterpart: if the kingdom of God has arrived all other kingdoms are facing immanent displacement. Surely this meant Rome. How inexplicable then, Jesus' statement that Caesar was due what was his.¹⁵¹ Can the gospel coexist with the Roman

¹⁴⁸ N. T. Wright, "The New Testament and the 'State'," http://www.theologicalstudies.org.uk/article_state_wright.html Accessed July, 2006

¹⁴⁹ Mark 1:15

¹⁵⁰ Micael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, p. 124

¹⁵¹ A survey of what Jesus meant by "rendering to Caesar what is Caesar's" (Matt 22:15 – 22; Mark 12: 13 – 17; Luke 20: 20 – 16) shows a variety of opinion: Martin Hengel, *Victory Over Violence*, (Minneapolis; Fortress Press, 1973, pp. 47 – 48), believes Jesus was not trying to liberate Israel but to transform the human heart therefore, He did not identify the problem as being in socio-political structures; Robert Funk, *The Five Gospels: What Did Jesus Really Say? The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*, (San Francisco; Harper Collins, 1993, pp. 236, 379) writes that it was Jesus' way of making people decide for themselves; David Ball, "What Jesus Really Meant by 'Render to Caesar'," *Bible Review* (April 2003, 00. 15 – 17), believes it was a cryptic way of saying taxes should be paid; William Herzog, *Jesus, Justice, and the Reign of God: A Ministry of Liberation* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1999) pp. 225 – 232, that taxes

power structure? The Jews saw authority as linear: “either/or” and Caesar was not in the “chain of command.” I believe the western world and African culture view authority in exactly the same manner. Jesus understood it much differently: every individual has authority; Caesar also, but ultimate authority belongs to God. The arrival of the kingdom redesigned authority:

The ministry of Jesus is, of course, criticism that leads to radical dismantling. And as is characteristic the guardians and profiteers of the present stability are acutely sensitive to any change that may question or challenge the present arrangement. Very early Jesus is correctly perceived as a clear and present danger to that order.¹⁵²

There never are oppressed without oppressors but now the benefits are reversed: blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, the hungry, merciful, pure, the peacemakers. Blessed are those without God’s justice: the kingdom belongs to these. Blessed are those who know the liberative practices of forgiveness, compassion, justice and mercy; those whose fellowship with outcasts replaces the fundamental morality of a society unwilling to eat with them.¹⁵³ In this new dispensation, inclusiveness challenges old boundaries: both gender boundaries and the Jewish doctrine of election. Now faith and grace, obedience and compassion form the basis of God’s new people: not ethnicity; not gender; not position; not might. God’s new world order is breaking in and *all*

were unlawful and should be paid with utter contempt; Richard Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence*, (Minneapolis; Fortress Press, 1992, pp. 306 – 317), that Jesus was saying taxes should not be paid at all.

¹⁵² Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, p. 84

¹⁵³ *Ibid*, p. 85

people are summoned to share in it: the lame and the strong; the blind and those with sight; the poor; the powerful; the outcasts; the least – women, slaves, the unclean.¹⁵⁴ To quote Brueggemann again:

[Jesus] in fact, dismantled the dominant culture and nullified its claims. The way of his ultimate criticism is his decisive solidarity with marginal people and the accompanying vulnerability required by that solidarity. The only solidarity worth affirming is solidarity characterized by the same helplessness they know and experience.¹⁵⁵

Jesus acted practically and symbolically, teaching through parable, demonstrating through miracles, that here *now* was the return from exile. *This* is restoration. This is what the prophets foretold:

... the eyes of the blind be opened
And the ears of the deaf unstopped.
Then will the lame leap like a deer,
And the mute tongue shout for joy.
... and the ransomed of the Lord will return.¹⁵⁶

Although it does not fit a nationalist worldview, this is the antidote to the twin temptations of despair and rage. For through this darkness of hostile rulers and national failure comes a new covenant for God's people and renewed hope

¹⁵⁴ At the end of His first discourse, Jesus describes two builders: one wise; one foolish. The first builds his house on the rock; the other builds his on the sand. The people must have struggled to hold back their laughter. Who would build a house in a *wadi*: a dry riverbed? As in Africa when the rainy season comes, anything not built securely crumbles. Everyone can imagine the result. Matthew underscores that everyone understood Jesus taught with an authority they did not see in the scribes. The wise hear the voice of God in the teachings of Jesus and live by them; the foolish, think they are secure and make no change.

¹⁵⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, p. 82

¹⁵⁶ Isaiah 35: 5 – 6, 10

for the world. Israel had distorted the Scriptures by believing God's purpose was for them to rule the political world, but as N. T. Wright points out:

... the story was never about Israel beating up her enemies and becoming established as the high-and-mighty masters of the world. It was always the story of how the creator God, Israel's covenant God, would bring his saving purposes for the world to birth through the suffering and vindication of Israel. "Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures, the things concerning himself" (Luke 24: 27).¹⁵⁷

Instead of either despair or political revolution, Jesus offered a third option: recognition of the present situation and an offer of a counter-identity. The words of Isaiah once again reverberated through hearts:

Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings;
Lift up your voice with strength,
... say to the cities of Judah,
"Behold your God!"¹⁵⁸
... say to Zion, "Your God reigns!"¹⁵⁹

Jesus' message was not political but it was deeply subversive. Doubly subversive, for although it undermined the great empires and their representatives it also subverted alternative Jewish kingdom-stories: overthrowing the old order by working from within.¹⁶⁰ Those who responded were invited to participate as a new breed of revolutionaries: people willing to

¹⁵⁷ N. T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus*, pp. 161 – 162

¹⁵⁸ Isaiah 40:9

¹⁵⁹ Isaiah 52: 7

¹⁶⁰ Wright, N. T. "The Historical Jesus and Christian Theology," (Originally published in *Sewanee Theological Review* 39, 1996), http://www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Historical_Jesus.htm, Accessed 2006

abandon the present way of being Israel, willing to leave behind whole definitions of the present worldview, present cultures and their values. That remains the invitation: to be the people of God newly constituted in Jesus Christ; to follow in His subversive way of forgiveness, justice, inclusion, compassion, and peace; to be salt and light so that His kingdom, His reign is poignantly seen in His people. In short to “embrace God’s way of being humanity as he intended.”¹⁶¹

The kingdom of God does not erase culture but it must transfer identity and allegiance.¹⁶² Spiritual identity is more important than ethnic identity; spiritual priorities and values take precedence over cultural priorities and values; the Fatherhood of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and the brotherhood of fellow Christians replace cultural ancestry. Ephesians 4:4 - 6 affirms that there is one body and one Spirit ... one hope ... one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all. Ephesians 2:14 - 15 affirms that out of all nations comes one new nation, one people, one body one citizenship. “A people who live apart and do not consider themselves one of the nations” (Num 23:9).

¹⁶¹ Priddy, Mark. “God’s Kingdom and the Revolution of Jesus,”
[http://www.mark.alleoneagle.net/discuss/msgReader\\$98?mode=topic](http://www.mark.alleoneagle.net/discuss/msgReader$98?mode=topic) Accessed 2006

¹⁶² Jesus was a first-century Palestinian Jew and embodied a Jewish culture, a Jewish way of life. Yet the hope of the Jewish nation, politically, socially and economically, was not His hope. His hope was the coming kingdom of God.

Those who followed Christ *redesigned their whole worldview*: their praxis, their controlling stories, their symbolic universe and their basic theology around the fixed point of the kingdom. “They believed, in other words, as though the new age had already dawned.”¹⁶³

3. The Greek Worldview and the Gospel Message

In the first years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, the gospel was interpreted and reinterpreted in the changing social contexts of the pluralistic world of Greco-Roman culture. Where these forms and symbols failed, they were reshaped, redefined or abandoned altogether.

It was because men and women of the first century (sic) Mediterranean world, both Jew and Gentile, found their lives suddenly and inexplicable transformed by a new and unsuspected power from a new and confusing source that they were forced to reflect on their lives in a new way and infuse the symbols of their world with new content. ... The conviction that Jesus is alive and powerfully active in the believing community is the implicit, and sometimes explicit, presupposition of all the writings of the New Testament.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶³ N. T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is*, p. 137

¹⁶⁴ Luke T. Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation*, (Minneapolis; Fortress Press, 2002), pp. 104 and 117 as cited in “The Pathos of New Testament Studies: of What Use Are We to the Church and its (Public) Ethos?” by A. E. Mouton, http://academic.sun.ac.za/theology/Departemente/DONT/elnamouton_intreerede.pdf Accessed March, 2007

Rather than presenting Christ as Messiah to people who knew nothing substantial of the hope of Israel, the church presented Him in Greek terms as *Kyrios*, "Lord," and *Soter*, "Savior." F. F. Bruce explains the context:

Many were attempting to find in various mystery cults a divine lord who could guarantee salvation and immortality to his devotees; now the pagans of Antioch were assured that what they vainly sought in those quarters could be secured through the Son of God who had lately become man, suffered death and conquered the grave in Palestine.¹⁶⁵

I believe the use of *Kyrios* went far beyond questions of immortality, however. Wright convincingly argues that the confession of Jesus as *Kyrios* was deliberately framed in Roman terms to "counteract the essentially idolatrous politico-religious aspirations of imperial Rome." More particularly, it was aimed at the imperial cult of Caesar. If Jesus is Lord, Caesar is not. Neither is anyone (or anything) else. Statements interfering with or relativizing the authority of Caesar and his empire were met with an acutely hostile response: persecution and often death. By the first century AD, the Caesar cult was the fastest growing religion in the world. Octavius, who took the name Augustus, the "Highly Honoured or Revered One," was deified as had been his predecessor Julius Caesar. Octavius had added the phrase "son of God," to strengthen his divinity. Across the empire monuments, temples and coins promoted the cult of Caesar Augustus and the Caesars who succeeded him. People were urged to "have

¹⁶⁵ F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts, (New International Commentary on the New Testament)*, (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1954), p. 239

faith" in their "Lord" the emperor, the "Savior" who had brought them prosperity and peace. In the world of imperial Rome, this was "the gospel."

Rome did not usually bother with the religious customs of the nations it had conquered. However, a religion which had no specific ethnic or national connection but instead demanded universal assent and which held private meetings held also the potential for subversion or sedition; and that was quite another matter.¹⁶⁶ Christians were stigmatized as anti-social atheists: people who had no gods; at least none that were visible. Christians who refused to deny Christ and offer incense and wine to the emperor and the gods were put to death: "made to serve as objects of amusement; they were clad in the hides of beasts and torn to death by dogs; others were crucified, set on fire to serve to illuminate the night when daylight failed."¹⁶⁷ At the very least, Christians who refused to acquiesce risked economic and political isolation and loss of Roman citizenship. Yet faced with these perils, they displayed a dedicated toughness even to death, and refused to keep their faith secret. They simply could not keep quiet!

... the faith of first-and second-century Christians could not remain a private, individualized, personal religion. Rather, it was a public acknowledgement that the rule of Christ encompassed every domain of life. Christians could not afford to the emperors the absolute loyalty and allegiance they demanded in return for political stability and protection

¹⁶⁶ John Foxe, *Foxe's Annals of Martyrs*, (Burlington, Canada; Inspirational Promotions, no date given), p. 27

¹⁶⁷ Henry Bettenson, *Documents of the Early Church*, 2nd Edition., (London; Oxford University Press, 1963), pp. 2 – 5

because all such powers and rules were subordinate and subservient to Jesus' reign.¹⁶⁸

In other words, the spread of this news of the gospel from an original Jewish matrix to the Gentile world *came at a price* which amounted to “turning an entire theological and cultural grid upside down and inside out.”¹⁶⁹

Abraham Heschel describes a key fundamental difference between Hebrew and Greek culture: “The Greeks learned in order to comprehend. The Hebrews learned in order to revere.”¹⁷⁰ Where a Hebrew asked, “What must I do?” the Greek asked, “Why must I do it?” Nevertheless, the most profound challenge to thinking whether Jewish or Greek, was in the person of Jesus Himself. He expressed perceptions of God not accounted for in either religious experience. Nowhere was this more significant than in His death and resurrection: for although resurrection was familiar to Greek mythology and other religions, the resurrection of a crucified Messiah was not.¹⁷¹ That God would come in the form of a helpless baby through the faith of a woman and be born in the most humble circumstances to an oppressed and marginalized people, then allow Himself to

¹⁶⁸ A. E. Mouton, “The Pathos of New Testament Studies: of What Use Are We to the Church and its (Public) Ethos?”

¹⁶⁹ Leonard Hjarmlson, “Paradigms, Conversion and Paradox – Acts 10 – 11,” <http://nextreformation.com/?m=200605> Accessed 2006

¹⁷⁰ Abraham Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*, (New York; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1955), as cited in Brian Knowles, “The Hebrew Mind vs the Western Mind,” http://www.godward.org/Hebrew%20Roots/hebrew_mind_vs_the_western_mind.htm

¹⁷¹ Ernest Van Eck, *Die Opstanding in Dei Jodendom, Die Grieks-Romeinse Wêreld en Die Nuwe Testament*, HTS 60 (1 & 2), pp. 555 – 574, as cited in “The Pathos of New Testament Studies: of What Use Are We to the Church and its (Public) Ethos?” by A. E. Mouton.

be unjustly accused and put to death as a shameful criminal yet rise to life again because death could not hold one who had no sin, could not be accounted for in their religious perceptions.¹⁷² Following Christ created a radical discomfort zone. First of all, the concept of conversion seemed strange to first century Gentiles who did not regard belief as necessary for worship.¹⁷³ Sacrifices were offered, prayers recited, gods honoured, but sincerity was not required. Secondly, ethics was not considered part of religion.¹⁷⁴ What one cult required by way of behavior was not what another might require. Identity with Christ formed a basis for both a new self-understanding and a new moral perspective.¹⁷⁵ This extended to marriage and family. In place of the near property status a wife held in the first century, Christian husbands were instructed to “love their wife as Christ loves the church and gave himself up for her ...”¹⁷⁶ The result was that from the beginning, the movement brought with it

¹⁷² John A. T. Robinson notes that until a fundamental shift took place in Christology, the person of Jesus was not thought of as being of two natures. Jewish mythological categories had to be replaced with Greek ontological categories. *The Human Face of God*, (Westminster: Philadelphia, 1973), p. 33

¹⁷³ Michael Green, *Evangelism and the Early Church*, (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 2003), p. 203

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid*, p. 204

¹⁷⁵ A. E. Mouton, “The Pathos of New Testament Studies: of What Use Are We to the Church and its (Public) Ethos?” citing Bernard Latagan, “Textual Space as Rhetorical Device,” in S. E. Porter and T. H. Olbricht (Eds.), *Rhetoric and the New Testament: Essays from the 1992 Heidelberg Conference*, 1993, pp. 404 – 406, http://academic.sun.ac.za/tsv/Departemente/DONT/elnamouton_intreerede.pdf, Accessed March, 2007

¹⁷⁶ Ephesians 5:25

the concept of an alternative community: a people newly constituted in Christ not removed from culture; not destroying culture; but not conforming to it.¹⁷⁷

The spread of Christianity would have been even more formidable considering the lack of education and privilege of most followers and the second-class status of Palestinian Judaism, were it not for Rome's military control of its empire, especially its effective control of the Mediterranean basin. *Pax Romana* was thus an indirect *praeparatio evangelica*. Significantly, it was not Rome's religion that was foundational: it was her substantial military and civil achievements.

Prior to the first century, Jews had moved and spread throughout the Roman Empire.¹⁷⁸ Their dissemination both accelerated and hindered the spread of the gospel as is evident throughout the book of Acts.¹⁷⁹ Although not popular, they formed an influential subculture. Judaism thus also constituted a *praeparatio evangelica*, most especially since it was the only exclusively monotheistic religion:

Apart from Judaism, there was no other religion in the world of the day which would not make room for other faiths. 'Live and let live' was the motto of antiquity about gods. After all, it could be very inconvenient inadvertently to offend some powerful deity of another nation!¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁷ Gordon Fee, *Paul, the Spirit and the People of God*, (Peabody; Hendrickson, 1996), pp. 63 – 72

¹⁷⁸ Acts 2 records that there were Jews in Crete, Arabia, Parthia, Egypt, Persia, Pamphylia, as well as Antioch, Derbe, Lystra, Ephesus, Corinth, Athens and Rome just to name a few places.

¹⁷⁹ The phrase "but the Jews" gives reference: Acts 13:45, 50; 14: 2;4;19; 17:5, 13; 18:12.

¹⁸⁰ Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, p. 47

However, although Rome ruled the Mediterranean world, it took most of its cultural cues from Greek metaphysical speculation and intellectual thought.¹⁸¹ Captive Greece had captured her conquerors, as Horace once complained. The blending of Platonic dualism skewed the church's theology and led to an overall religious dualism in which a person's spiritual life was detached from the material world as much as possible.¹⁸² ¹⁸³ Myths were the main treasure-house from which both poets and theologians drew. Salvation was sought through knowledge or sacramentalism and holiness became a matter of retreat from the world.¹⁸⁴ Rational knowledge replaced the Hebrew understanding of knowing by experiencing.¹⁸⁵ Sin became the result of human folly: the transgression of

¹⁸¹ There was appropriation of Roman cultural forms and symbols also: for example, the title *pontifex maximus*, "repeated hundreds of times on the monuments and plaques of present-day Rome: originally a title for the chief priest of Roman pagan religion, it was taken over by the emperors during the principate of Augustus, was therefore renounced by the Christian emperors beginning with Gratian in the last quarter of the fourth century, but then was assumed (though not initially as an exclusive title) by the popes in the next century, beginning with Pope Leo I." Jaroslav Pelikan, *What Has Athens To Do With Jerusalem?* (University of Michigan Press, 1998), citing Max Bierbaum in *LTK* s.v.; Blase p. 634.

¹⁸² This is still seen in the church today, expressed in the everyday description of a person being "too heavenly minded to be of any earthly use."

¹⁸³ Thorleif Boman believes it is questionable if Plato's concept of the personal and impersonal are opposed to one another. Plato's understanding of god was as both personal and impersonal. Boman uses Plato's belief in prayer as a vehicle for communication with a personal being to substantiate this claim. It was this belief in an encounter with the divine that Plato became conscious of the Ideas. *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek*, (New York; W. W. Norton & Company, 1970)

¹⁸⁴ Michael Green, *Evangelism and the Early Church*, p. 171

¹⁸⁵ Greek thought was concerned with the nature of being: what *truly is*. Thorleif Boman (*Hebrew Thought Compared With Greek*) considers Greek thinking to be fully the peer of Hebrew thinking, although more interested in harmony. Although he characterizes Hebrew thinking as dynamic, vigorous, passionate and sometimes explosive, and Greek mental processes are prudent, moderate and peaceful, he sees neither as markedly differing from each other.

moral law.¹⁸⁶ Punctilious acts of worship averted the displeasure of the gods. Greek theodicy held that no sacrifice could induce the gods to intervene on mankind's behalf, thus precluding the presence of a merciful and loving God capable of forgiveness and restoration. The heresies of Greek docetism, antinomianism, legalism and a cluster of other philosophical and religious ideas under the umbrella term "gnosis," contrasted sharply with Hebrew thought that regarded man holistically and the fear of God as the beginning of wisdom.¹⁸⁷ The god posited by Greek philosophers was not the personal, redeeming Creator God of Judaism. Thus Paul's statement, "What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you."¹⁸⁸

3.1 The Gospel Message in Greek Format

It was said that in Athens it was easier to meet a god than it was to meet a man. The human population was approximately ten thousand but there more statues of the gods than in the rest of Greece combined. The city was "infested" with idols: gods of every sort.¹⁸⁹ Paul's address to the Areopagus cultured pagan

¹⁸⁶ Green notes that guilt, and a sense that man is responsible for his actions and therefore wrongdoing must be punished was heightened by the civil wars. The belief was that these wars were punishment for religious negligence. *Evangelism and the Early Church*, p. 40

¹⁸⁷ Proverbs 9: 10

¹⁸⁸ Acts 17: 23

¹⁸⁹ N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus Really the Founder of Christianity*, (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1997), p.87

milieu is paradigmatic for his ministry and for contemporary missions. Paul is first and foremost an apostolic missionary:¹⁹⁰ his theology and mission are inseparable.

... [they]do not simply relate to each other as “theory” to “practice” in the sense that his mission “flows” *from* his theology, but rather in the sense that his theology is a missionary theology and that mission is integrally related to his identity and thought as such. Paul’s understanding of mission is not an abstract construct dangling from a universal principle, “but an analysis of reality triggered by an initial experience that gave Paul a new world-view.”¹⁹¹

Paul’s encounter with the risen Christ changed him from a “Pharisee of Pharisees,”¹⁹² a persecutor of the early church and one who perceived Jesus as a liar, imposter and a threat to Judaism, into someone who embraced Jesus as the central purpose of his life. This radical conversion was a *paradigmatic change*,¹⁹³ transforming Paul’s values, his self-definition, and his commitments.¹⁹⁴

Numerous questions, interpretations and even church names have emerged from his speech at Mars Hill. Paul’s theological critics¹⁹⁵ hold that the quotation,

¹⁹⁰ The use of these two words, “apostolic” and “missionary” is repetitious: they are, in fact, the same word – one Greek and the other Latin.

¹⁹¹ Donald Senior and Carroll Stuhlmueller, *the Foundations for Mission in the New Testament*, (Maryknoll; Orbis Books, 1983), p. 171 as cited in David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 124

¹⁹² Philippians 3: 4 – 5

¹⁹³ Beverley Roberts Gaventa, “You Will Be My Witnesses:” Aspects of Mission in the Acts of the Apostles, *Missiology* vol. 10, pp. 413 – 425, as cited in David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 124

¹⁹⁴ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, pp. 125 – 126

¹⁹⁵ Among whom are Albert Schweitzer and Martin Dibelius who believed the Greek rationalism evidenced in this statement is incompatible with the biblical Paul. H. Conzelman also holds the view that the Areopagus speech is inauthentic: a “free creation” of the author. “The Address of Paul on the Areopagus,” in *Studies in Luke-Acts* (ed. L. E. Keck and J. L. Martyn; Abingdon; Nashville, New York, 1966), p. 218 as cited in J. Daryl Charles, “Engaging the (Neo) Pagan Mind: Paul’s Encounter with Athenian Culture as a

“In him we live and move and have our being”¹⁹⁶ supported a Stoic worldview¹⁹⁷ rather than a Christian one and therefore, Luke’s account as recorded in the book of Acts, is unhistorical. However, many scholars including F. F. Bruce¹⁹⁸ believe Luke gave a trustworthy account of events experienced by the early church, which while not professing to be either a word-for-word transcript of discourses or a complete theology, “significantly contributes to our overall understanding of N. T. theology.”¹⁹⁹ Paul’s address as it is recorded in Acts may be a two-minute summary of the main headings of a discourse that might have gone on for several hours. On virtually every point, Paul has written a fuller explanation elsewhere in his New Testament letters as George Eldon Ladd confirms:

Model for Cultural Apologetics (Acts 17:16 – 34)” *Trinity Journal*, 16:1 (Spring 1995) pp. 47 – 62. This manuscript was presented at the 1994 annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in Chicago. http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/athenian_charles.pdf Accessed March, 2006

¹⁹⁶ Acts 17: 28

¹⁹⁷ Stoics, founded by Zeno, were pantheists who believed God and everything else was made out of one piece of cloth: all of creation is part of God and all of God is in creation. They taught that God was not anthropomorphic but a force which permeates all things, both animate and inanimate. This “guiding principle” they called Reason (*Logos*). They were fatalists: everything has a pre-determined path to follow and from this path there can be no deviation. History is cyclic: the world is headed towards collapse and then it will start again and go through another cycle. Stoics lived a life of moderation: apathy was the highest virtue; moderation their style. They lived between joy and sorrow, elation and depression. An example of present day Stoic philosophy may be seen in the viewpoint of Shirley MacLaine who writes, “There is an urgent need for people to recognize the power within themselves, to know themselves as a spark of God. Begin with self; recognize the god within, and the result will be the recognition, with tolerance and love, that everyone else possesses God within as well. In other words we are each part of God experiencing the adventure of life.” *Going Within: A Guide for Inner Transformation*, (Bantam; Reprint Edition, 1990), p. 102

Epicureans on the other hand, believed the gods were remote and uncaring (practical atheism). Everything happened by chance as atoms dispersed and recombined and death signaled a complete end therefore, bodily resurrection would be absurd. Their response to Paul was one of ridicule, “What is this babblers trying to say?” (Acts 17:18).

¹⁹⁸ F. F. Bruce, *Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1977), p. 240

¹⁹⁹ David S. Dockery, “The Theology of Acts,” *Criswell Theological Review* 5.1 (1990), pp. 43 – 55. http://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/Ted_Hildebrandt/NTeSources/NTArticles/CTR-NT/Dockery-TheologyActs-CTR.htm

This does not require us to believe that the sermons Luke reports are verbatim accounts; they are altogether too short for that. Nor do we demur that Luke is the author of these speeches in their present form. We may, however, accept the conclusion that they are brief but accurate summaries of the earliest preaching of the apostles. It is also clear that Luke is not a critical historian in the modern sense of the word; ... Luke selects from the sources of information available to him, both written and oral, what to him are the most important events in tracing the extension of the church from a small Jewish community in Jerusalem to Gentile congregation in the capital city of the Roman empire.²⁰⁰

Although there was more than one form of Judaism in Paul's day, his views of Athenian culture are consistent with them all. Athenian morals were base and vices abounded: they were "pagan," a word Wright defines as denoting those who are neither Jew nor Christian and which carried a connotation of their developed worldview in which religion and politics, superstition and magic, hope and fear, and sometimes ethics and morals all clustered together around a bewildering range of symbols and stories, developed over many centuries.²⁰¹ There were "many gods and many lords:" not only the Greek pantheon but also Caesar. Yet Paul is clear,

For even if there are so-called gods whether in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords, yet for us there is but one God, the Father, whom are all things, and we exist for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him.²⁰²

²⁰⁰ George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1974), p. 314

²⁰¹ N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, pp. 78 – 79

²⁰² I Corinthians 8:5 - 6

Three main missionary motives can be seen in the early church: a sense of gratitude, a sense of responsibility and a sense of concern. All these are clearly identifiable in Paul's writings.

It is, however, above everything else, *idolatry*, that Paul deems reprehensible. Idols are fabrications of the perverted human mind (cf Rom 1:23, 25), and yet in spite of the fact that they are human creations, they take control of people, who are 'led astray to dumb idols' (I Cor 12:2) and are 'in bondage to beings that by nature are no gods', slaves of 'weak and beggarly elemental spirits; (Gal 4:9f). Their being in bondage to idols is therefore due not to ignorance (as the Stoics would argue) but to willfulness. In fact, 'idolatry' is not limited to worship of idols but includes a broader sense of allegiance to anything that is false (cf Bussmann 1971:38 - 56; Senior and Stuhlmeuller 1983:186; Hultgren 1985:139f; Grant 1986:46 - 49; Malherbe 1987:31f)

... Over against this pervasive idolatry of the Greco-Roman world Paul proclaims (in full harmony with his Jewish religious roots) the uncompromising message of one God who lays exclusive claim to people's loyalty. In absolute contrast to the idols Paul describes God as 'living and true' (I Thess 1:9).

... He sees humanity outside Christ as utterly lost, en route to perdition (cf I Cor 1:18; 2 Cor 2:15), and in dire need of salvation (see also Eph 2:12). The idea of imminent judgment on those who 'do not obey the truth' (Rom 2:8) is a recurring theme in Paul.²⁰³

For Paul, humanity's *only* hope of avoiding the penalty of sin and the judgment to come is the kindness of God who has provided an opportunity for repentance in Jesus Christ. As F. F. Bruce argues, Paul gives no concession to Hellenistic paganism but instead utilizes theistic assumptions his audience was already familiar with - their sense of the divinity - as the base to take them beyond their present understanding.

²⁰³ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 134

It is not suggested that even the Paul of Acts ... envisaged God in terms of the Zeus of Stoic pantheism, but if men whom his hearers recognized as authorities had used language which could corroborate his argument, he would quote their words, giving them a biblical sense as he did so.²⁰⁴

Paul's opening statement, "I see that in every way you are religious. I even found an altar with this inscription, 'To an Unknown God'," does not mean Paul is commending their religious practices. Rather he uses both their lack and their poetry as a frame of reference.²⁰⁵ It is a superb example of "contextualization without accommodation."²⁰⁶ Paul is culturally sensitive and contextually appropriate but he is not culturally accommodating. He uses what they already admit to not knowing: a God who is "*Agnosto Theo*,"²⁰⁷ a God they do not know and who they worship "*agoneo*," (*ἀγνωστος, ἀγνοέω*; v.23; *ἀγνοια*, v. 30), literally "being in ignorance."^{208 209}

Those who take these words as expressing both a positive and a negative relation between the religious pagan and the one true God see the positive relation as an ignorant worship of God (Haenchen 1971:521; Talbert 1984: 74; Stott 1990:285). No new god is being introduced; it is simply that God's identity is being unveiled to those who admit if only unconsciously, their ignorance.²¹⁰

²⁰⁴ F. F. Bruce, *Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, (Eerdmans; Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1977), p. 240

²⁰⁵ Charles Kraft, *Christianity in Culture*, p. 154

²⁰⁶ J. Daryl Charles, "Engaging the (Neo)Pagan Mind: Paul's Encounter with Athenian culture As A Model for cultural Apologetics."

²⁰⁷ This is the root word for "agnostic."

²⁰⁸ <http://www.wikipedia.org>

²⁰⁹ J. Daryl Charles notes that Paul's message is "pregnant with irony" because of the theme of "ignorance" in a city of great learning and before the Areopagus Court, composed of thirty of the most literate men of Paul's day. "Engaging the (Neo)Pagan Mind"

²¹⁰ Ibid.

Paul knows the truth of the one God and this he proclaims to them. He avoids condemning either the men of Athens themselves or their practices; is familiar with their religious beliefs, philosophic terminology and literature²¹¹; but *he uses these in order to change their worldview*. It is imperative to note that as respectful as Paul is of Athenian religious endeavours, he does not consider them in any way salvic. They worship many gods, but not the one true God.²¹² The direction of Paul's discourse is *confrontational* in this respect with their religious beliefs. He faces the deeply held attitudes that form their pagan worldview. Therefore, the ignorance of the Athenians is a limited point of contact. Paul is clear: they do not worship the one true God and now must "repent" (Acts 17: 30). God does not inhabit man-made images of gold and silver and stone (v. 29) and is not served by human hands. He is in need of nothing but in fact gives all men everything including life and breath. The Sovereign Lord, the Creator of heaven and earth (which presupposes no other God/s); calls everyone (including each person present); to repentance (presupposes sin); because He has created them to seek Him (presupposes purpose); with the reality of a future judgment (presupposes personal accountability); through the resurrection of Jesus Christ

²¹¹ Paul is not in agreement with Aretus' philosophy but quotes him to show that even their own Greek thinkers disagreed with the concept of an anthropomorphic God. There is very little information about Aratus today. He was probably born in Cilicia about 300 years before Christ. Aratus studied Stoic philosophy in Athens. The only work surviving in its entirety is *Phaenomena* ("natural appearances") and it is this poem Paul quotes: "for we are indeed his offspring," (v. 28)

²¹² We encounter the same situation in Matthew 16:13 – 17 as people gave various responses to the identity of Jesus. Only Peter, who answered, "You are the Christ, the son of the living God," was "blessed."

His Son, whom He raised from the dead (which invalidates Greek religion).²¹³

As Wright correctly maintains, Paul's speech is polemical, contextual and sharply critical. Polemical in that Paul did not "shout his message across a yawning cultural gap"²¹⁴ but used familiar cultural forms, filling them with new meaning; sharply critical because he did not affirm *in any way* the sufficiency of the religious views of Athenian culture.²¹⁵ There is no suggestion whatsoever that the gods of Athens are alternate gods or powers. They are "so-called" gods and lords.²¹⁶ Although Paul's message was good news,

... [it was] not the sort of good news that told them they were more or less all right as they were, but the sort of good news which told them that, though they were at present going about things in a totally wrong way, the God who made them loved them and longed to remake them.²¹⁷

In other words, Paul's discourse marks a *radical discontinuity* with the worldview of his audience. His gospel calls all people everywhere to repent.

²¹³ J. Daryl Charles, "Engaging the (Neo)Pagan Mind"

²¹⁴ N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, p. 80

²¹⁵ J. Daryl Charles, "Engaging the (Neo)Pagan Mind," writes that Paul's explanation of creation serves as a "necessary pedagogical-missionary preamble." (P. Veilhauer, "Zum 'Paulinismus' der Apostelgeschichte") Paul uses the same argument in Romans 1: that is, the phenomenon of creation is accessible to everyone. "Even pagans without knowledge of Christ have a fundamental awareness of moral accountability. Pagans 'by nature' do the moral law of God, even though they do not have the law (Rom. 2:14). Thus, the Apostle can speak of universal norms. Ultimately, whether he is writing to Christians living in the Imperial seat of Rome or addressing academics sitting on the council of the Areopagus in Athens, Paul's purpose is to stress that *all people* are morally accountable. All, though 'ignorant,' are without excuse." See also David J. Williams, *Acts*, (Peabody, Mass.; Hendrickson, 1985), p. 309

²¹⁶ 1 Corinthians 8: 5

²¹⁷ N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, p. 81

The early church used Greek philosophy and reductionist, propositional logic and fondness for abstraction not only to build a bridge but also as a tool to define Christian doctrine. Although history records resistance from one group of Christians, notably Tertullian, who illustrated the seriousness of the conflict between Greek and Hebrew thought with his question, “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem,”²¹⁸ within a hundred years the church changed from an often persecuted minority by gradually losing its apocalyptic-eschatological perspective and settling into the surrounding culture.²¹⁹ Bosch writes that by the end of the first century there was an almost boundless syncretism of far eastern (oriental) and western (occidental) religions.²²⁰ Salvation and civilization were equated with membership in the now institutionalized church. Therefore, despite Tertullian’s reply to his own question that a disciple of Jerusalem did not need to become a pupil of Athens; Athens did in fact gobble up much of Jerusalem. The whole ancient world was too thoroughly permeated with Greek thought to be “exorcized by simply shutting one’s eyes to it,” as Michael Green submits:

Accordingly in the New Testament itself we find Paul and other Christian missionaries making use of what is true and useful in paganism; in the second century this procedure was developed with enthusiasm. It was called ‘spoiling the Egyptians,’ and was used with great effect by Justin,

²¹⁸ Henry Bettenson, *Documents of the Early Church*, p. 8.
See also Jaroslav Pelikan, *What Has Athens To Do With Jerusalem?*

²¹⁹ Tertullian’s answer to his question was that a disciple of Jerusalem did not need to become a pupil of Athens. Ricoeur’s response was more pointed, “Much in every way.”

²²⁰ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 191

Aristides, Athenagoras, Theophilus and the great Alexandrians, Clement and Origen. Plato and Aristotle, the Stoics, and even Euripides are called to the bar to defend Christian doctrines of God.²²¹

Bosh points out that the result, even as soon as the close of the first century, was anything but desirable:

What began as a movement had, long before the end of the first century, irrevocably turned into an institution. ... There can be no doubt that, as early as the late first century, a shift in the understanding of the church had set in. In fact, some of the New Testament texts already reflect a situation where the *mobile* ministry of the apostles, prophets and evangelists was beginning to give way to the *settled* ministry of bishops, elders and deacons.²²²

Faith demands a pilgrim people. Without movement, “spiritual entropy”²²³ dictates that dust as we are, we begin to settle. As with the exile in Babylon, the loss of a sense of foreignness seduces Christians to conform.

In writing about the early church and its context, Bosch makes two points that are particularly significant for this paper. He contends that the reason the church did not succumb was due firstly to its fundamental difference from other faiths: rather than being a bearer of culture, it adopted a stance that questioned the culture. Christians were held in contempt by the vast majority of cultured citizens of the Empire.²²⁴ Secondly, the Roman Empire was slowly decaying and

²²¹ Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, pp. 37 – 38

²²² David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, pp. 191, 201

²²³ Ron MacDonald, “Beyond Pentecost: A Pentecostal-Charismatic Hermeneutic Model in a Postmodern Context,” p. 8.

²²⁴ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 193

Christianity was ready to bring new life and hope.²²⁵ This changed in the late second century due to the influence of Clement, Origen and others who introduced the new tradition of “the sophisticated Christian scholar who could match any pagan philosopher, particularly since they could make use of the same type of argument as the Greek teachers did.”²²⁶ The pre-Constantinian church saw itself as the bearer of history, the vehicle for meaning and purpose; neither sponsoring nor supporting the world or its cultures. The post-Constantinian church fused its faith with the state. Colin Greene accurately sums up the result as “a virtual domestication of the Christian faith, the elimination of all that is odd, controversial, angular and inimical to a progressive idea of religion and culture...”²²⁷ The following rather lengthy quote summarizes -

This is not the place to speak of the decadence of Greek religion, of its ameliorating influence on the Alexandrian world, or of the control it exercised over the Roman state. Its most permanent effect is found rather in Christianity. And here its shaping influence is first noted in Christian theology beginning with Paul and the Apostle John. For although Greek religion was more free from dogma or anything that could be called theology than are most religions, it furnished the religious content to the greatest philosophical systems we know; and all through the centuries the leaders of Christian thought have been trained in the religious philosophy of Plato and of Aristotle. Our Christian conceptions of the nature of God and the soul, of the relation of God to the physical universe, and of God's government of the world, have been worked out along the lines laid down by these Greek thinkers. And while the debt is primarily to Greek philosophy, it should never be forgotten that Greek philosophy formulated these conceptions out of the material which Greek religion

²²⁵ Ibid, pp. 193 – 194

²²⁶ Ibid, p. 193

²²⁷ Colin Greene, *Christology in Cultural Perspective: Marking Out the Horizons*, (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 2003), p. 145

furnished; indeed one may believe that it was the religious conceptions formulated by centuries of thoughtful worshippers which found final expression in the Greek philosophic systems.²²⁸

3.2 The Pivotal Role of Greek Thought

Greek thinking not only played a pivotal role in the history of the ancient Mediterranean world but revived through the Enlightenment, continues to shape contemporary education, philosophy, medicine, government, ethics and the church. We are indeed “swimming in a Greek soup.”²²⁹ Secular humanism’s scientific empiricism is remarkably similar to the Epicureans; as is postmodernism’s New Age pantheism to the Stoics. Western culture in particular resembles the Athens of Paul’s day: it is “a society filled with generic religion, a deep craving, a powerful yearning, and an unresolved restlessness.” However, I believe that people of all cultures find Paul’s discourse similarly challenging. As Barth maintained, the wisdom of Paul’s time is also the wisdom of today.²³⁰

3.2.1 The Postmodern World²³¹

²²⁸ The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, “Religion in Ancient Greece,” <http://www.verselink.org/isbe/isbe4a3899.html>

²²⁹ Christina Overman, *Assumptions that Affect Our Live* (U. S. A.; Ablaze, 2006), p. 14

²³⁰ Marius Herholdt, “Postmodern Hermeneutics, *Initiation into Theology: The Rich Variety of Theology and Hermeneutics*, (Pretoria; JL Van Schaik, 1998), p. 452

²³¹ It should be noted that definitions of the term “postmodern” or “postmodernism” are often rejected by postmoderns because any description of definition cannot be “neutral.” Therefore, any definition is likely to reflect the person offering the definition rather than accurately describing the phenomenon. David Tracy, (“Fragments: The Spiritual Situation of Our Times”) for example, denies that there is any such thing as postmodernism; there are only postmodernities. It is therefore more a “condition” which, as Kevin

The present-day western world is one of paradox: a global village where people are born in one place, educated in another, may work in a third and marry someone from a fourth. Families are blended. Globalism, nationalism and tribalism are on the increase and everything is done at speed. The “umbrella word” postmodernism, covers the mood of the foregoing as well as the movement of deconstruction; the philosophy of history; aesthetics; and a profound shift in epistemology.²³² Challenging many of the beliefs that formed the base of Newtonian mechanistic modernism, the western “post world” has adopted a mood of dissatisfaction with the Enlightenment’s rule of reason and instead embraces uncertainty, encouraging both pastiche and *bricolage* in its effort to restore a sense of meaning. It is relevant to specify that the “post” in post-modernism, post-structuralism, post-colonialism, etc., lacks a positive definition. It is a reactive phase, indicative more of what is opposed than what is proposed. The idea that the terms “hyper-modernism,” or “ultra-modernity,” “liquid modernity,”²³³ or even “most modern,” are more descriptive has merit. In any event, all are terms used to indicate that as an ideology, modernity has

Vanhoozer writes is at once intellectual/ theoretical and cultural/practical, a condition that affects modes of thought as well as modes of embodiment. *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, (London; Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 4

²³² D. A. Carson, “Domesticating the Gospel: A Review of Grenz’s *Renewing the Center*” in *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation In Postmodern Times*, Millard Erickson, Paul Helseth and Justin Taylor, Eds., (Wheaton; Crossway Books, 2004) p. 45

²³³ Zygmunt Bauman

spun out in moral decline.²³⁴ The promises of technological progress, the Enlightenment project, autonomous individualism, empiricism and absolute moral relativism have resulted in a moral spinout: a tailspin of “sexual, interpersonal and familial wreckage.”²³⁵ The Enlightenment offered knowledge as the key to unlocking the secrets and prosperity of the universe. Objectively certain, and inherently good, it was both limitless and obtainable. Knowledge would secure the future of the world.²³⁶ Analysis could be held at arms-length. As Danah Zohar suggests:

Like the Protestants who said to the Church, “Get out of my way. I’ll relate to God directly, by myself,” the mechanistic scientists said to the priests and the philosophers, “Don’t *tell* us about nature. We’ll find out.”²³⁷

The map-makers of postmodernism are many. To name but a few: René Descartes with his focus on doubt laid the philosophical foundation; Isaac Newton provided the scientific machinery needed for a framework; Kant opened the way for critical rationality in his theory of rationality or epistemology as it is

²³⁴ Oden adds the term “terminal modernity” to the list. Thomas C. Oden, “Death of Modernity and Postmodern Evangelical Spirituality,” in *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement* 2nd Edition, David S. Dockery, Ed., (Grand Rapids; Baker Books, 2001), pp. 26 – 27

²³⁵ Thomas C. Oden, *Requiem: A Lament in Three Movements*, (Abingdon: Nashville, Tenn., 1995), p. 116 as cited in Millard Erickson, *Postmodernizing the Faith: Evangelical Responses to the Challenge of Postmodernism*, (Grand Rapids; Baker Books, 1998), p. 51

²³⁶ Stanley Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 3 – 4. Grenz has his critics, one being Justin Taylor who does not have anything positive to say about Grenz’s writing (in particular his book *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era*) except that it forces the reader to examine and sharpen his or her understanding. (“An Introduction to Postconservative Evangelicalism,” <http://www.gnpceb.org/assets/products/excerpts/1581345682.1.pdf>)

²³⁷ Danah Zohar, *Rewiring the Corporate Brain: Using the New Science to Rethink How We Structure and Lead Organizations*, (San Francisco; Berret-Koehler Publishers, 1997, p. 8. *Italics in the original.*

also called;²³⁸ Derrida contributed the concept of logocentrism; Hobbes added political and ethical ideas; Foucault produced an understanding of the relationship between power and history; Rorty brought a suspicion of metanarratives; Hume added skepticism and Stanley Fish, literary criticism. Modernity has been under attack (at least) since Friedrich Nietzsche (1844 – 1900) and his “death of God” theory,²³⁹ however, the modern era can be dated roughly as waxing in 1550 and waning about 1945.²⁴⁰

It is not within the scope of this paper to give a detailed historical account of the rise of postmodernism, or even whether that term is an accurate one to use. What is important to note is that as difficult as it is to describe and assess, there is monumental change going on.²⁴¹ Whether it is a “movement” or simply a “mood” is rather unimportant. The reality is that although humans do have some mechanistic aspects and our muscles work like machines, some aspects of our minds are “programmed” by a worldview, and Newtonian thinking is required in order to be goal-oriented and to solve problems; humans are more than just the foregoing. We have emotions, feel pain, laugh at jokes, write poems, have spiritual needs and insight. New paradigm science is participatory.

²³⁸ Marius Herholdt, “Postmodern Hermeneutics,” *Initiation into Theology*, p. 458

²³⁹ Danah Zohar, *Rewiring the Corporate Brain*, p. 5

²⁴⁰ R. Scott Smith and J. P. Moreland, *Truth and the New Kind of Christian: The Emerging Effects of Postmodernism in the Church*, (Wheaton; Good News Publishers, 2005), p. 26.

²⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 2 – 3

The postmodern world exists. Therefore, it is essential that Christians live and give a relevant message.

According to postmodernism, the test for theological models is their success in providing meaning in terms of how the world is experienced in relation to the Christian belief in a benevolent God. This can only be accomplished by designing a comprehensive metaphysical scheme in which faith can be fitted into the framework of how we actually experience the world on many different levels.²⁴²

3.2.2 Fitting Christian Faith into the Framework of the Postmodern World

What does postmodernism mean for the church? I dare say hundreds of books and articles have been written in recent years in response to that question. Therefore, without attempting to summarize a small library, there are commonalities to the general observations and suggestions through most of what is being written whether the writers are identified as emergent, reformist, post-conservative, young evangelical (in spirit rather than years), post-fundamentalist, post-foundationalist, post-propositionalist or even post-evangelical.²⁴³ Postmodern leaders are a loosely networked group who "... desire a "generous orthodoxy that would steer a faithful course between the Scylla of conservative-

²⁴² M. Herholdt, "Postmodern Theology," *Initiation Into Theology*, p. 215

²⁴³ This does not mean anti-evangelical as Dallas Willard points out in "Smothering Jesus in a Heap of Trivialities," his foreword to Dave Tomlinson, *The Post-Evangelical*, rev. North American ed. (Grand Rapids; Zondervan 2003), p. 11

traditionalism and the Charybdis of liberal-progressivism.”²⁴⁴ Justin Taylor refers to Stanley Grenz as postconservatism’s Professor; Brian McLaren as its Pastor; Roger Olson and Robert Webber its Publicists. Webber summarizes the basic perspectives and contributions as follows:

He or she is committed to construct a biblically rooted, historically informed, and culturally aware new evangelical witness in the twenty-first century. They value tradition over ahistoricism; stories over propositions; a communally embodied apologetic over rational argumentation; and the visible over the invisible church.²⁴⁵

McLaren adds that Jesus’ message about the kingdom of God concerns the *here-and-now*, not just *heaven-when-you-die*; it pertains to *community* not just individuality; and *all of creation*, not just the human soul. He advocates dialogue over debate; experience over proof; poetry, stories and mystery over systems.²⁴⁶ However, he is also quick to indicate postmodern weaknesses: one being the Pentecostal/ Charismatic trade on intense experiences, “but you can still beat your wife.”²⁴⁷

I believe that overall postmodernism offers substantial opportunities to reshape and revision theology to include unpredictability and openness. The

²⁴⁴ Justin Taylor, “Introduction to Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation In Postmodern Times,” <http://www.gnpcb.org/assets/products/excerpts/1581345682.1.pdf> Accessed March 2007

²⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 21

²⁴⁶ Brian McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey*, (San Francisco; Jossey-Bass, 2001)

²⁴⁷ Brian McLaren as summarized on http://www.emergentkiwi.org.nz/archives/cat_brian_mclaren.php Accessed 2005

emphasis on relationships is especially positive. Today's young people in particular are discovering the bankruptcy of a primarily self-focused faith. The world is not a mechanistic realm as modernism proposed. It is relational.²⁴⁸ Christianity, rather than being a sponsor for national governments, has an opportunity to be a culture-forming community called by God to be followers of Jesus Christ. Postmodernism replaces inflexible structure with self-organizing networks and eliminates the potential to superficiality inherent in the concept of a "community" that meets at specific times and in specific places. The more dynamic concept of *communitas*, a group on a risky journey "in the context of a shared ordeal ... a group with a mission that lies beyond themselves,"²⁴⁹ offers a more vigorous form of community with a more missional edge. In this way, as Alan Hirsch emphasizes, the church breaks the bondage of dualism.²⁵⁰

Postmodern theology's task is to provide a personal account of faith in order to increase meaning²⁵¹ and point to coherence between our personal experience of God and the way we experience the world physically and morally. As Herholdt points out, "Every generation must discover meaning intelligible to itself."²⁵² And in this sense, pluralism is part of the postmodern matrix. A

²⁴⁸ Einstein's General Theory of Relativity observed that at a quantum level, all things even including space and time are integrally linked.

²⁴⁹ Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church*, (Grand Rapids; Brazos Press, 2006), p. 25

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 239 – 241

²⁵¹ Marius Herholdt, "Postmodern Theology," *Initiation Into Theology*, p. 228

²⁵² *Ibid.* p. 224

Biblical text is not understood as having only one meaning. I submit this must presuppose the reader is under the active guidance of the Holy Spirit. Truth resides in the relationship of the reader, the Holy Spirit and the text. This means an end to objectivism but at the same time does not welcome “anything goes” relativism. All meanings must lead us to God who is *the* Truth.²⁵³ Even in our best judgments, there is a propensity to distort or block the truth found in Scripture in the vested interests of our personal histories of anxiety, fear, hurt, or our personal ambitions.²⁵⁴

Every vested interest has working in it, if it is passionate, a high measure of anxiety about deep threats, perhaps perceived, perhaps imagined, and anxiety has a forceful passion to it that permits us to deal in wholesale categories without the nuance of the particular.²⁵⁵

Postmodern relativism means the practice of *a contextual, local perspective*.

Brueggemann explains: “the world is perceived, processed, and articulated with one or another perspective, and a perspective has the power to make sense out of

²⁵³ Contra to the postmodern thinker Gilles Deleuze, who writes “There is no starting point just as there is no goal to reach” (Deleuze and Parnet, *Dialogue*), we are not aimless nomads with no destination. According to one of Deleuze’s favorite images, we are like a flowing stream, now merging with, now separating from other streams, changing in the process. Miroslav Volf points out that while Deleuze is correct in picturing life as a journey of change, his analogy breaks down when we contrast the life of Abraham who went against the flow, deciding to “*go forth* in response to a *call of God*.” God’s call to Abraham and Abraham’s response show a starting point, a goal, and that departure in itself was a temporary state, not an end in itself. (Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, p. 40. Italics in the original.

²⁵⁴ Walter Brueggemann, “Biblical Authority: A Personal Reflection,” Address to the 2000 Covenant conference, Pittsburgh, PA, November 2, 2000.
<http://www.covenantnetwork.org/sermon&papers/brueggemann.html> Accessed 2005

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

the rawness of experienced life, even though it cannot be “proven” or absolutely established.”²⁵⁶ This was the intention of Kuhn and Polyani:

... It could be that we turn our anxieties, fears, and hurts to good advantage as vehicles for obedience. But even in so doing, we are put on notice. We cannot escape, I believe, from such passions; but we can submit them to brothers and sisters whose own history of distortion is very different from our own and as powerful in its defining force.²⁵⁷

It is true as Mark Twain observed that we do not much deal in facts when we are dealing with ourselves. Therefore, I reiterate my point that the Holy Spirit and a *participatory hermeneutic* are critical. That is, in order to avoid two of the primary dangers of objectivism: firstly that the text of the Bible is static; and secondly that all perspectives are virtuous or innocent, believers must rely on “God who speaks and makes his message known.”²⁵⁸

3.3 Summary

The early church adamantly refused to compromise by even the seemingly insignificant practice of paying respect to imperial Caesar or the traditional gods. They made a radical break from cultural exclusivism: no specific culture held centre place. Instead God, in whose sight all are equal, was the centre of gravity.

²⁵⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination*, (Minneapolis; Fortress Press, 1993), p. 10
Brueggemann develops what he calls the *zone of imagination* that exists between the text and every reader, in this book, pages 62 – 63.

²⁵⁷ Walter Brueggemann, “Biblical Authority,” <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=2104>
Accessed 2007.

²⁵⁸ Marius Herholdt, “Pentecostal and Charismatic Hermeneutics,” *Initiation Into Theology*, p. 429

However, the sub-apostolic church was profoundly influenced by culture. Christians lost their focus on the immediacy of Christ's return and the importance of proclaiming the gospel, settling instead into the world around them. Failing to become a radical subversive political reality because of a loss of nerve and vision, the church attempted to increase its influence and extent by accommodating secular powers even through the use of violence. Political advantage was sought, not the kingdom of God. The Roman church understood mission as an obligation with an expansionistic reward rather than as the consequence of forgiveness and devotion to Christ. Paganism was the absence of "civilization;" and "civilization" was defined as European culture. The church's mission was to sustain its own power and expand its own influence around the world.

4. The Colonial Worldview and the Mission of the Church²⁵⁹

The church that emerged from the Greek Patristic period had lost its preoccupation with the immanent return of Jesus.²⁶⁰ Whereas the missionary text of the early church had been Matthew 4: 17, "Repent, for the kingdom of

²⁵⁹ The word "mission" was not used in the New Testament. It first appeared in the sixteenth century by Ignatius of Loyola and is historically linked to the colonial era.

²⁶⁰ I am utilizing David Bosch's divisions of history here – "the Greek Patristic period," dating from the late first to the sixth century. Andrew Walls prefers to call this the "Hellenistic-Roman" period. I prefer Bosch's use of the word "Greek" simply because of its reference to Greek thinking which dominated the period.

heaven is near," the medieval church used a forceful reading of Luke 14: 23, "compel them to come in."

Gregory the Great moved the church to extend its influence through aggressive acts of war, understood as both justified and necessary. Europe was Roman Catholic and since it was inconceivable for a European monarch to reign over pagan people, baptism into the church was enforced as a consequence of conquest. Once baptized, if "new converts" reverted to their former faith, they were executed.

A "new sort of magic" in the form of rituals, rites and a powerful clergy, who enforced the monopoly of the church over personal and state affairs, supplanted much of the supernatural and mystery of God.²⁶¹ To say that the church truncated the gospel is an understatement.

4.1 The "Constantinian Shift"

The "Constantinian shift," or Christendom as it came to be called, saw the church begin to derive its significance through its association and identity with the purposes of the state. As John Howard Yoder observes,

... the most pertinent fact of the Constantinian shift was not that the church was no longer persecuted but that the two visible realities of church and world were fused. There was, in a sense no longer anything to call "world" - state, economy, art, rhetoric, superstition and war were all baptized.²⁶²

²⁶¹ Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 2004), p.166

²⁶² John Howard Yoder, "The Otherness of the Church," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 35 (October 1961): 212 as cited in Rodney Clapp, *A Peculiar People*, p. 25

The distinction between the church and the world was not only blurred but to a large degree eliminated.²⁶³ Yoder summarizes the reversal between the pre-Constantine invisible church and its post-Constantine visible counterpart:

[Before Constantine] Christians had known as a fact of experience that the Church existed, but had to believe against appearances that Christ ruled over the world. After Constantine one knew as a fact of experience that Christ was ruling over the world, but had to believe against the evidence that there existed a believing Church.²⁶⁴

The kingdom of God moved from a present, spiritual, social and personal reality to a distant realm of heaven, entrance to which was also mediated by the church. The result was that the church stopped being the church. Instead it became “an administrative branch of the State on the same level with the Army or Post Office.”²⁶⁵ The identification of state and church has been nothing short of disastrous. Both Yoder and Clapp refer to the Reformation as the “Fall of the Church”²⁶⁶ because the power structure of the papacy, Pelagianism, hagiolatry, and sacramentalism were not confronted by the Reformers. They could not bring themselves to acknowledge that the church was apostate and that Europe was again a mission field.

²⁶³ Augustine thought that the true church might actually consist of as little as 5 percent of those who appeared part of it.

²⁶⁴ John Howard Yoder, “Otherness,” p. 289 as cited in Rodney Clapp, *A Peculiar People*, pp. 27 – 28

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

²⁶⁶ Ibid, p. 27

The entire concept of mission changed accordingly. In Pliny's famous letters to the Roman Emperor Trajan (112 AD) he describes the gospel's spread across the provinces of Asia Minor, writing that Christianity had taken such a firm hold of the province of Bithynia that even remote districts were affected: pagan festivals were almost entirely neglected; sacrifices rare.²⁶⁷ Virtually nothing is known of specific missionaries or missionary endeavors: the history of the early church in the first three centuries is buried in oblivion. This situation changed by the seventh century: events and specific individuals are well-chronicled through patristic theological and apologetic writings.²⁶⁸ The disparity is more extensive than comparisons of written history, however. The Latin Medieval church understood mission not as a response to the grace of God and His love for mankind but as an avenue to power and influence. The church had an *obligation* to convert heathens. If this meant violent or coercive evangelism, so be it.

Once Christianity was made the official religion of the empire, evangelism became as much a mission of the state as it did of the church. What benefited one surely benefited the other. Was there in fact any difference between empire and kingdom? Had God not permanently fixed human society, including social classes and nations? A social hierarchy went from God to the church then to "divinely authenticated" kings, nobles and on to the people; from these to people

²⁶⁷ A more complete translation of the text of this letter can be found at http://www.tyrannus.com/pliny_let.html

²⁶⁸ Notable early patristic writers include Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Athanasius, Augustine.

of other nations; and lastly to plants, animals and other things. European culture was idolatrously proclaimed as an integral part of the gospel. Non-Europeans were “savages:” implicitly portrayed as the kind of people “we” are not.

The adjective “non-European” (in the sense of “nonwestern”) underlines the distancing of “them” from “us” already contained in the noun “savages”: we are moral and civilized, they are the wicked barbarians. Rightful moral outrage has mutated into self-deceiving moral smugness.²⁶⁹

Christendom shifted the perspective of Christianity from the margins to the centre. Prior to Constantine, Christianity was a *religio illicita*, an illegal superstition often resulting in the persecution of its followers. We can view some of the profound changes involved in terms of the following thirteen broad categories in the chart on the following page.

²⁶⁹ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, (Nashville; Abingdon Press, 1996), p. 58

	Pre-Christendom	Christendom
FOCUS	The Kingdom of God	The political triumph of the Church
VANTAGE POINT	The margins; seen as deviant	The centre; mainstream
ATTRACTION	Community; spiritual power	Access to prestige, power, and participation in society
POWER	Spiritual power/human vulnerability	Human, institutional power
OBEDIENCE	Voluntary	Compulsory
INCULTURATION	Pilgrim people; resident aliens; indigenizing principles in tension	Residents; indigenizing principle predominates
JESUS	Victor; Lord; Healer; Example; Teacher of all who follow Him	<i>Pantokrator (Παντοκράτωρ)</i> Exalted; Omnipotent One; Teacher of “perfect” Christians
SOCIAL STRUCTURE	Inclusive: women and men; poor and wealthy; educated and non-educated; multigenerational	Hierarchy: apex of society, the aristocracy; or educated males
SETTING	Informal; <i>domus ecclesiae</i> : domestic or home setting	Grand public assemblies; ornately decorated basilicas
WORSHIP	Spontaneous; unpolished; aim to worship God and equip Christians	Liturgy; imposing buildings; aim to impress the masses
MISSIONS	Missions as central to the identity of the church	Missions as maintenance of the church’s power and influence; prescriptive
CLERGY	Every member a minister; leaders commissioned by local churches/apostolic leader	Professional clergy separated from laity; hierarchical ecclesiastical system analogous to the state hierarchy and buttressed by state support ²⁷⁰
MEMBERSHIP	By confession of faith in Jesus Christ	By birth (unless Jewish); infant baptism as the symbol of obligatory incorporation into Christian society

Table 1 - Pre-Christendom / Christendom

²⁷⁰ Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, (Grand Rapids; Brazos Press, 2006), p. 59

4.2 The Protestant Church and Missions

Wilbert Shenk rightly contends that the Protestant church post Reformation until early 1800's was a church largely *without* a mission.²⁷¹ The church's calling to be an agent of reconciliation between the world and its Creator had been hijacked by theologians who conceived their task to be essentially concerned with intellectual questions within Western academia and the ecclesia. Secondly, Calvin's doctrine of predestination and Luther's justification through faith by grace meant that salvation was in God's hands alone. Therefore, God would bring those who He deemed His regardless of missionary endeavour. There was a certain amount of pessimism and a dark view of mankind's future as well as passivity: God surely had revealed Himself to every person in every nation through nature and through the early apostles. Every person's destiny was pre-determined. This had the capacity to virtually paralyze missionary endeavor. With the exception perhaps of the Pietists and Moravians, mission enterprises were under-taken within the framework of colonial expansionism. Issues of soteriology and ecclesiology dominated the Reformation: the nature of the true church was seen in Word and in sacrament, but not in mission to any extent until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

²⁷¹ Wilbert Shenk, *Write the Vision: The Church Renewed*, (Valley Forge; Trinity Press International, 1995), p. 35

4.3 Missions and Empire

In the thirteenth century, the sea-faring countries of Europe embarked on an extension of their influence through programs of exploration and discovery. The word “discovery” was appropriately molded to comply with the conquerors’ beliefs that their “Manifest Destiny” was a mandate to guide history to its appointed end. It was then only a small step to absorb the concept of Manifest Destiny from a nationalistic spirit into a missionary ideology.²⁷²

... Christians of a specific nation would develop the conviction that they had an exceptional role to play in the advancement of the kingdom of God through the missionary enterprise.²⁷³

The Pope, as “God’s emissary on earth,” provided the moral authority for exploration and exploitation. Pagans and infidels could be enslaved; borders redrawn; geographic areas, nations, mountains and rivers renamed according to the conquerors’ fancy.²⁷⁴ The general tendency was to disrespect other nations’ way of life, including their religions. The foundation stone of the colonial world order was power and power was manifested at times by brute force or by threat of such. Behind the overt colonial moves to dominate territory was another less obvious, quieter revolution which involved those dissatisfied with the social and political conditions in Europe. They were ready to move on to create their own

²⁷² David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, pp. 298 – 301

²⁷³ *Ibid*, pp. 298 – 299

²⁷⁴ The European slave trade in Africa began in 1440 A. D. with the first shipment of slaves sent directly from Africa to Portugal, with the blessing of the Roman Catholic church.

freedom in a new land of opportunity.²⁷⁵ Many of these participated in the initial swell of European interest primarily for the purpose of trade,²⁷⁶ although in the course of time imperialist motives began to predominate. During this time missionaries were not a welcome party to the endeavours. Christians such as William Pitt, Edmund Burke, William Wilberforce and William Carey often voiced rigorous criticisms of the policies of trading companies. Eventually in the early years of the nineteenth century, the situation changed to what later became known as “benevolent colonialism:” a term meant to indicate that colonial powers would take some responsibility for the welfare of the people of their colonies. It ricocheted into the missionary arena, allowing them to operate with considerable freedom. At first newly arrived missionaries tried to maintain their independence from colonial authority, however, that resolve gradually began to suffer erosion and with the advent of the high imperial era of the eighteenth hundreds, as David Bosch remarks, if one said the word “mission,” one also said colonialism.²⁷⁷ “The missionary wagon” in the words of Ogbu Kalu, was “firmly hitched to the colonial train.”²⁷⁸

²⁷⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, *Religion, Revolution, and the Future*, (New York; Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1969), p. xiii

²⁷⁶ The Portuguese trade first began in Africa with various West African countries. Their trading voyages were primarily for gold, however, what was almost as good as gold was black pepper. The accounts of Captain Pinteado, as well as the English merchant Captain Windham, relate ships returning with this type of “black gold.” Richard Eden, “Decades of the New World (1555),” http://africanhistory.about.com/od/kingdoms/PreColonial_Africa.htm

See also Ogbu Kalu, “Decolonization of African Churches: The Nigerian Experience, 1955 – 1975,” p. 3, <http://www.oslo2000.uio.no/program/papers/s7/s7-kalu.pdf>. Accessed April, 2007.

²⁷⁷ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 303

Missionaries were convinced of the superiority of the European, Western culture. Concepts such as “Social Darwinism”²⁷⁹ transferred the ideas of natural selection and evolution to the social endurance of nations.²⁸⁰ Enlightenment thinkers such as Hegel and Hobbes, Spencer, and others, understood biological evolutionary change (speciation) as “survival of the fittest” which drove social and cultural evolution. The idea of racial superiority had been set out before Darwin published his theory, by Arthur de Gobineau in an article entitled, “An Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races.” In it Gobineau proposed three main racial divisions of mankind, based not on colour, but on geographic location. The Nordic race of the northern hemisphere was superior because of its evolution in a cold and harsh climate which forced the development of superior skills. North in general was “higher” than South. The social philosophy of eugenics, advocated by Darwin’s cousin Francis Galton, and Darwin’s theory of natural selection complemented this view and resulted in a thorough-going, Euro-centric and patronizing understanding not far removed from Kipling’s “White Man’s Burden.” People from non-European cultures were not seen as “different” but as inferior. One simple illustration of this waltz between

²⁷⁸ Ogbu Kalu, “Decolonization of African Churches”

²⁷⁹ This term was popularized in 1944 by the American historian, Richard Hofstadter, although it first appeared in an article in “Popular Science” written by Oscar Schmidt.

²⁸⁰ Social Darwinism itself does not necessarily engender a view of racial superiority. It also argues for views such as the inevitability of progress, or the potential degeneration of humanity. wikipedia.org

European attitudes and the gospel message is seen in the account of an early Capuchin missionary to the Congo,

On my way, I found numbers of idols which I threw into the fire. The owner of these idols ... seemed very annoyed. To calm him down by humiliating him, I let him know that if he persisted in anger, I should see that he himself is burnt with his idols.²⁸¹

Thus paganism was the absence of “civilization;” and “civilization” meant European culture although as Bosch notes, that view was more indicative of an assumption than a well thought out comparison.

... Christians believed that their culture was superior to those of [other] nations, but they did not isolate cultural uplift as a goal of mission. It was simply assumed that people would live a better life once God’s rule was established over their respective societies. In John Eliot’s words (quoted by Hutchison 1987:27), it was “absolutely necessary to carry on civility with religion.”²⁸²

Unfortunately, “God and maxim guns”²⁸³ went together in the end. By and large missionaries were part of the colonial power structure and saw its control as helpful to their own enterprises. Andrew Walls suggests that the collusion changed the gospel message; or at least changed the perception of it.²⁸⁴

Encrusted onto the good news were concepts of elitism, financial and

²⁸¹ Adrian Hasting, *Church and Mission in Modern Africa*, (New York; Fordham University Press, 1966), p. 59

²⁸² David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 260

²⁸³ A phrase used by Geoffrey Johnston, in *Of God and Maxim Guns: Presbyterianism in Nigeria, 1846 - 1966*, (Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1998)

²⁸⁴ Andrew Walls as referred to by Ogbu Kalu in “Decolonization of African Churches: the Nigerian Experience, 1955 – 1975, www.oslo2000.uio.no/programs/papers/s7/s7-kalu.pdf Accessed April, 2007

organizational dependence, and geographical competition between missionary agencies.

But was the missionary endeavour truly a mask for Western imperialism? Ogbu Kalu in his paper on decolonization examines the relationship.²⁸⁵ He writes that missionary values differed from that of colonial interests although there were similarities seen especially in the reluctance to pass leadership to local people.²⁸⁶ It is a point noted by Moltmann some thirty years earlier when he wrote that the “kingdom of freedom” of God’s reign for all mankind peculiarly reserved the right of lifting one’s head to the white Christian male.²⁸⁷

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, mission was understood not so much as the good news of the rule of God but as a response of obedience to the command in Matthew 18: 18 – 20, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

²⁸⁶ He notes that although education was a primary concern of missionaries, few local people received university education: “For instance, the Presbyterians came to Nigeria in 1846 and the first African graduate minister was Inya Ude who graduated from the University of Toronto in 1963.” in “Decolonization of African Churches,” p. 12

²⁸⁷ Jürgen Moltmann, *Religion, Revolution, and the Future*, p. 73

4.4. A “Paradoxical Emancipation”²⁸⁸

An interesting aspect of missionary associations was their largely egalitarian attitude towards women. R. Pierce Beaver refers to women’s involvement in missions as “the first feminist movement.”²⁸⁹ Women went literally to the ends of the earth and not only as wives but as single women, missionaries in their own right.²⁹⁰ In this paradoxical emancipation missionary societies sanctioned behavior that contravened conventional attitudes of the day which were ideologically restrictive. Protestant femininity by and large was constituted in roles of wife and motherhood.²⁹¹ However, with the demographic imbalance of more women than men in nineteenth century and an evangelical emphasis on self-sacrifice and service to others, the social obstacles which had closeted women in the home relaxed.²⁹² Ruth Tucker places the ratio of women to men in mission fields in the early twentieth century as high as two to one.²⁹³ While

²⁸⁸ Inger Okkenhaug, “Women in Christian Mission: Protestant Encounters from the 19th and 20th Century,” <http://kilden.forskningsradet.no/c18372/artikkel/vis.html?tid=17564> Accessed April, 2007

²⁸⁹ R. Pierce Beaver, *American Protestant Women in World Mission: The History of the First Feminist Movement in North America*, (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1980)

²⁹⁰ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 328

²⁹¹ Ibid.

²⁹² Often women missionaries, if single, were expected to serve without ever getting married. In the event she did marry, “she was required, by a signed pledge, to return her travel and outfit allowance and sometimes her salary.” R. Pierce Beaver, *American Protestant Women In Mission*, (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1980), p. 178

²⁹³ Ruth Tucker and Walter Liefeld, “Wed Only to Their Master,” *Mission Frontiers Bulletin*, August 1999. Accessed April, 2007

women's activities were often subordinate in terms of hierarchy (as men were understood to be leaders of both their households and the church), a substantial number of women were neither passive nor submissive.²⁹⁴

Numerous examples exist of women missionaries who preached, taught, wrote books, and extended the gospel to the fringes of the known world. Even at home, women had opportunity to enter the public domain by serving missionary societies both in office work and as fund raisers, thus freeing them from the confines of home and providing opportunities for learning organizational skills.

4.5 Summary

The close association of the gospel and the self image of its propagators which led to the abuses of colonialism cannot be denied.²⁹⁵ History abounds with demonstrations of the partnership between colonial expansion and missionary endeavors. They were "bed-fellows," or as Ogbu Kalu describes

²⁹⁴ The paradoxical strength of "weakness" is exemplified in Mary Slessor, who argued that she should be allowed to go to Africa alone since a woman would be less of a threat to tribesmen and therefore safer. She arrived two years after David Livingstone died (1875) and took up his work. She was both an explorer and an evangelist. Similar stories are seen in the lives of Sarah Cumming who went to Burma in 1832 and Eleanor Macomber who followed later. Macomber was considered a great evangelist and church organizer. Ida Scadder, a doctor went to India and instituted a college to train Indian women as doctors. Lottie Moon served for decades in China. The list can go on and could I believe, even include my own mother who partly from a desire to participate in missions, went to Peru in 1936 to marry my father, a Free Church of Scotland missionary. She had met him in person only once although they later corresponded for some time. She left Ireland for Peru by ship, traveling through the Panama Canal, on a journey that lasted about a month. Together they spent thirteen years in Peru and helped to form what became the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Peru (IEPP).

²⁹⁵ Kofi Asare Opoku, "The Baobab Tree of Truth: Reflections on Religious Pluralism in Africa," <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/interreligious/cd34-08.html> Accessed June 2007

them: “intimate enemies.”²⁹⁶ Even after decolonization, the “winds of change” advocated by Harold MacMillan in the 1950’s did not blow evenly across the church in Africa.

... missions did not pack up and leave as the new flags were unfurled and did not hand over all the church posts to black people merely because the colonial administrators had left. Decolonization in the churches took a much longer time as deliberate measures designed to maintain influence even when indigenous people were at the helms of administration.²⁹⁷

At the same time, Kwame Bediako emphasizes that Christian missionary movements are not easily divided into positive and negative components:

... the negative side of missionary history in Africa must not be exaggerated, for several reasons. First, the vitality of our Christian communities bears witness to the fact that the Gospel really was communicated, however inadequate we may now consider that communication to have been. There is always more to the ‘hearing’ of the Word of God than can be contained in the actual preaching of it by the human agents ... The Holy Spirit is also present to interpret the Word of God directly to the hearers. The mercy and providence of God override human shortcomings.²⁹⁸

Even so, the overriding commitment to European culture served to embed racism in the emerging church. The coziness with their own culture blinded missionaries to the evils present in what they were propagating and wittingly or unwittingly drew a colour line so incisively that, to echo Miroslav Volf, it has

²⁹⁶ Ogbu Kalu, “Decolonization of African Churches”

²⁹⁷ Ibid.

²⁹⁸ Kwame Bediako, *Jesus In Africa* p. 20

resulted in many black Africans feeling closer to black Muslims than they do to their fellow Christians.²⁹⁹

5. The African Worldview

There is some disagreement regarding the generalization of a common African culture given the continent's great diversity encompassing of hundreds of different ethnic groups and languages.³⁰⁰ However, as African poet and oral arts historian, Kofi Awoonor observes, there are ways to define cultural ethnicity and identity other than language: a belief in common origin; the influence of neighbouring large ethnic groups and the arbitrary boundaries drawn by colonialist powers.³⁰¹ Kwame Gyekye³⁰² and John Mbiti³⁰³ also believe it is possible to cautiously and respectfully generalize: Africa is a unity, albeit as Laurenti Magesa contends, a unity in diversity.³⁰⁴ Ogbu Kalu as well argues that the holistic view of the indigenous peoples of Africa is animated by a sense of

²⁹⁹ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, p. 36

³⁰⁰ Spoken languages indigenous to Africa are variously estimated to number between 700 and 3,000. The most widely spoken is Swahili (an Arab-influenced Bantu language) and Hausa, each with about 20 million people speaking them. <http://www.africanhistory.com>

³⁰¹ Kofi Awoonor, <http://www.uflib.ufl.edu/cm/africana/awoonor.htm> Accessed May, 2007

³⁰² Kwame Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience*, (U.S.A.; Oxford University Press, 1997)

³⁰³ John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd Ed., (Oxford; Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1969)

³⁰⁴ Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*, p. 16

reverence for the land and a desire to live in harmony, even if only from necessity. He uses words as brush strokes to paint the backdrop of African culture as follows:

... the world is still enchanted; religion colludes with magic to weave an organic perception of reality; and spiritual forces combine with humans ... gods operate in the sky, land, water and ancestral world. They destroy the boundaries between the profane and sacred; sacralize reality and give religious value to everyday activities. Religion, culture and ethnicity become the organizing frameworks of human lives and the modern public space is constantly "villigized" through the use of cultic elements acquired from the primal sector of the culture.³⁰⁵

A Western worldview divides the cosmos into two water-tight entities:

sacred and secular but the African worldview offers a connectedness as elements of creation are woven together in a tapestry of community, nature, spirits, ancestors and God the Creator. There is no dualism: the visible physical and invisible spiritual realms form an interlocking unity. Mystical power permeates the universe. In this respect Africans are similar to the ancient Hebrews and Celtic peoples. In contrast to the European understanding that nature is there to be dominated and exploited, Africa lives not merely off nature but with it as an ally.

African ontology considers God, spirits, humans, animals, plants and inanimate creation to be one. To break up this unity is to destroy one or more of these modes of existence, and to destroy one is in effect to destroy them all.³⁰⁶

³⁰⁵ Ogbu Kalu, "Faith and Politics in Africa: Emergent Political Theology of Engagement in Nigeria," paper presented at the Paul B. Henry Lecture, 2003 at the Paul Henry Institute, Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan. <http://www.calvin.edu/henry/archives/lectures/kalu.pdf> Accessed June, 2007

³⁰⁶ Cornel Du Toit, "African Hermeneutics," *Initiation Into Theology*, p. 392

This fundamental unity preserves a hierarchy within the universe. Religion is ontological rather than something one belongs to and is not approached epistemologically; therefore, proselytizing and conversion are irrelevant. As Mbiti says, “Africa has no atheists.”³⁰⁷

In 1961 Janheinz Jahn proposed an overview of the Sub-Saharan worldview composed of a network of four interacting forces.³⁰⁸

1. *Muntu* - thinking beings with command over *nomos* (the magic word), including men living or dead, spirits and gods, and the Creator-God.
2. *Kintu* - visible forces, such as animals or plants, which have no power of their own but act in accordance with *Muntu*. Hesselgrave notes that this explains the importance of amulets, charms and talismans.
3. *Hantu* - localized forces; space and time as a unity.
4. *Kuntu* - functional forces governing all social and environmental behavior such as sorcery, procreation, farming.³⁰⁹

Eight years after Jahn’s overview, John Mbiti wrote his seminal book *African Religions and Philosophy* in which he systematically outlined African life from a distinctly African point of view. It was the first work to significantly challenge

³⁰⁷ John Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy*, p. 29

³⁰⁸ Janheinz Jahn, Marjorie Grene, *Muntu: African Culture and the Western World*, (New York; Grove Press, 1961), pp. 104 – 151; 219 – 239

³⁰⁹ David. J. Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally*, p. 224

Western European assumptions that African religions were “demonic and anti-Christian.”³¹⁰ Besides arguing that “in Africa, God is not dead,” Mbiti disagreed with Jahn’s emphasis on force as a key concept of the African worldview but agreed that religion is understood ontologically. It cannot be separated from daily life but permeates all of life whether personal, social, political, or economic. Mbiti divides African ontology into five anthropocentric categories.

1. God – the Creator and Sustainer of humanity.
2. Spirits – nonhuman beings and the spirits of those who have died, all of which are involved in the life and destiny of humanity.
3. Man – those living and those not yet born.
4. Animals and plants – the remainder of biological life.
5. Phenomena and objects without biological life but which are part of the human environment.³¹¹

5.1 Community

The basic philosophy of life in traditional society is found in a sense of community, or *ubuntu*: the sense of belonging, being part of each other. The essence of African ontology is summarized in the words of African theologian and philosopher John Mbiti, “... whatever happens to the whole group happens

³¹⁰ John Mbiti, “The Encounter of Christian Faith and African Religion,” *Christian Century* (August 27 – September 3), pp. 817 – 820. <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1746> Accessed 2003

³¹¹ John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, pp. 15 - 16

to the individual. The individual can only say I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am.”³¹² This saying typifies a thinking expression that is cyclic, encompassing lateral thinking. Expression is done in “man-in-existence:” that is, a life situation. Knowledge is therefore anthropocentric.

The Khoisan people of the Kalahari are often held up as the quintessential egalitarian community. Their egalitarian social structure was highlighted in the movie “The Gods Must Be Crazy,”³¹³ which illustrates what happens when the hero, Ki, discovers a Coke bottle which had been dropped from an airplane. Ki brings the bottle back to the group. However, there is just one bottle and it is indivisible. This causes such social tension that Ki discards the bottle in order to restore social harmony.

Conversion theology with its focus on the individual is an inadequate model for salvation in an African context of community. Secondly, and more importantly, the gospel message encompasses more than conversion. It presents God as One who sent His Son not only to bring salvation from sin³¹⁴ but also to destroy the works of Satan.³¹⁵

³¹² Ibid, p. 108 – 109

³¹³ The Gods Must Be Crazy, written and directed by Jamie Uys, was released in 1980.

³¹⁴ Luke 19: 10

³¹⁵ 1 John 3: 8

5.2 Sin

The African worldview interprets mankind's loss of contact and benefit between heaven and earth not as an ethical "fall," but as an ontological separation which continues to the present time. Man's fall did not defile or make him sinful. The essence of sin is an anti-social act and is present when community is disturbed. An injury or offense to one is an injury or offense to all. Reconciliation involves the corporate community and forgiveness is understood as restoration. To some extent this view is similar to the view of sin in ancient Israel where sin separated covenant relationship within the community, but to stop there distorts Israel's understanding that sin is more than antisocial. It is primarily transgression against a holy God.

In Africa both sin and reconciliation are understood to affect not only the physical world but also the spiritual world and the harmony between the two. Forgiveness and restoration take precedence over guilt and punishment. While this has definite positive aspects as it benefits general peace and harmony in the community, it compromises personal responsibility and the need for restoration. Sin entails more than a disruption of community. It entails a disruption of our cognitive abilities and diminishes our reasoning capacity. Furthermore, the African worldview understands sin as conditional, dependent on the persons involved and their context: where and when the offense occurred can redefine the offense as "wrongdoing" rather than as disobedience or a violation of God's

laws. For example, Kalu notes that it is an ambiguous system. In the black African world, if one steals from the “white man’s world,” the thief is beyond the purview of traditional sanctions.³¹⁶ The concept expands to include the relationship between faith and politics in contemporary Africa:

A politician who robbed the state still dances to the big drum in the village as a warrior who had forayed out into the white man’s world and returned with a piece of the national cake for his people.³¹⁷

5.3 Gender Roles

In both public and private life, roles and images are socially and culturally defined. This has had the effect of paralyzing members of society into little frozen copies of past generations which is, as Musimbi Kanyoro contends, particularly true of women. Although moderated somewhat by the move of an emerging middle class to urban life, the hold of the past remains strong. The fear of breaking cultural taboos silences individuals into a state of numbness where many act without questioning what is being done.

Writing on cultural practices that rob women of their voice and dignity, Kanyoro calls African culture a “double-edged sword:” in some instances the creed for community and identity; in others, the main justification for oppression and injustice. This “cultural schizophrenia” is poignantly illustrated in two articles in the July 8, 2007, edition of the Durban newspaper, *The Mercury*. In

³¹⁶ Ogbu Kalu, “Faith and Politics in Africa”

³¹⁷ Ibid.

large bold type, the bottom half of page 6 informs, “Smacking Kids to be Outlawed: Proposed addition to the Children’s Act will ban corporal punishment even at home,” and goes on to state, “to ensure that the Act is successfully enforced, an army of social workers is required.”³¹⁸ Apparently the Treasury has set aside 6 billion Rand to implement this addition to the Act. However, only a few pages farther on *in the same newspaper*, under the heading, “Knowing is One Thing, Helping is Another,” Mercury reporter, Neliswa Bidla reports the horrifying story of a ten year old girl who suffered repeated rapes by her uncle.

When the child’s mother found out what had happened, she dragged the child with her to the uncle to confirm the story. When it was confirmed, she wanted the uncle to pay compensation. The rapist offered R6,000 – to be paid in December. ...Later the rapist was heard saying: If I pay the damages, it means that I will have a wife.” The people he was with laughed.³¹⁹

The article continues, reporting that the victim’s older sister wanted justice to be done and the rapist was arrested. However, the following day, the mother of the victim went to the police station to try to drop the rape charges. Why? “That man is my sister’s husband and that makes him my husband too. Children make mistakes.”³²⁰ Justice is gagged by culture.

³¹⁸ The Mercury, 8th July, 2007

³¹⁹ Ibid.

³²⁰ Ibid.

Incidents such as this one are repeated over and over again as South Africa's statistics on women and child abuse continue to soar. It makes Kanyoro's statement even more relevant when she says,

To make the claim that "it is our culture" often means that nobody has a right to question it. ... We ask ourselves whether some of our discomfort with the church is precisely a disappointment with Christianity that has not protected us from the demands of culture! We lament the increase of HIV/AIDS, while at the same time we helplessly note the refusal of our communities to change certain cultural attitudes to sexuality. Men continue to dominate women in decisions including those affecting women's bodies. Polygamous behavior still dominates our communities. Men of all ages still sexually exploit women of all ages. ... [we must] advocate for change of some of our cultural practices, which diminish women and girls. ... Our theology therefore proclaims on the mountains and on the housetops that "male and female are both created in God's image" and it is not the will of God that women and girls in Africa should be imprisoned in cultural practices which diminish their humanity. The loud rejection is told in first-hand personal stories, which object to child marriages, female genital mutilation, widowhood rites, polygamy, promiscuity, and endless other negative practices which pass for culture in Africa.³²¹

In pre-independence years, African politicians and theologians sought to restore African dignity through inculturation: a strategy which sought to disrobe the gospel of its Western clothing and re-establish cultural identity. Unfortunately, the dominant participants were all male. They failed to confront issues that imprison women in cultural and traditional practices which compromise women's dignity and full liberation. It was not until 1980 that a female voice was added to the conversation: that of Mercy Amba Oduyoye. Her now historic

³²¹ Musimbi Kanyoro, "Engendered Cultural Hermeneutics: African Women's Contribution to Theology," Commencement Address, 6/5/1999, Accessed April, 2004. No longer available Online.

statement during the Lambeth Conference of Anglican Bishops in 1988 summarizes the importance of African feminist theology not only to the church in Africa but to the wider Body of Christ. During that Conference Oduyoye had the courage to tell the Anglican bishops that women had no need nor use for their soliloquies and monologues on subjects such as polygamy, culture, and the authority of the church. That until women's views were listened to and their participation allowed and ensured, truth would remain hidden and the call to live the values of the Reign of God unheeded.³²² The statement has become a benchmark for women theologians in Africa. However, it has since been modified and in the process lost the fundamental truth that cultural beliefs and practices must be tested and either affirmed for their life-giving potential or condemned for injustice using the filter of the *kingdom of God*. Oduyoye and Kanyoro have substituted "gender lenses" for "kingdom lenses" and lost the key. By asking what the consequences of women's perspectives in theology are for the church in Africa, they relegate the position of women and men to "gender wars," instead of transcending these issues in light of the gospel of the Kingdom and its message of liberation and inclusion.

It is the church's compliance with culture that militates against women's full participation, as Rose Uchem contends:

... the Church is not counter-cultural especially with respect to women. In the peculiar cultural milieu of Africans ... this complicity on the part of

³²²Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro, Eds., *The Will To Arise: Women, Tradition, and the Church in Africa* (New York; Orbis Books, 1992), p. 1

the Church amounts to a counter-witness to the liberating Good News of Jesus Christ.³²³

Uchem calls for a “second evangelization” of both the Church and culture.³²⁴

As long as women are barred from functioning according to their gifting, what people see and hear is that women are equal to men *in theory* but not in reality. To say one thing and do another is worse than saying nothing. The perception is that grace is mediated by men and that maleness is associated with divinity. As long as the “priesthood of all believers”³²⁵ is in practice the priesthood of *some men*, the church presents a distorted picture of the kingdom of God to the world. Everything in the kingdom of God rests upon voluntary submission to gifting and authority. In that order. From the recognition of God’s gifting flows the authority the gift commands. Biblical authority, therefore, is *derived authority* and not intrinsic. It flows from the Spirit of God through a believer over the Body of Christ and to the world.³²⁶ We are all, without merit on our part, recipients of God’s grace. All are vessels through which His grace is poured out for the world. Neither gifting nor authority has anything to do with testosterone levels.

³²³ Rose Uchem, “Overcoming Women’s Subordination in the Igbo African Culture and in the Catholic Church: Envisioning an Inclusive Theology with Reference to Women,” Doctoral Dissertation, p. 222 www.Dissertation.com/library/1121334a.htm. Purchased as an e-book from Amazon.com, March 4, 2007

³²⁴ Ibid.

³²⁵ Exodus 19:6; 1 Peter 2:9

³²⁶ Stanley Grenz and Denise Kjesbo, *Women In the Church: A Biblical Theology of Women in Ministry*, (Downers Grove; InterVarsity Press, 1995), p. 228

For black African men, who have so often experienced blanket discrimination based on “otherness” (colour), their hard-headed, callous attitude towards women is astounding. Their parallel experiences of exclusion and subordination should mean they have a *greater* understanding of what is at stake for those now proscribed.

The remedy lies with a critical biblical hermeneutic that prophetically catches the wind of the Spirit in the redemptive move of God which continues beyond the first century New Testament. Women’s subordination in first-century Greco-Roman culture is not an indicator of divine order. The liberating attitudes and teachings of Jesus not only moved beyond the social order of His day, they contravened it. Similarly, we must apply the principles of inculturation with a sense of social justice. Rose Uchem argues the point in her PhD thesis, “Overcoming Women’s Subordination.” As she observes, we have now accepted the earth is round not flat and agree in retrospect that slavery was and is wrong. Now we must see the connection between ethnic subordination and women’s subordination. There is opportunity for the church in Africa to lead the way in finding the courage and humility to admit that it has been wrong: at Pentecost God truly poured His Spirit on all mankind.³²⁷

³²⁷ Acts 2: 17 - 18; Joel 2: 28 – 29

5.4 Time

The key to understanding the worldview of sub-Saharan Africa is *time*.³²⁸

Time is composed of the past, present and what is inevitably or immediately to occur: "... according to traditional concepts, time is a two-dimensional phenomenon, with a long *past*, a *present* and virtually *no future*."³²⁹ This means time is seen in retrospect. Mbiti illustrates the elasticity of the present tense by using two Swahili words, *sasa*, which covers an immediate now period and *zamani*, which generally refers to events in the past.³³⁰

<i>Sasa</i>	1. I will come	Ningoka	Anywhere from two to six months from now
	2. I will come	Ninuka	Within the next short while.
	3. I will come	Ningoka	Soon, after a certain event.
<i>Zamani</i>	4. I came	Nindoka	Immediate past - in the last hour or two.
	5. I came	Ninjukire	Today sometime.
	6. I came	Nidokire	Recent past.
	7. I came	Nindookire tene	At some point in the past.

Table 2 - The African Concept of Time

³²⁸ Time is important in all cultures although attitudes towards it differ. For example, whereas in Western cultures lateness may be excused if it is within five minutes, builds tension if it is fifteen and risks hostility if half an hour or more; in African time lateness of fifteen minutes or more is often ignored completely, and only brings tension after an hour or so. Westerners consider time as money but African social relations are more important. Problems are resolved through exhaustive considerations and judgments and self image protected at all costs.

³²⁹ John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, p. 16. Italics in the original.

³³⁰ Ibid, p. 18

The *overlap* as seen in the verb “to come” in Gikuyu of Kenya, helps to illustrate how the presence of a person can continue in life although they have slipped below the horizon into death. Because of the cyclical (or spiral) nature of time, death does not bring separation: the events of life are eternally recurrent. Death brings only transition from mortality to immortality, not departure.

The crucial point is that the linear Western concept of time as past, present and future is foreign to African thinking. There is a *potential* future, or potential time for events which are certain to occur but once these have taken place they are either in the present or in the past. *Actual time* is therefore what is present plus what is past. Time itself “... moves ‘backward’ rather than ‘forward’; and people set their minds not on future things, but chiefly in what has taken place.”³³¹ The focus is both immediate needs: food, drink, shelter; and more complex needs such as personal significance, respect or political freedom. Mbiti explains:

People constantly look towards the *Zamani*, for *Zamani* had foundations on which the *Sasa* rests and by which it is explainable or should be understood. *Zamani* is not extinct, but a period full of activities and happenings. It is by looking towards the *Zamani* that people give or find an explanation about the creation of the world, the coming of death, the evolution of their language and customs, the emergence of their wisdom, and so on. The ‘golden age’ lies in the *Zamani* and not in the otherwise very short or non-existent future.³³²

³³¹ Ibid, p. 17

³³² Ibid, p. 23

As an individual lives and one day dies, they move on to join their ancestors of the past, rather than the Western view of moving forward to a future life or existence somewhere else. What Mbiti does not mention, although Kwame Bediako picks it up, is that *Zamani* is also the realm of the spirits of the dead.³³³

Theology must utilize the African concept of time to effect a transfer of “African ontology” to “Christian ontology” which is a concept not entirely new to either Mbiti or Bediako. On coming to Christ a person experiences a present in which “all things have become new;”³³⁴ we are free from the power of sin; free from the kingdom of Darkness and transferred to the kingdom of Light. We have the “full rights of sons;” and because we are sons of God we call out, “*Abba, Father.*”³³⁵ Bediako notes in his article, “Scripture as the Interpreter of Culture and Tradition,” that Gentiles in the New Testament referred to Old Testament Scripture and there found “our forefathers” (1 Cor 10:1).³³⁶

Israel’s history had become their ‘adoptive’ history.” All believers are grafted into the olive tree of God’s people (Rom. 11:7 – 20) and become children of Abraham and Sarah (Gal. 3:26 – 29): a new lineage with new ancestors and a new heritage. We are a new people, no longer based on ethnic identity but on our common Father. Our family connections are those based on faith in Christ; our ancestors now Abraham, Sarah, Moses,

³³³ Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa*, (U.K.; Regnum, 1999), p. 326.

Interestingly, Bediako capitalizes the word “spirits” when he speaks of the spirits of the dead.

³³⁴ 2 Corinthians 5:17

³³⁵ Galatians 4:5; Galatians 4:7

³³⁶ Kwame Bediako, “Scripture as the Hermeneutic of Culture and Tradition,” *Journal of African Christian Thought*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (June 2001), pp. 2 – 11

Elijah, and the woman of Samaria. Their triumphs and failures help us understand our own journey of faith (Rom. 11:18).³³⁷

As the diagram below illustrates, a linear concept of time is not necessary in order to perceive the reality of the kingdom of God or to experience its liberating power in daily life. The essential factor is that one moves toward Christ.

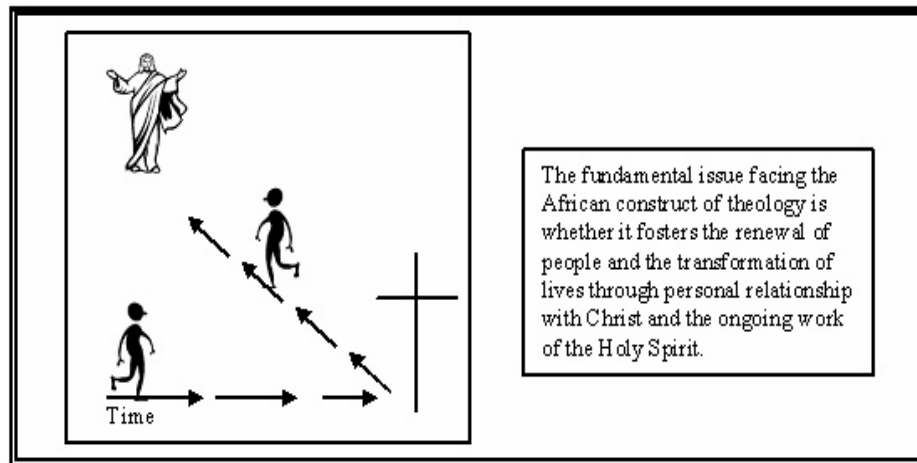


Figure 1 - A Non-Linear Concept of Time

All Christians are part of a new family of God and are being “conformed to the likeness of His Son.”³³⁸ In this way, the kingdom of God modifies the culture of those who follow Christ. And in this way, ontology, epistemology, values and ethics all become part of a new life in Christ.

³³⁷ Ibid.

³³⁸ Romans 8: 29

5.5 African Traditional Religion³³⁹

There are countless myths of mankind's origins in African traditional religion that include a fundamental belief in the existence of a high Creator God or Goddess who is the source of all power and life and known by a variety of local names such as *Mungu*, *Mulungu*, *Olodumare*, *Ruwa*, *Murungu*, *Modimo*, *Unkulunkulu*, etc.³⁴⁰ African stories of creation generally do not affirm that mankind was made in the "image of God," nor do they assign dominion over the earth to man. Humans are rather in the vulnerable position of unpredictable forces and gods: forces that are sometimes malevolent; sometimes benevolent.

The world of African religion is awash in a community of spiritual and physical beings, some of which are good, some bad. Life is a constant struggle between these powers that interact between the divine world and the human and shape events on earth.

If wrong-doing causes a dangerous separation of the various elements of the equilibrium in the universe, sacrifices and offerings aim to reestablish unity and restore balance.³⁴¹

³³⁹ It is worth noting that using the word "traditional" in African Traditional Religion, does not refer only to something in the past. It rather is indicative of a fundamental, historical indigenous value system which under girds a pattern. There are no historical human founders, no written records or creeds. African traditional religion is not static. Just as it embraces the ebb and flow of the seasons and life, it also incorporates the changes brought by human invention. For example, Sango the Yoruba god of lightning is also credited with the responsibility for modern electricity.

³⁴⁰ Virtually all of Africa is monotheistic. John Mbiti wrote of 300 traditional African religions, "In all these societies, without a single exception, people have a notion of God as the Supreme Being," *African Religions and Philosophy*.

³⁴¹ Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*, (Maryknoll; Orbis Books, 1997), p. 203

All of life is controlled by spiritual beings and forces of varying strength and authority. It is a “warfare worldview,” as the following diagram illustrates.

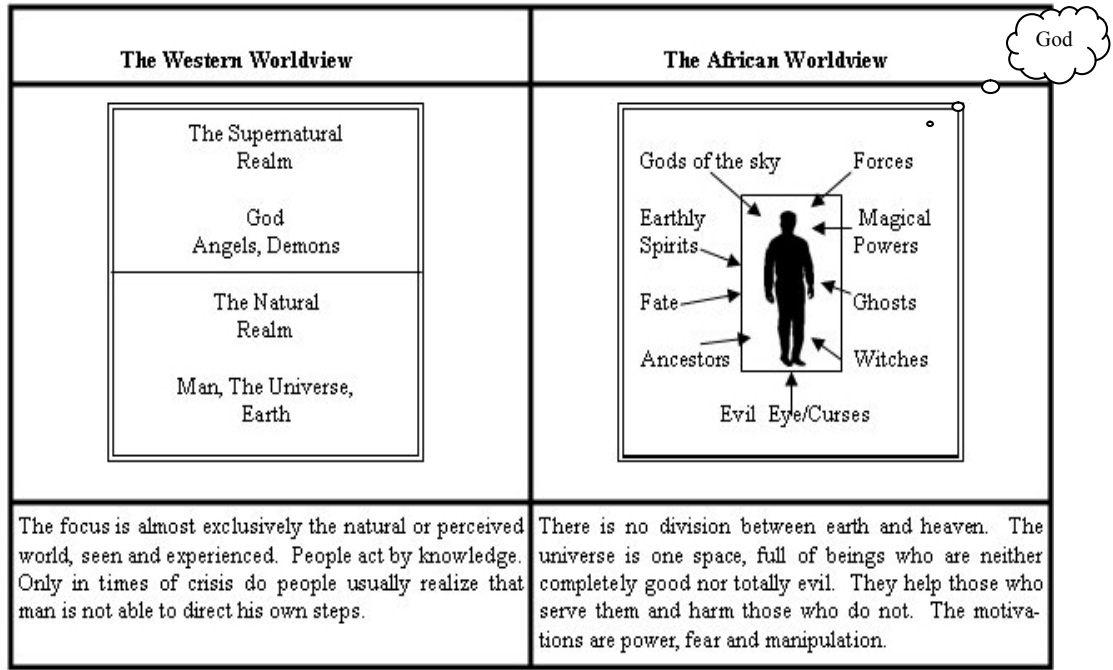


Figure 2 - The Western Worldview / The African Worldview

There is uncertainty to the purpose of life, or indeed if it has purpose at all. John Mbiti maintains that the most serious *cul de sac* in African religion is this absence of a solution to the dilemma of uncertainty.³⁴² God is generally considered unknowable, invisible and furthermore, has no interest in being made known to anyone.³⁴³

A person’s name in African societies generally has a meaning descriptive of his personality and being. In the case of God, people might know some of His activities and manifestation, but of His essential nature they know

³⁴² John Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy*, p. 35

³⁴³ Bolaji Idowu rejected the idea of the creator being distant in *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, (London; Longmans, Green and Co., 1962), p. 204. He dropped out of scholarly writing in the late 1970’s.

nothing. It is a paradox that they 'know' Him, and yet they do not 'know' Him; He is not a Stranger to them, and yet they are estranged from Him; He knows them, but they do not know Him.³⁴⁴

African indigenous beliefs and practices have been referred to as *animism*,³⁴⁵ a term John Mbiti, Bolaji Idowu, Kwame Bediako and others strongly condemn as prejudicial and derogatory not so much because it is erroneous but because they believe it relegates African religion to an inferior position relative to Christianity and Islam. Other terms such as polytheism, fetishism, and primitive religion further this concept of "primitive religious evolution." The term largely mirrored the political answer to cultural pluralism: colonialism. The religious or intellectual answer: evolutionism.³⁴⁶ The theory posited that pre-logical primitive belief was soon to be replaced by one of the "higher" formal religions.

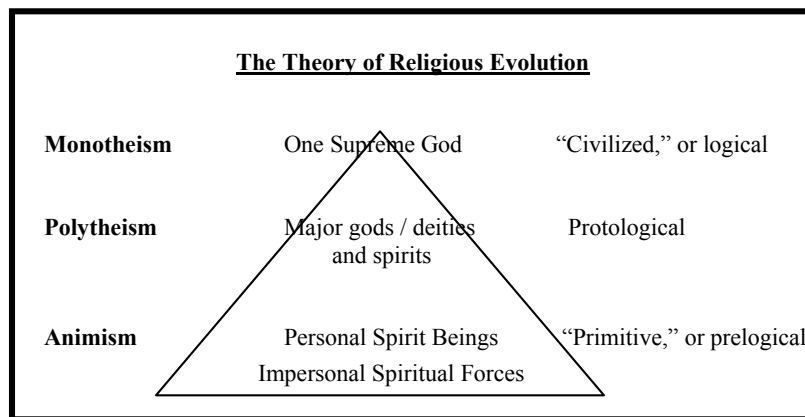


Figure 3

³⁴⁴ John Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy*, p. 35

³⁴⁵ *Animism* is defined as "...the belief that personal spiritual beings and impersonal spiritual forces have power over human affairs and that humans, consequently, must discover what beings and forces are impacting them in order to determine future action and, frequently, to manipulate their power." <http://www.missiology.org/animism/Foundations/definition.htm>

³⁴⁶ The theory of religious evolution was developed by E. B. Tylor in his monumental work, *The Origins of Culture*, first published in 1870. British anthropologist E. Evans-Pritchard argued against Tylor's theory in his *Theories of Primitive Religion*, (U.S.A.; Oxford University Press, 1962).

In place of *animism*, the term preferred among anthropologists and African theologians of today is “primal religion,” a phrase used by Harold Turner to circumvent the offensive evolutionary connotation of animism.³⁴⁷ Primal religions are defined as those which occur prior to the universal religions. However, this idea is also offensive to many African theologians who would like African traditional religion to be recognized as one of the world religions.³⁴⁸ It is worth asking why Christian theologians hold such a proposal to be important since none of the ten world religions other Christianity (defined as faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior) are righteous in God’s eyes.³⁴⁹ Can the quest for affirmation as a “world religion” at least to some degree be explained sociologically? Peter Beyerhaus the former Director of the Institute for Missions and Ecumenical Theology, University of Tübingen, believes it could be a “reaction to conquest.”³⁵⁰ Lesslie Newbigin agrees, pointing out that discussion on the issue is difficult because of what he terms “emotional hangovers” from

³⁴⁷ Harold Turner, “Religious Movements in Primal (or Tribal) Societies,” *Mission Focus*, (Elkhart; Mennonite board of Missions 9(3), September 45 – 55 as cited in Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of Non-Western Religion (Studies in World Christianity)*, (New York; Orbis Books, 1996), pp. 93 – 96

³⁴⁸ For example, Laurenti Magesa, Waliggo, Lugira, and John Mbiti among others.

³⁴⁹ The ten world religions are Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Judaism, Bahai Faith, Confucianism, Jainism, and Shintoism, according to wikipedia.org.

³⁵⁰ Peter Beyerhaus, “The Christian Encounter with Afro-Messianic Movements,” *Christopaganism or Indigenous Christianity*, Tetsunao Yamamori & Charles Taber, Eds., (Pasadena; William Carey Library, 1975), p. 78

the colonial period. As Beyerhaus remarks, “sometimes it seems that [anything] is acceptable, however bizarre, as long as it is clearly not European.”³⁵¹

Regardless of whether or not African traditional religion is accurately described as *animistic* or as a primal or a world religion, the essence of African traditional religion is ungodly power: power to control; to destroy; and even to kill as Ebenezer Boafo confirms:

... the essence of all African traditional religions is the overlaying of our world by another world of gods, spirits of the returning dead and rites in a world where everything is alive. Moreover, priests ... are believed to be able to control spirits and travel in a trance to the spirit world or to intercede with the gods.³⁵²

Fear and attempts to discover how to appease, coerce, or manipulate these powers dominate every aspect of daily living. Rituals and magical-religious rites attempt to manage the spirit world. When confronted with unexpected calamity, the traditional religionist seeks to find out who caused the affliction: what power; which ancestor; what curse or evil eye. An individual does not seek a personal relationship with spiritual powers but rather seeks what is needed to succeed in business, health or security, either to avoid calamity or to prosper (what to invest in the stock market, for example). In other words, answers to immediate problems.

The secret use of spiritual power by an individual is almost always malevolent – meant to cause suffering. When used publicly by recognized

³⁵¹ Ibid.

³⁵² Ebenezer Boafo, “Communicating the Message about Jesus to African Traditional Religionists,” <http://www.ctsfw.edu/library/files/pb/804> Accessed 2007

leaders of a society, spiritual power is often benevolent, discovering who has brought evil upon the society. Whether spiritual power is used negatively or positively, its existence is never questioned.³⁵³

Communication with the spirit world is by divination or consultation with mediums that have access to the spirit realm.³⁵⁴ This raises the question of whether African religions should be considered polytheistic after all. In response Bolaji Idowu waltzes around the issue, using the terms “modified monotheism,”³⁵⁵ and “diffused monotheism.”³⁵⁶ John Mbiti, using a similar dance technique, characterizes African tribal religion as “essentially monotheistic.”³⁵⁷ Osadolor Imasogie adds a little side-step calling it “bureaucratic monotheism.”³⁵⁸ The mediatorial role of ancestors, myriads of supernatural beings, sorcery, witchcraft, and divination are all “wallflowers,” left on the sidelines of these definitions; as are other spirits of sky and earth and mystical forces such as magic and curses. In its classical sense, polytheism refers to a pantheon of gods none of whom are greater than others. African theologians

³⁵³ “Definition of Animism,” <http://missiology.org/animism/Foundations/definition.htm>

³⁵⁴ Places, including mountains, caves, waterfalls, trees, stones and certain animals, particular pots, masks, drums and colours are regarded as sacred. The religious connotation of colours can be seen for example in the Zulu practice of sacrificing a dark-skinned beast when seeking rain. or as altars, and entities such as the earth and the sun are considered deities in traditional religions. John Mbiti, “General Manifestations of African Religiosity,” <http://afrikaworld.net/afrel/mbiti.htm> Accessed February, 2007

³⁵⁵ Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion – A Definition*, (SCM Press, 1973), as cited in Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity*, p. 286

³⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 136

³⁵⁷ John Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, (Oxford; Heinemann, 1991)

³⁵⁸ Osadolor Imasogie, “African Traditional Religion,” (Nigeria; University Press, 1986), as cited in Ian Ritchie, “Christianity and Culture,” <http://www3.sympatico.ca/ian.ritchie/ATSC.Chapter1.htm> Accessed 2005

negotiate the dance floor by pointing out that African religion holds the sense of monotheism in that although God is not the only deity, he or she is primary and unique by virtue of having created all the others. It is an explanation that is oddly out of step with Christianity and more fitted to henotheism: the worship of one god without denying the existence of other gods.³⁵⁹

5.5.1 The Role of Ancestors

Ancestors, the “living dead,” play a far more pivotal role in daily life than the Creator God. Considered closer to him because they are dead, ancestors are believed to have advanced mystical power and thus not only occupy an important mediatorial role, they are considered influential. Ancestors are an integral part of tradition and social structure, responsible for ensuring that their descendants remain faithful to traditional beliefs and practices. They are honoured by various libations or sacrifices and consulted by divination.³⁶⁰ Not everyone is elevated to the role of an ancestor. In order to qualify, a person must have achieved great influence while living and rituals must be performed.

An ancestor must have lived a morally worthy life and must have died a good death. This means that the person was not killed by lightning or a

³⁵⁹ Nowhere is God represented in African art, either in physical images or representations. He resides in heaven and takes no interest in what happens elsewhere. Although distant and withdrawn, God provides rain and sunshine and has delegated authority through lesser deities, and family ancestors which rule geographical areas here on earth. Idowu rejects the idea of the creator being distant.

³⁶⁰ In Zulu culture one year after a person’s death, people perform *ukubuyisela idlozi*, which translated means “bringing home our ancestor.” Prayers are offered to the ancestors and a beast is slaughtered.

falling and was not killed by a strange disease such as smallpox or leprosy. ... An ancestor must have received a second or third burial to smooth the sojourn through the spirit world to reincarnation. Obviously, those who died bad deaths or did not get fitting burials do not reincarnate and, indeed, turn into malevolent spirits which hound their progeny for failing to bury them properly.³⁶¹

Yusufu Turaki notes that the status of ancestor is also assigned to persons who are national liberators or defenders: those who have suffered and sacrificed to free their people. As symbols of tribal and ethnic unity and the ones believed to be custodians of ethics and traditions, such liberation fighters as Jomo Kenyatta (Kenya), Kenneth Kaunda (Zambia), Kwame Nkrumah (Ghana), Mnamdi Azikwe (Nigeria), Samora Machel (Mozambique), Walter Sisulu along with Nelson Mandela (South Africa), qualify (or will do so), as national ancestors.³⁶²

In most African cultures, authority is directly proportional to a person's age. Therefore, ancestors have greater authority and power than their living descendents. Their lives are remembered, their favour and mercy solicited to resolve problems and restore wholeness. "To be cut off from relationship with one's family and ancestors is to cease to be a whole person."³⁶³ Although the spirit world is invisible, ancestors remain part of family and community life:

³⁶¹ Ogbu Kalu, *The Embattled Gods: Christianization of Igboland 1841 – 1991*, (Africa World Press, 2004), pp. 57 – 58

³⁶² Yusufu Turako, "The Role of Ancestors," *Africa Bible Commentary*, p. 480

³⁶³ Jack Partain, "Christians and Their Ancestors: A Dilemma of African Theology," which originally appeared in the *Christian Century*, November, 1986, p. 1086. <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1078> Accessed 2005

sharing in meals, interested in events. They remain present until they are no longer remembered through ritual. Should the family or an individual not fulfill obligations such as attending funerals or family celebrations and rituals, the ancestor often brings calamity either on the one who has neglected them or on the entire family. Obviously this exerts enormous pressure on every individual to conform.³⁶⁴

Some African theologies have proposed Jesus should be presented as an African ancestor: the one who is the greatest ancestor. While this is not without merit, it is also coupled with the danger that it is tantamount to reducing Jesus to the position of a great man and ignoring His divinity. Even Turaki's modification that "Jesus has come to fulfill our ancestral cult and has taken the place of our ancestors, replacing them with himself," still validates the spiritual influence ancestors seemingly held.³⁶⁵

A view of Jesus as *Christus Victor*, in which Christ is seen as the conqueror of evil and the restorer of *shalom* (peace, completeness, health and salvation), is more useful. God is Almighty, loving and just, able to protect, to heal and to drive out demons that oppress. Those who follow Jesus are secure in His hands for He is superior to traditional healers and His weapons are more powerful. He

³⁶⁴ I remember a young single mother who attended a meeting of young people several years ago. She gave her life to Christ that evening. However, on returning home to her family and relating the good news, she was told that if she persisted in attending church and leaving the old ways she would have to take her child and leave the community. For her this meant not only losing her family connections but also her home and possessions. She would literally be alone in the world with a child to care for. She chose to remain with her family.

³⁶⁵ Yusufu Turako, "The Role of Ancestors," *Africa Bible Commentary*, p. 480

is victorious: He has defeated Satan and his kingdom of Darkness and every imaginable hostile power. His authority transcends every power. His rule is sovereign over all. He lives and is accessible to all who follow Him. In times of existential crisis, He is near. He alone is the Savior of Africa.

5.5.2 Ancestral “Veneration” and “Worship”

Many are the African theologians who take exception to the veneration of ancestors being referred to as “worship.”³⁶⁶ John Mbiti believes that communion with the dead is not the same as worship of ancestors. He insists,

... the phenomenon which Westerners have called ‘ancestor worship’ is not really worship at all. The acts of giving food and drink to ancestral spirits are symbols of communion, fellowship and remembrance. To fail to remember the dead in this way is, in effect, to excommunicate them and deprive them of that which is needful for another existence. But to remember is not to deify them.³⁶⁷

Muzorewa, building on Mbiti’s foundation, elevates ancestors to the position of mediatorial saints with the goal of “synchronizing Christian faith with African traditional religion in such a way that does not jeopardize African existence,” but insures “the welfare of the people of his own tribe.”³⁶⁸

³⁶⁶ Including Desmond Tutu, John Mbiti, S. E. Serote, Gabriel Setiloane, Kwame Bediako and Mercy Amba Oduyoye, whose “Letter to My Ancestors” can be read at: <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/assembly/or-mo-e.html>

³⁶⁷ David Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross Culturally*, p. 152

³⁶⁸ Gailyn Van Rheenen, *Communicating Christ Among Folk Religionists*, <http://www.missiology.org> Accessed November, 2002, citing Gwinyai H. Muzorewa, “African Theology: Its Origin and

The issue of ancestral veneration critically illustrates the damage done by the Christo-pagan Roman Catholic church that propounds the theory of God operating in power through Roman Catholic canonized “saints” and other relics. This false doctrine coupled with the widespread Western practice of professing that departed family members or persons noted for their humanitarian work, are still in some way present or at least available for prayer requests, adds to the confusion and undermines God’s sovereignty.³⁶⁹ When theological formulations allow ancestors to usurp the intercessory role of Christ (1 Tim 2:5), they displace him as the fullness of all deity (Col 2:9) and directly contradict the Biblical injunction against the living consulting the dead in Deuteronomy 18:11 and Isaiah 8:19.³⁷⁰ God’s all sufficiency and sovereignty negates any mediating roles that might be assigned to others.

Interestingly, although Mbiti and others make much of the difference between the words “worship” and “veneration,” in practice there is little difference. Libations are still poured, commemorations still performed,

Development,” Unpublished Dissertation, Union Theological Seminary. Muzorewa explains the welfare of the tribe, and in particular of the family, rests upon the benevolence and protection of their ancestors.

³⁶⁹ For example, during the recent concert celebrating the tenth anniversary of the death of Princess Diana, P. “Diddy” Combs, Tom Jones, Elton John and others spoke of the Princess as if she were present: “We know you are with us.” “We know you can hear us,” “You are smiling right now.” The 65,000 people who attended the celebration held at Wembley Stadium roared their agreement. The program was watched by an estimated 160 million viewers around the world.

³⁷⁰ Gailyn Van Rheenen, *Communicating Christ Among Folk Religionists*

anniversaries still remembered, and intervention still sought.³⁷¹ The result is the parity of religious belief and universality of God's grace without Jesus Christ. Christian theology consistently holds Him to be transcendent and all-powerful, a personal God who commands total allegiance.

5.6 Gods and Spiritual Powers in Biblical Perspective

Whether traditional religion is animistic, polytheistic, or primal is to a large extent a matter of perspective: whether the focus is on One Supreme Being or on the many mediators necessary to reach him or her. Kwame Bediako, a Ghanaian Presbyterian theologian, has carefully noted that the larger issue is to ignore local beliefs or to neglect addressing them in specific ways. Bediako uses Paul's interaction with the Corinthians³⁷² to affirm the uniqueness of Jesus, the one true Lord, in relation to "so-called many lords" and concludes that Jesus can be seen in relationship to these "others," thereby freeing Him to be Lord in both African and Biblical terms.³⁷³ The difficulty I have with Bediako's proposal is that he is guilty of his own indictment: ignoring or neglecting to address local beliefs in specific ways. He validates African religious beliefs along with John Mbiti, as

³⁷¹ Once in conversation with students, the Western practice of placing flowers on loved one's grave and having photos of them in prominent places in the home, was also compared to "veneration." The general consensus, however, was that this did not constitute any recognition of influence in the spirit world.

³⁷² 1 Corinthians 8: 5 – 6

³⁷³ Kwame Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa: History and Experience*, (New York; Orbis Books, 2004) p. 37

praeparatio evangelica, not in the sense that everyone has experiences which God uses in order to draw us to Him, or as Calvin understood all men to have a sense of religion, but that Africa's primal religion constitutes a continuing source as well as a basis in itself for Christian theology. Along with others, such as Idowu, Mulago, Maluleke and Mbiti, he persists in affirming the continuity of God from the African pre-Christian past into the present Christian experience using Paul who he describes as follows:

... the apostle who grasped most firmly the significance of Christ for the entire universe, and who strenuously preached Jesus to Jews as the fulfillment of the promises of the Old Testament, proclaimed with equal conviction that Jesus was to Gentiles also the fulfiller of their deepest religious and spiritual aspirations.³⁷⁴

Bediako omits to note what John Mbiti clearly understands, and although I have quoted this earlier, it is worth repeating here, that although people may know something of God's activities and manifestations, "of His essential nature they know nothing. ... He knows them, but they do not know Him."³⁷⁵

Paul acknowledged the religious aspirations of the Athenians but he did not hesitate to tell them, "You do not know who He is, but I do." Paul did not (as stated earlier) consider their religiosity in any way salvic. He confronted the deeply held attitudes that formed the Athenians' pagan worldview.³⁷⁶ Their ignorance was a limited point of contact. They did not worship the one true God and now

³⁷⁴ Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity*, p. 245

³⁷⁵ John Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy*, p. 35

³⁷⁶ N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, p. 79

must “repent.”³⁷⁷ Rather than affirming, Paul was sharply critical of the religious view of Athenian culture. Adeyemo writes that Paul came as a messenger “to remove their ignorance and to announce God’s command that people everywhere must repent.”³⁷⁸ God may be known by different names but His identity never changes.³⁷⁹ Lamin Sanneh argues that Christianity has expanded most rapidly and almost exclusively in places where missionaries of the colonial era kept the indigenous name for God.³⁸⁰ He is correct according to statistics; however, many mix the Biblical message with African traditional theology. Ndjerareou argues the point: the names of God *must* be filled with new meaning. For it is, “*not what the Creator God is called, but how he is represented and how his relationship with his creation is understood.*”³⁸¹

... he cannot be represented by something made by human hands [or human minds]. ... African religious traditions came to feel that the Creator God was so exalted that he was beyond the reach of human beings. Thus they created a whole pantheon of gods to take care of different human needs. ... But God has revealed to us that the only mediator that we need to approach is Christ, who himself stated, ‘No one comes to the Father [the Most High] except through me’ (John 14:6; see also 1 Tim 2:5)

Yahweh is the creator ... His favour, unlike that of other gods, is not dependent on receiving sacrifices and offerings. What he desires is

³⁷⁷ Acts 17:30

³⁷⁸ Tokunboh Adeyemo, *Africa Bible Commentary*, p. 1331

³⁷⁹ Abel Ndjerareou, “Yahweh and Other Gods,” *Africa Bible Commentary*, p. 861

³⁸⁰ Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West*, (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 18 – 19

³⁸¹ Abel Ndjerareou, “Yahweh and Other Gods,” *Africa Bible Commentary*, p. 861. Italics not in the original.

conduct that honors him (Ps 40: 7 – 9). His nature is to offer pardon and salvation to those who trust him (2 Chr 30:9).³⁸²

The apostolic mission to the Gentiles provides the most adequate paradigm for assessing the similar transposition of the Christian faith to Africa as Bediako maintains, but he misses the significance of Paul's call for a *radical discontinuity* with the worldview and religion of his audience. This does not mean the adoption of Western trappings such as songs and dress and orders of service, etc. African culture is not the issue. If traditional religion is a preparation for the gospel as Mbiti maintains, when reality appears what happens to the preparation? When one reaches a destination, are the signposts along the road not left behind? Michael Green suggests that the interplay of Greek, Roman and Jewish cultures were also *praeparatio evangelica* but these must be put in correct perspective, along with *pax romana*; Greek philosophy; the Law and its ceremonial regulations and the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD.³⁸³ They all have served their purpose. Surely we are not looking for their resurgence or continuation today?

The Gentile mission concluded that everyone was acceptable to God without circumcision or adaptation to Jewish laws as a prerequisite. This was in order that the real scandal of the gospel could be perceived and its challenge faced: that Jesus, in His death on the cross, has atoned for sinful man by taking our sin and

³⁸² Ibid.

³⁸³ Michael Green *Evangelism in the Early Church*, pp. 29 – 33, 37, 154, 294, 389f.

shame and reconciling us to God. The gospel call is to those who will follow Him: an alternate community holding an alternate allegiance and an alternate conscience.³⁸⁴ It is a call to be, as Walter Brueggemann writes, a “contrast-society” to every other governance.³⁸⁵ There was only one requirement for entrance: sincere repentance. It meant a radical break with the past; a change of attitude to the old way of life and a willingness to let go of former sins: in other words, demonstrated repentance.

In the Bible, God clearly condemns the belief and practice of magic (Exod 9:11); divination (Deut 18:10); witchcraft (1 Sam 15:23); polytheism (Exod 20:3); shamanism (Lev 20:6). The gods of the nations are not gods at all (Is 44:6 – 8; 24 – 28).³⁸⁶ Nevertheless, wrong beliefs cannot simply be ignored or dismissed as figments of imagination. Nor can Western technology and science give answers to questions of human existence, as Hiebert et al write,

... Christians must take these beliefs seriously – not because they are true, but because these are the beliefs that the people have about reality, and they will not simply die out when confronted with other beliefs.
... Westerners must also examine their own views of causality and test them in the light of Scripture. They must abandon the dualism that divides their world into supernatural and natural realities, and relegates spiritual problems to religion, and natural ones to science. ³⁸⁷

³⁸⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, p. 84

³⁸⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *The Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), p. 238

³⁸⁶ Although these Scriptures condemn the forgoing, they also affirm His love for all peoples and make it clear that God holds sovereign power.

³⁸⁷ Paul Hiebert, Daniel Shaw and Tite Tiénou, *Understanding Folk Religion: A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), pp. 168 - 169

J. V Taylor's now famous question, "If Christ were to appear as the answer to the questions that Africans are asking, what would he look like" appears somewhere in almost every book on African theology.³⁸⁸ However, not one book that I have read actually lists any specific questions that Africans are asking. When I invited students attending college to suggest what they believed the primary question Africans wanted to pose concerning Christ, their consistent response was, "Why is Jesus white?" Should He then be black? Is Douglas Waruta correct in his contention that Africans "have every right to formulate their own Christology, their own response to who Jesus is to them?"³⁸⁹ With reference to the Western missionary enterprise confusing Christianity with Western civilization, Waruta has a point. It is not, "You must become like us." However it is, "We must become like *Him*." (Rom 8:29) Jesus is not the product of or the servant of anyone's religion and culture. *Sola scriptura* cannot be replaced by *sola cultura*. Jesus' question of Matthew 16: 15, "Who do you say that I am," as Collium Banda contends, "was an ontological question that expected a specific ontological answer."³⁹⁰ It was not a query about ethnicity. Can Jesus be at home in every culture? Certainly. However, His identity as Sovereign Lord

³⁸⁸ Charles Kraft, *Christianity in Culture*, (New York; Maryknoll, 1979), p. 305.

³⁸⁹ Douglas W. Waruta, "Who Is Jesus Christ for Africans Today? Prophet, Priest, Potentate," in *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, Robert J. Schreiter, Ed. (New York; Orbis Books, 1995), p. 53

³⁹⁰ Collium Banda, "The Sufficiency of Christ in Africa: A Christological Challenge from African Traditional Religions," dissertation. <http://etd.unisa.ac.za/ETD-db/theses/available/etd-05292006-134807/unrestricted/dissertation.pdf> Accessed May, 2007

and King over all must be seen and understood; for He is above all nations, all cultures, every religion. To quote Banda again,

... he did not come to answer to a particular culture; he came so that all ethnic groups will answer to him. African Christology must be wary of being ethnicized. Such a Christology leads to a provincial Christ lacking in sovereignty and universality.³⁹¹

5.7 The Missiological Task

The missiological task of the church in Africa is to model what it means to be the people of God: living in the kingdom of God, citizens of the kingdom of heaven (Phil 3: 21) while remaining within their communities. This means critiquing culture using the grid of the kingdom to bring forth the fruits of the kingdom. How? One method is by utilizing the concept of “the configurational nature of knowledge,” as Hiebert, Shaw and Tiéno explain and illustrate extremely well in their book, *Understanding Folk Religion*.

Knowledge is not the sum of bits of information, but the system of interpretation that links those bits into an explanatory whole. Configurations combine objective facts and subjective interpretations of these facts to account for reality. ... Configuration gives to knowledge a coherence and comprehension that make sense out of a bewildering barrage of experiential data entering the mind. It helps people to “picture” reality.

The configurational nature of knowledge is important in understanding culture change. Normal change occurs in a belief system as new data are added and lines are redrawn to fit the new information. Revolutions, what Kuhn calls ‘paradigm shifts,’ occur when the existing configuration

³⁹¹ Ibid.

is rejected because it no longer adequately accounts for the data, and a new configuration is adopted that explains the data better.³⁹²

I have used their diagram, modifying it slightly to illustrate the process of integrating knowledge: how we might arrive at a configuration and how this configuration might change as new data are added and the lines redrawn.³⁹³

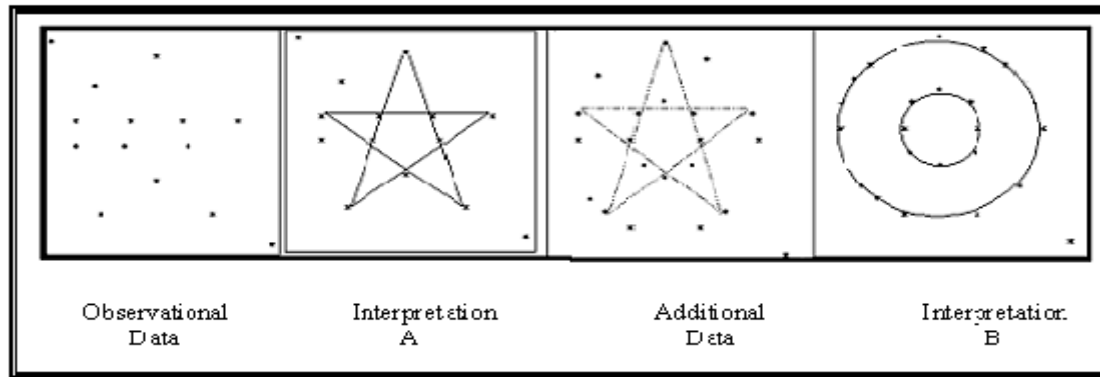


Figure 4 - The Configurational Nature of Knowledge

If we imagine the dots in the box on the extreme left to be information or experiences and events (data), we can see that a framework (in this case a star) connects the dots and organizes them into some sort of explanatory whole. This helps to “picture” reality and could be compared with a system of knowledge or a “belief system.” Thomas Kuhn has called this belief system a “paradigm.”³⁹⁴ At the highest level of abstraction, paradigms are reflected in worldviews.³⁹⁵

³⁹² Paul Hiebert, Daniel Shaw and Tite Tiéno, *Understanding Folk Religion*, pp. 40 – 41

³⁹³ Ibid, p. 41

³⁹⁴ Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, (Chicago; University of Chicago Press, 1970)

³⁹⁵ Paul Hiebert, Daniel Shaw and Tite Tiéno, *Understanding Folk Religion*, p. 40

When more dots are added (data), the old pattern no longer serves. The question then arises whether in fact Interpretation A is sufficient or if a change is necessary. If insufficient, a “paradigm shift” occurs: Interpretation B.

Two interesting points should be noted which are illustrated in the diagram below: first of all, Interpretation B already existed in the first frame on the extreme left. Although I drew a star, the choice of a star or circles depends on the individual. A militating factor is that individual choices are mediated by social pressures to conform.

Secondly, not all dots accurately fit on the lines of the two circles. Neither are all dots completely accounted for. This helps the church to understand that many parts of the old may fit into the new, although they are given new meaning, while others seem to “fade.”

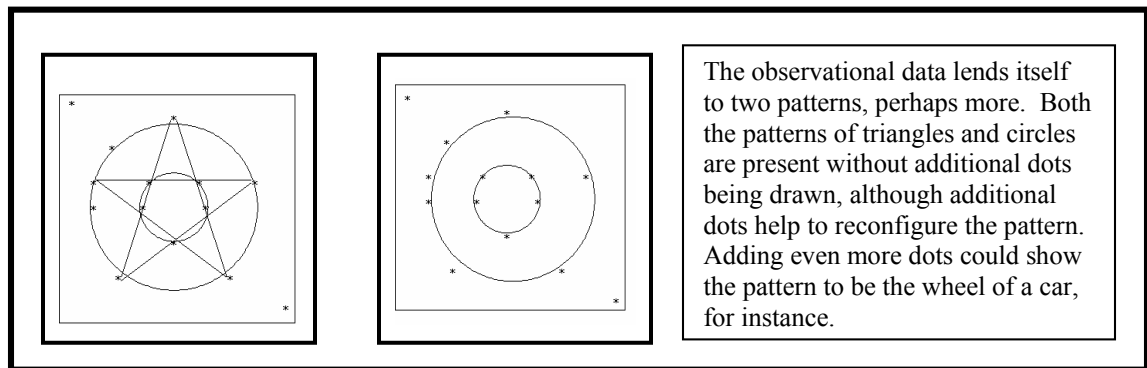


Figure 5 - Patterns of Configurations

One of the most important aspects of Christian conversion is that no person is won to Christ through argument. The old adage: “A man convinced against his will is a man who needs convincing still,” has merit. At the same time,

Christians must take spiritual realities seriously. The kingdom of Darkness operates by twisting truth and by deception. Satan blinds eyes and deafens ears so that men do not turn to the light.³⁹⁶ Scripture calls him the father of lies.³⁹⁷ But sin is found not only in the wrong choices individuals make but also in cultural ideologies and social institutions. Cultural structures pressure people to conform and persecute or even kill them if they do not.

Christians need a biblical theology that is able to answer the life questions folk religionists seek answers to: questions relating to sickness, death, the afterlife and the basic needs of every person for significance, purpose, and security, while critically contextualizing cultural beliefs and practices. The data which does not fit into the paradigm of the kingdom of God is left out as Jones confirms:

If it fits into the Kingdom, it is right and the right thing to do. If it doesn't fit into the Kingdom, it is wrong and the wrong thing to do. Seek first, last, and always the kingdom of God and all these things – the lesser demands and issues and needs – will be added to you.³⁹⁸

5.8 The “God of Africa,” Politics and Exile

African theologians submit that Africa had a concept of God long before white Europeans tried to subvert it, despite as Kalu says, “everyone knowing

³⁹⁶ 2 Corinthians 4: 4

³⁹⁷ John 8:44; Revelation 12: 9

³⁹⁸ Earl Stanley Jones, *The Unshakable Kingdom and the Unchanging Person*, p. 220

who brought it, from where, when and at what costs.”³⁹⁹ Pre-independence, African politicians (most of whom had been educated in missions schools) quickly recognized the usefulness of religion as a key in the politics of decolonization as western nations began to support “democratization and the taming of predators.”⁴⁰⁰ Post-independence the trend to re-image the missionaries’ God into an ethnic African God has gained momentum.

Couched in the term *indigenization*, cultural theology attempted to signal “an awareness of the inadequacy of expressing what Africans wanted to say and what Europeans wanted to hear.”⁴⁰¹ But many of Africa’s church leaders lacked the training to engage the political space and with a combination of abundant natural resources and a history of autocratic rule, politicians soon became more interested in what benefited their own material interests and pleasures as the scourge of one-party states and corrupt governments evidences. Sampie Terreblance, the South African political economist, comments that since 1990 South Africa’s economic system moved from colonial and racial capitalism to a (predominantly) black neo-liberal, first-world “elite” that disengages itself from

³⁹⁹ Ogbu Kalu, “Faith and Politics in Africa.” It should be said that elsewhere in his writing, Kalu is scathing in his assessment of colonialism.

⁴⁰⁰ Ogbu Kalu, “Faith and Politics in Africa.” Kalu notes that it was the God of the Empire who in fact bred political leaders for the new Africa. This supports Nico Koopman’s argument that the black African church is an expression of Constantinianism. “Churches, Democracy and the Public Sphere,” South African Council of Churches, <http://www.sacc-ct.org.za/koopman.html> Accessed July 2007

⁴⁰¹ Ogbu Kalu, “Faith and Politics in Africa”

the black labour force.⁴⁰² Rian Malan, the controversial writer, puts it more bluntly: “Everyone considered themselves revolutionaries, but then come 1993, 1994 they all jumped into their BMWs and followed the gravy train.”⁴⁰³

In the new politico-economic system, individual members of the upper classes (comprising one-third of the population) profit handsomely from mainstream economic activity, while the mainly black lumpenproletariat (comprising fifty percent of the population) is increasingly pauperized. Ironically, individual members of the black and white upper class in the new system seem as unconcerned about its dysfunctionality as individual members of the white elite were about that of the old. The common denominator between the old and the new systems is that part of society was/is systemically and undeservedly enriched, while the majority of the population were/are systemically and undeservedly impoverished – in the old system through *systemic exploitation*, and in the new system through *systemic neglect*.⁴⁰⁴

My contention is that African theology has failed to answer this contemporary existential problem. Instead, mainline churches have compensated clergy left out of the new prosperity loop with rich symbolism and flowing robes. Pentecostals and Charismatics too, are widely challenged: if not theologically, at least in their praxis. One issue that has raised major questions even within their own traditions has been the particular doctrine known as the “prosperity gospel,” which has deep sociological implications. Characterized by

⁴⁰² Sampie Terreblanche, *A History of Inequality in South Africa 1652 – 2002*, (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press and KMM Review Publishing, 2002), pp. 422 – 423, as cited by Gerald West, “Hearing the (Theological) Voice of the Other in the City Mission: A South African Perspective,” http://www.tf.uio.no/citymission/doc/city_mission_abstract.pdf Accessed February, 2007

⁴⁰³ Rian Malan, in an interview with The Observer, March 25, 2007. <http://observer.guardian.co.uk/magazine/story/0,,2040044,00.html> Accessed July, 2007

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid, p. 423. Italics in the original.

platform preaching by (mostly) American televangelists with large hair do's and expensive suits, it is an appealing option to some of the still-disadvantaged African clergy.⁴⁰⁵

The South African church has not recognized the two dangers Nico Koopman identifies in his article, "Churches, Democracy and the Public Sphere:" sociological sectarianism and Constantinianism. The first, sociological sectarianism, applies to the (mostly) white church and is expressed as an after-effect of those who supported the *status quo* under apartheid and are now either fearful of making further mistakes, opting instead for disinvolvement, or in fact over-compensating "for the sake of gaining credibility and re-orientation into the new political, economic and social context."⁴⁰⁶ The second, Constantinianism, applies to the black African church who "run the risk of being co-opted by the agenda of the state ... being too loyal to former comrades in the liberation struggle, who are now in government ... [losing] the appropriate critical distance."⁴⁰⁷

For various reasons, former so-called struggle churches and former so-called *status quo* churches withdraw themselves from the public sphere in post apartheid South Africa.⁴⁰⁸

⁴⁰⁵ As early as 1971, John Gatu, then General Secretary of the Presbyterian Church in Kenya, suspecting that the slow pace of indigenization in leadership of the Presbyterian Church was due to a hidden agenda to retain power in white hands, called for a moratorium on foreign missionaries for the next five years. All missionaries presently residing in Africa should go home so that Africans could build the church without Western aid. He declared during a visit to the United States, that he had not come to beg either money or people. The short man should learn to hang his knapsack within reach.

⁴⁰⁶ Nico Koopman, "Churches, Democracy and the Public Sphere."

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid.

Either way, the result is a silencing of the prophetic voice. The scene resonates with the silence: the stillness and settled-ness of *exile*.

5.9 “The God of Africa,” Politics and Post-Exile

Because liberation had a theological base but a political expression, it now looks for a political solution. One of the most surprising features for the new South Africa, however, is that the political liberalization which was characterized “in the verbs that defined the virtues of the era: serve, suffer and sacrifice;”⁴⁰⁹ has not led to an egalitarian and just future but to a “liberation aristocracy” on the one hand and on the other a culture of cynicism, distrust, and intractable disappointment.

The ANC’s “better life for all” promise of the 1994 election has not materialized into a road map for a rendezvous with destiny. A decade into democracy the gap between rich and poor is greater than ever.⁴¹⁰ In an interview with the Financial Times of London in June 2007, Desmond Tutu criticized the lack of a better life saying, “Most people are languishing in the wilderness.” Using the Biblical analogy of the Red Sea, Tutu said South Africans had crossed

⁴⁰⁹ Dumisane Negobo, “Nihilism in Black South Africa: The New South Africa and the Destruction of the Black Domestic Periphery,” http://singh.reshma.tripod.com/alternation/alternation6_1/10NCOBO.htm Accessed March, 2007

⁴¹⁰ The Financial Times, 28 June, 2007

over in 1994 but that very few have reached the Promised Land. In the past most affluent South Africans were white, now they have been joined by a few black elite, but most of the masses that lived in shacks before the end of apartheid are still living in shacks today.

The South African government's development indicators of June 2007 reported that currently 40% of South Africans, that is about 18 million people, live on less than R3 000 (\$430 USD) per annum.⁴¹¹ According to Statistics SA, about 5.8 million people and probably more were unemployed in 1999, of which 90% were black, and 56% female.⁴¹² At a societal level, unemployment contributes significantly to rising levels of poverty and crime. South Africa is struggling with a reputation for ultra-violence, with recent statistics showing one of the heaviest crime rates in the world: 50 murders; 148 rapes; and 700 assaults committed each day of the past 12 months.⁴¹³ Even more alarming is an estimate that 32% of all crimes are not reported to the police.⁴¹⁴ Of the victims of reported rapes⁴¹⁵, 41% were aged 18 years or younger and 14% were under 12 years old. Looking at the past five financial years, there were more than 100,000 murders;

⁴¹¹ Broadening the glance to Sub-Saharan Africa, U.N. General Secretary Ban Ki-moon stated that the region would not meet the Millennium Development Goals aimed at lifting the number of people living on USD 1 per day or less.

⁴¹² The Sunday Times, 4th March, 2001.

⁴¹³ Mail & Guardian Online, http://www.mg.co.za/articlepage.aspx?area=/breaking_news/breaking_news_national/&articleid=312960 Accessed 3 July, 2007

⁴¹⁴ Ibid.

⁴¹⁵ According to the Christian Century, South Africa has the highest incidence of rape in the world.

270,000 rapes; and 1.3 million serious assaults. A million robberies took place and an estimated 450,000 cars were stolen.⁴¹⁶

WorldPress quotes present HIV-AIDS figures of at least 5.54 million South Africans living with HIV/AIDS. UNAIDS estimates that 20% of the adult population of South Africa is HIV-positive as of February, 2002.⁴¹⁷ Only India has a higher rate.⁴¹⁸ According to the Stellenbosch Bureau for Economic Research (cited in the Sunday Tribune 14/04/2002) it is estimated that AIDS will reduce the GDP by 1.7% in 2010 and by 5.7% in 2015. A typical South African company may expect 20% of its workforce to die of AIDS within the next decade.

In recent months the battle against HIV-AIDS lost ground through the trial of Deputy President Jacob Zuma, alleged to have raped an HIV-positive woman. Although found not guilty of rape Zuma admitted to consensual sex without a condom, testifying that he believed he had avoided potential HIV contagion because he had showered afterwards. At the time of his statement he was the chairman for the South African National AIDS Council (SANAC) and leader of the ANC's Moral Regeneration Movement.⁴¹⁹ This type of statement from a well-known politician sends a confusing message and turns people away from anti-

⁴¹⁶ Mail & Guardian Online, http://www.mg.co.za/articlepage.aspx?area=/breaking_news/breaking_news_national/&articleid=312960

⁴¹⁷ The Economist, 23/02/2002

⁴¹⁸ Chinua Akukwe, "South Africa's Leadership on H.I.V./ AIDS Is a Welcome Development," Worldpress, <http://www.worldpress.org/Africa/2826.cfm>, Accessed July, 2007

⁴¹⁹ The Mail & Guardian, 8th May 2007. http://www.mg.co.za/articlePage.aspx?articleid=306998&area=/breaking_news/breaking_news__national/ Accessed July, 2007

retroviral treatment and back to traditional medicine or “outright quackery,” the label given by the International AIDS Conference held in Toronto, Canada in 2006, to South African Minister of Health Dr. Manto Tshabalala Msimang’s remedy of “garlic, beetroot, lemons and African potatoes” as an alternative treatment against HIV infection.⁴²⁰ After the conference, a total of 81 leading AIDS scientists signed an open letter to President Thabo Mbeki calling for Msimang’s immediate dismissal from the Ministry of Health.

The confusion was complicated even further on Saturday, 5th May 2007, as Bishop Ben Mthethwa of the Full Gospel Community church, conferred on Zuma the title of “honorary pastor” during a meeting of a group of independent charismatic Full Gospel churches held at Ntuzuma, north of Durban. At the end of the ceremony, Mthethwa put a clerical collar on Zuma and declared him a priest. Later the Full Gospel church distanced itself from the ordination as Secretary General, Christy Perumal, stated there was no such office as “honorary pastor” and that they had no part in the conferring of this status.

⁴²⁰ Msimang was accused of “undermining HIV science in South Africa” as a result of her shocking representation of this “alternative treatment” during an International AIDS Conference in Toronto last year. Stephen Lewis, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for HIV/AIDS in Africa, in his address to the Conference said that South Africa “is the only country in Africa whose government continues to propound theories more worthy of a lunatic fringe than of a concerned and compassionate state.” She was comically referred to as “Dr. Beetroot.” c/f “Sack SA Health Minister – World’s AIDS Experts,” <http://www.afrol.com/articles/21094> Accessed July, 2007

To exacerbate the situation further, corruption in South Africa is growing.⁴²¹ It must be noted that apartheid was an inherently corrupt system which benefited the few at the expense of the vast majority. With its demise in 1994, most experts thought that corruption levels might decrease. However, by 1999, a study headed by Judge Willem Heath of the Special Investigating Unit, undertaken to unearth corruption and recover state assets, estimated that at that time in South Africa there were 834 cases involving USD 1.87 billion. Heath said that millions of dollars lost through corruption, fraud and mismanagement were waiting to be exposed. "We haven't touched it yet," he remarked.⁴²²

Where some authorities consider crime to be directly associated with poverty, Dumisane Ncgobo, a psychologist with the University of Durban, Westville, develops a compelling alternative theory: a "growing sense of nihilism experienced by South Africans," defining "nihilism" as a "monumental eclipse of hope."⁴²³ The cause: the demise of the liberation struggle and the resultant loss of identity; meaning and mission and a loss freedom from oppression. ⁴²⁴

Instead of freedom from hunger, homelessness and joblessness, the black African

⁴²¹ This seems to be the trend for Africa in general. Transparency International rates African countries among the worst offenders in the world. Of the top 20 countries perceived as most corrupt, 12 are African states. Resources intended for health, education and clean water are diverted to bulging bank accounts in Europe.

Transparency International, http://www.transparency.org/regional_pages/africa_middle_east/about/africa. Accessed July, 2007

⁴²² Willem Heath as quoted on http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1058/is_1_116/ai_57643492, Accessed July, 2007

⁴²³ Dumisane Ncgobo, "Nihilism in Black South Africa"

⁴²⁴ Ibid.

majority have “liberation millionaires.” These “black diamonds” have formed a “liberation aristocracy,” trading low-income politics for lucrative business careers.⁴²⁵ Displaying flamboyant lifestyles, driving luxury cars, wearing “faux fur jackets and diamond-encrusted shoes,” they have changed the values and aspirations of the youth and “pulled the plug” on upward social upliftment through legal means.⁴²⁶

The freedom that was hoped for is not the freedom that is being experienced. The land belongs to Africa once again technically, but the masses are still landless. Black South Africans still command less than 5% of the economy. Street names have been changed and monuments erected and now *pax Romana* is replaced with *pax Americana* African-style, but ultimately one oppressor has merely been replaced by another. Hope dims, rage and violence are everywhere. This is the equivalent of *post exile* and it stands in direct contradiction to our understanding of liberation.

In the same way that first-century Jews dealt with their post-exile experience when faced with massive social suffering, African society has responded by resorting to coping mechanisms that seemed to work in the past: in this case primal religious powers and traditional medicine religion. In one of the most seriously useful books on folk religion, *Under-standing Folk Religion*, Paul Hiebert,

⁴²⁵ Ngobo lists names such as Cyril Ramaphosa (the resigned ANC Secretary-General), Saki Macozoma, former Gauteng Premier Tokyo Sexwale, Marcel Golding, John Copelyn and more than 30 former Members of Parliament.

⁴²⁶ Dumisane Ngobo, “Nihilism in Black South Africa”

Tite Tiénou and Daniel Shaw state that approximately four-fifths of the population in South Africa consults traditional healers.⁴²⁷ Ten thousand (or more) neo-primal or renewal movements, the African Independent Churches, many of whom are opposed to Christianity, seek to combine tribal rituals such as polygamy, priestly robes, and blood sacrifice with Christian beliefs. Others uncompromisingly make a clear break with traditional religion, focusing on the New Testament and rejecting many old customs, instead advocating a new ethic of peace, sexual discipline, and industriousness. These movements give their followers “a new sense of identity, hope, and dignity in the midst of the confusion, frustration, and powerlessness,” encouraging them to take responsibility for their future.⁴²⁸ However, there is a down side as Independent churches also raise difficult contextual issues. Self-appointed prophet-leaders often use rituals and divination, claiming their revelation of sickness and their power of healing comes from divine revelation. Some utilize the practice of throwing the bones, or specific power words, or employ sanctified articles such as needles or pieces of cloth to seek remedies that appease the spirits.⁴²⁹ All pursue answers to the needs of daily living.

⁴²⁷ Paul Hiebert, Daniel Shaw, Tite Tiénou, *Understanding Folk Religion*, p. 168

⁴²⁸ Ibid.

⁴²⁹ Ibid, pp. 361 – 363

5.10 The Kingdom of God and Those in Exile and Post-Exile

While I agree with Ncgobo that the sense of social despair is almost overwhelming and that the burgeoning market culture characterized in cell phones and plasma screens has altered the entire moral framework of South Africa, I disagree with his alternative: “a new black leadership grounded in African culture.” Cultural and political solutions compose the “default setting” in the human heart whether it is housed in a black or a white skin. Politics and enculturation hijack the vehicle to true transformation: the church as the visible expression of the kingdom of God here in Africa. Just as first century Israel distorted the Scriptures by believing God’s purpose was for them to rule the political world, so the church in Africa runs the risk of believing His purpose is for them to rule the political world today. However, the biblical story was never about Africa beating up her enemies and becoming the high-and-mighty masters of the world.

It was always the story of how the creator God, Israel’s [and Africa’s] covenant God, would bring his saving purposes for the world [including Africa] to birth through the suffering and vindication of Israel.⁴³⁰

Jesus still offers an option to political answers and present pain with a counter identity, a new breed of revolutionaries: people willing to abandon the present way of being African, willing to leave behind whole definitions of their worldview, culture and values. The gospel message is not simply information to

⁴³⁰ N. T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus*, pp. 161 - 162

be communicated but a message to which people must respond by following His subversive way of forgiveness, justice, inclusion, compassion, and peace. It is a change of worldview, as old beliefs and practices are evaluated in the light of biblical truth in order to root life in the gospel. This means a theology that is embedded in Scripture, guided by the Holy Spirit and conducted by the church as the hermeneutical community of the kingdom of God. *This* is liberation... although it does not look like what Africa thought it would.

Seek first the kingdom of God and all these things will be added to you.

Matthew 6:33

CHAPTER 4 CONCLUSION

*“The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you.”
(Mark 4: 11)*

Someone once remarked that it is easier to give birth than to raise the dead and added that the speaker was likely male. While the statement has no academic merit, it does resonate with how easy it is to talk about change in comparison to what is required to accomplish it.⁴³¹

The theological reflection of this paper began by considering the challenge of critical contextualizing the gospel without concurrently modifying its message. Since reality is mediated by worldview and behavior expresses culture, without a transformation of worldview there is no lasting transformation of behavior. Again change is easier said than done. However, it must be kept in mind that the struggle is not between various cultures. The battle is a spiritual one and therefore must be fought with spiritual weapons rather than with anthropology or psychology.⁴³²

The gospel hinges on Jesus, and He is our example: a first-century Palestinian Jew who embodied Jewish culture, a Jewish way of life. Yet the expectation of the Jewish nation politically, socially, and economically was not His hope. His hope was the coming kingdom of God. The kingdom did not erase His culture, but it became the source of His identity and allegiance.

⁴³¹ This may even require a new generation.

⁴³² Ephesians 6: 12

Throughout its history, the church has grappled with the tensions between the kingdom of God and the challenges of critical contextualization. First-century Israel tried to jam the kingdom of God into a nationalistic model and nearly throttled it. The disciples, even just prior to Jesus' resurrection, asked Him once again, "Lord is it at this time that you are restoring the kingdom to Israel?"⁴³³ Neither Israel nor the disciples could see past their own culture because of persistent political worldviews.

When Gentiles began to flood into the church, challenges arose immediately. Should circumcision be part of the entry requirement? What needs to be added to the gospel? Should they form one church or two? The solution was not to splinter the church into little ethnic subdivisions but to "preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."⁴³⁴ Believers were urged not to return to slavery to "those which by nature are no gods ... or to weak and worthless elemental things" that would enslave them once again.⁴³⁵

Early Christians saw themselves as Israel reconstituted in Christ, an *ethnos hagon* living the reality of Leviticus 19: 20. Christ has broken down the dividing wall and now by His blood, no nation is a stranger to the covenants of promise,⁴³⁶ for "He is our peace,"⁴³⁷ our reconciliation. No longer are Gentiles

⁴³³ Acts 1: 6

⁴³⁴ Ephesians 4: 3

⁴³⁵ Galatians 4: 8 – 9. This concern is echoed by John, in 1 John 2:18 – 23; 4:1; and by Peter in 2 Peter 2:1 – 22; 3:17.

⁴³⁶ Ephesians 2: 11 - 12

aliens. All are citizens of the kingdom.⁴³⁸ Those in the early church shared a common story, a history, an identity, a language and grammar in which kingdom words such as love and grace, kindness, compassion, and service were lived out in daily life. The peculiarities of forgiveness and relationship were reinterpreted through the example and practice of Jesus Christ.⁴³⁹

The exclusive claims of the gospel meant that Christians were expected to respond by acknowledging there was no other Lord but Jesus. Faith in Him supplanted, not supplemented their ancestral religions. Jesus invited people to become part of a *tertium genus*,⁴⁴⁰ a “third race,” and a new supra-culture which extends beyond earthly cultures and time: the culture of the kingdom of God. This called for a new way of living in the world, yet *apart* from its worldview.⁴⁴¹ Evangelism was not heard only as proclamation but concomitant with an invitation to this new way of living. The first Christians lived with a passionate sense of gratitude; an understanding that they should now adopt lifestyles fully pleasing to God; and that Jesus alone was the hope for their nations. They threw off idolatry and passionately embraced Christ, renouncing all other religious allegiances. They behaved differently because they *were* different: they now

⁴³⁷ Ibid, verse 14

⁴³⁸ Ibid, verse 19

⁴³⁹ Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, p. 67

⁴⁴⁰ *Ibid.* Green observes that Harnack made a study of the growing awareness of both Christians and pagans that the Christian community constituted a “*tertium genus*,” a third type of person in the world alongside Romans and Jews. However, it was Tertullian who first used the term, *Scorp 10*.

⁴⁴¹ Romans 12: 2

participated in the divine nature,⁴⁴² and did what is right because they had been born of Him.⁴⁴³ The same is true for us today.

The church under Constantine had not an illustrious, but an infamous history. Violent coercive evangelism partnered with licenses for conquest. Like conjoined twins, what the empire took in quickly benefited the church and vice versa. Dual voices cried, "Convert or die!" Adversaries of the state were enemies of God. Even slavery was sanctioned with anointing oil as nation after nation was skewered through by ships, sword, and with God's aid. Colonial expansionism brought missionary and merchant, gospel and gunpowder in the same vessel.

In the last half of the 20th century, Europe's hold on its African colonies began to relax as one by one countries gained independence and threw off the European Enlightenment-coated missionary enterprise of "civilization." However, as Kalu says, the chief concerns of the era of decolonization were hatched in the high noon of imperialism and many European interests still managed to survive liberation movements.⁴⁴⁴ The result was a birthing of weak local churches with inadequately trained leaders and a dependency on overseas missionary funds.

⁴⁴² 2 Peter 1:4

⁴⁴³ 1 John 2:29

⁴⁴⁴ Ogbu Kalu, "Decolonization of African Churches."

In the end, liberation movements and decolonization did not produce the freedom and prosperity that was hoped for. The response of traditional religious movements was to walk the “Emmaus Road,” returning to historical cultural religious values and practices. For those few who have succeeded in forming a *nouveau riches* black social stratum, aspirations are aimed at obtaining more of the stuff money can buy: cars, houses, goods and gadgets. The effect is that in both situations the church looks and acts no different than their surrounding cultures.

5.1 The Effects of Globalization

In an article entitled, “The Hermeneutics of Fundamentalist Religious Warfare,” Ben-Willie Golo posits that the resurgence in fundamentalist religion around the world is a response to the real or perceived threat of the intrusion of globalization and developments in global society that pose a challenge, in whatever form, to “any traditional religious movement.”⁴⁴⁵ He uses the definition given by Bronislaw Misztal and Anson Shuppe in their book, *Religion and Politics in Comparative Perspective: Revival of Religious Fundamentalism in East and West*: that religious fundamentalism is, “...an instant heuristic remedy to the situation of rapid change, frequently the change that is imposed from without or

⁴⁴⁵ Ben-Willie K. Golo, “The Hermeneutics of Fundamentalist Religious Warfare: Navigating the Power Dynamics of Contemporary Pentecostals/Neo-Pentecostals and the Powers of Globalization. A Protestant Perspective,” <http://www.hf.ntnu.no/cofu/content/golo.pdf>. Accessed July, 2007. Golo is quoting Miroslav Volf, “The Challenge of Protestant Fundamentalism,” in Kūng and Moltmann, *Fundamentalism as an Ecumenical Challenge*, (SCM Press, 1996), p. 98

from above.⁴⁴⁶

Jürgen Moltmann holds the same position, stating that today the world is driven by “a materialistic worldview, which forms the thesis of which fundamentalism is an antithesis.”⁴⁴⁷ He writes,

What is nowadays termed ‘fundamentalism’ is a secondary phenomenon: the primary religious, inter-religious and a-religious challenge is not ‘fundamentalism,’ but the ‘modern world.’⁴⁴⁸

The modern era has created systems which are manifestations that give embodiment to invisible forces or “principalities and powers,” which control socio-cultural institutions (including politics, economics and religion).

Moltmann describes this world not as an undivided universe but one in which the First World has produced the Third World where the masses are not regarded as individuals but as objects.⁴⁴⁹ Materialism secularizes culture, privatizes religion and silences faith.⁴⁵⁰ Seeding from this materialistic worldview is an emergence of a “new religion – the religion of the market,” led by its own “missionaries:” the World Bank and the International Monetary

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁷ Jürgen Moltmann, “Fundamentalism and Modernity,” in Hans Kung and Jürgen Moltmann (Eds.), *Fundamentalism as an Ecumenical Challenge*, (London; SCM Press, 1992), p. 113 as cited by Ben-Willie Golo, “The Hermeneutics of Fundamentalist Religious Warfare.”

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁹ The term “Third World” was first used by French demographer Alfred Sauvy to refer to those developing countries which were isolated from the communist bloc as well as capitalist countries. A noteworthy point is made by political theorist Hannah Arendt, who contends that “The Third World is not a reality but an ideology.” Today terms such as “developing countries,” “less economically developed countries,” or “those countries not technologically advanced,” seem to be more politically correct. One could contend, however, that Moltmann seems to disregard these countries’ lack of economic development and technology prior to colonization.

⁴⁵⁰ Jürgen Moltmann, “Fundamentalism and Modernity,” p. 115

Fund.⁴⁵¹ Both have left their negative social, economic, and ecological trails in Africa as even a cursory glance at African debt shows.

5.2 Summary

Quests for the restoration of national kingdoms, dreams of political and social prosperity have plagued the church through history and compromise the mission of the church with the result that often the church “leaves a blur instead of a mark.”⁴⁵² Yet Paul’s testimony in Philippians calls the church to unhesitatingly present a crystal clear message to a confused world:

*... One thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.*⁴⁵³

What changes in understanding and behavior does this entail? I submit the chart on the next two pages showing the four worldviews covered in the previous chapter as well as the view of reality of the kingdom of God. It is important to note that the God’s kingdom is presented not as a “view” or another perspective, but reality itself.

⁴⁵¹ Ibid.

⁴⁵² Ibid, p. 21

⁴⁵³ Philippians 3: 13b – 14

WORLDVIEWS AND THE REALITY OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

CONCEPT	HEBREW	GREEK	COLONIAL	AFRICAN	KINGDOM
Vision	Macroscopic	Microscopic	Expansionistic (Myopic)	Endoscopic	Inclusive
Focus	Natural	Metaphysical	Eurocentric	Merged dualism Spiritual	Holiness/ Righteousness
Identity	Traditional Historical	Accomplishments	Traditions/ Externals Privilege	Geographical: Tribal (Colour/ Corporate)	Holy Family
Belonging	Community – Ecological	Independent personal Fulfillment	Ethnocentric	Tribal / Ethnocentric	Family Membership
Thinking Expression	Soul	Intellectual	Pragmatic, practical	Cyclic	Metaphorical
Communication	Storytelling	Propositional	Authoritarian	Narrative: religious conversations	Intimacy
Time	Promise - Present age and age to come	Cyclic	Expanding – flowing forwards	Cyclical or Spiral: flowing backwards	Fullness, or Fulfillment
Knowledge	Intuitive	Abstract	Political power and control	Anthropo-centric	Revelational/ Intimate
Building/ Growth	Holistic	Reductionistic	Domination	Resistant (with Assimilation)	Expanding reign of God in sacrificial love
Dwelling Place	The Land	The City	The Empire	The Continent	All Creation

Table 3

WORLDVIEWS AND THE REALITY OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

CONCEPT	HEBREW	GREEK	COLONIAL	AFRICAN	KINGDOM
Authority	Generational	Delegated	Authoritarian	Territorial	Metanarrative King and Kingdom
Male/Female Marriage	Man’s sub- partner Patriarchal	Reproduction and pleasure. National, personal, political	Patriarchal Social Institution	Reproduction/ property / pleasure Patriarchal	Temporal Typological Completeness
Questions	Experiential	Philosophical Analytical	Historical	Ethnic	Service
And it could go on... Example: Church/ Synagogue	Corporate Assembly	Religious Temple	Social Gathering	Local expression	Bride, Body of His Dear Son

Table 3 (continued)

5.3 A Rising Prophetic Voice

The good news is there is an up side to this state of “exile” and “post exile:” between an undesirable return to traditional religion and the creation of a new jet-set aristocracy. The pangs of debt repayment, the dismissive attitude of the elite, and the oppression of the market have driven many to the “warm embrace of hot religion,” as Kalu phrases it.⁴⁵⁴ The spiritual and emotional hunger of those impoverished and oppressed by the religion of the market has not only

⁴⁵⁴ Ogbu Kalu, “The Pentecostal Model in Contemporary Africa,” as cited in Ben-Willie Golo, “The Hermeneutics of Fundamentalist Religions.”

resulted in a return to primal religious beliefs but also a rush into Pentecostal/Charismatic church movements. Here people find freedom from fear, curses, and spirits, and combat issues of sickness, injustice, inequality, etc., through spiritual warfare, and the power of the Spirit of Truth.

Increasingly African Christians, particularly those part of the Pentecostal/Charismatic church, are heard proclaiming the kingdom of God and imagining a new Africa. While retaining the vitality of African cultural concerns, these groups “fit” Africa’s concept of spiritual forces and “mine the interior of [the] primal worldview,” working from the inside out.⁴⁵⁵ The ministry is a practical mix of holiness, evangelism, and intercessory prayer for the deliverance of people and nations from demonic forces, witchcraft, curses, and sorcery. The theology behind the ministry is best explained by Emeka Nwankpa, of Intercessors for Africa,⁴⁵⁶ who shows how African forefathers covenanted the land and its people to various deities; how God’s purposes were hijacked and the land polluted by indigenous practices such as the killing of twins and collusion in the slave trade; how rituals and rulers, festivals and libations are tools that entangle entire communities to ancestral spirits. The connection between events in human lives and events in the spiritual world means responsibility is placed on individuals (without preference to ethnicity), social structures, rulers and those ruled, as well as on larger cosmic battles beyond man’s influence. Through

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁶ Intercessory Prayer Ministry International, http://www.goipmi.com/main.asp?_p=131
Accessed July, 2007

these churches the prophetic voice cries out that the answer to poverty, disease and suffering is found in repentance, confession, and renunciation of idolatrous practices; and calls the church to spiritual warfare through the power of prayer and the strength of a “de-tribalized” Christian community to reform nations. This is the way to regain prosperity and recover from the years the locust has eaten.

There is an African proverb which says, “When spider webs unite they can tie up a lion.” In a continent where nearly 50% of the population is counted as Christian, what could this immense number “tie up” as it presents a united front? What could it loose?

5.4 Demythologizing African Pneumatology

The myths of objectivism and subjectivism that dominate Western culture rest on the belief that unredeemed mankind has access to absolute, unconditional truths from a perspective of nowhere. What both the myths fail to recognize is the way we understand the world through our interactions with it. People perceive truth relative to their cultural understandings of it but evil distorts reality. For Christians who are in a personal subjective relationship with Jesus Christ, The Truth, and therefore one in spirit with Him; His thoughts become

ours. His Spirit in us gives us perspective as we are “seated with Him in heavenly places.”⁴⁵⁷ Jesus said,

I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.⁴⁵⁸

Jesus Christ is the bridge that crosses Lessing’s famous ditch of the subjective and objective realms. The Holy Spirit with us, participating in the text, enables us to know the “then” of the text and the living of it “now.” The Holy Spirit is the only spirit that knows the truth. Those who know Him (and only those who know Him) personally and experientially are able to be kept in truth.⁴⁵⁹

Without this work of the Spirit, a person cannot understand what the Spirit teaches in Scripture ... This work of the Spirit affects the heart and the mind of people in the deepest and fullest way. We cannot fully describe the Spirit’s work by saying, for instance, that regeneration is merely making available to a person in an intellectual way some new analogy. Doubtless the Holy Spirit enables the person involved to see the relevance of certain relations and analogies, but not only analogies in the bible itself, but relations between the biblical teaching and the person’s own life and experience. But it would be false to say that the work of the Holy Spirit is exhausted in making clear any one analogy.⁴⁶⁰

⁴⁵⁷ Ephesians 2: 6

⁴⁵⁸ John 15:15

⁴⁵⁹ John 16: 13

⁴⁶⁰ Vern S. Poythress, “Models in Science and in Biblical Interpretation,” *Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation, Science and Hermeneutics: Implications of Scientific Method for Biblical Interpretation*, Edited by Moisés Silva, (Grand Rapids; Zondervan, 1988), p. 491, as cited by R. A. MacDonald, “Beyond Pentecost: A Pentecostal-Charismatic Hermeneutic Model in a Postmodern Context.”

African traditional thought does not share the same dualism as the West. Subjectivism and objectivism do not constitute a challenge to African epistemology because knowledge does not hold itself separate to experience: both participate in a culture-bound worldview. The “crunch” is, however, that much of African theology sidesteps issues present in the traditional spirit world which directly contradict the teachings of the Bible. These issues are not peripheral to the gospel, but constitute denials of the very heart of a Biblical worldview in terms of knowledge of God, the spirit world, sin, judgment, salvation, human community, suffering, sickness and witchcraft.⁴⁶¹ Despite awareness of the supernatural, Africa’s view of the spirit world and spiritual power differ significantly from the worldview of the Bible. The heavy focus on the Old Testament limits the good news of the New Covenant by forcing it to correspond to the cultural traditions and comfort zones of African primal religious interpretation. Jon Ruthven writes in his article, “Can a Charismatic Theology Be Biblical?”

Wolfhart Pannenberg rightly complained that not only *traditional Protestantism*, but generally, “contemporary theology lacks a doctrine of the spirit that corresponds to the biblical concept of the Spirit.”⁴⁶²

⁴⁶¹ Lenard Nyirongo, *The Gods of Africa or the God of the Bible? The Snares of African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective*, (Potchefstroom; Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education, 1997) as cited in Matthew S. Clark, “The Challenge of Contextualization and Syncretism to Pentecostal Theology and Missions in Africa.”

⁴⁶² Jon Ruthven, “Can a Charismatic Theology Be Biblical? Traditional Theology and Biblical Emphases,” <http://www.logosword.co.uk/articles/biblicalCharismaticTheology-1.htm> Accessed 2007. *Italics in original.*

I believe that indictment can be brought against contemporary African theology. It is also suffering from “controversies only tangentially related to it”⁴⁶³ and lacks a doctrine of the Holy Spirit consistent with Biblical pneumatology, often substituting an understanding of the Spirit’s personhood with an inanimate “force” based on shamanism and employed by diviners who are equated with the Biblical priesthood.⁴⁶⁴ Very little scholastic research has been done on the work of the Holy Spirit in African theology and would be a worthwhile research endeavour.

5.5 Changing Worldview Glasses

In the kingdom, a new humanity emerges: those to whom race and class and gender mean nothing because everything is seen in new perspective for conversion into the kingdom is “conversion unlimited.”⁴⁶⁵ It is a paradigm shift complete with a new story, and a new community, enacted through the church that defines itself by a new set of assumptions, different from those of the world,

⁴⁶³ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁴ See R. Buana Kibongi, who translates *nganga* as priest, as well as Matthew Schoffeleers, “Christ as the Medicine-man and the Medicine-man as Christ: A Tentative History of African Christological Thought,” *Man and Life*, Journal of the Institute of Social Research and Allied Anthropology, Calcutta, vol. 8, 1 & 2, pp. 11 – 28

⁴⁶⁵ Earl Stanley Jones, *The Unshakable Kingdom and The Unchanging Person*, p. 82

any world.⁴⁶⁶ Issues that once separated are now transcended as people become counter-cultural without being “escape artists.”

Jesus clearly defines the gospel as the good news *of the kingdom*.⁴⁶⁷ By substituting other goals, although they may be worthy of attention, the course of the church is diverted and it is rendered powerless to overcome.⁴⁶⁸ Social and economic issues find their solution in the moral standard of the Sermon on the Mount: good news for the poor; release to the captives; recovery of sight for the blind; freedom for victims; a new beginning.⁴⁶⁹

... a strongly charismatic theology is also centrally, a biblical theology, normatively binding on all who claim scripture as their primary principle of religious authority.⁴⁷⁰

Jon Ruthven rightly identifies the primary idea of the kingdom of God is “*the act of ruling rather than a territory ruled.*”⁴⁷¹ The nature of the kingdom is not political; it is spiritual, consisting of works that “destroy the work of the evil one,”⁴⁷² and is demonstrated in the physical, spiritual, ethical and psychological realms. Although the kingdom will come in fullness when Christ returns, it is

⁴⁶⁶ The church in Thessalonica, who “turned from idols to serve the living and true God” is a model both to “all believers in Macedonia and Achaia” and to the contemporary church (1 Thessalonians 1: 7).

⁴⁶⁷ Matthew 24: 14

⁴⁶⁸ Over and over again the history shows that true conversion resulted not from attempts to coerce or out-argue unbelievers, but from a desire to bring them to Christ.

⁴⁶⁹ Matthew 5 – 7

⁴⁷⁰ Jon Ruthven, “Can a Charismatic Theology Be Biblical?” *Italics not in the original.*

⁴⁷¹ Ibid.

⁴⁷² 1 John 3: 8

already partially manifested through Jesus' ministry and those who follow Him.⁴⁷³ I agree with Ruthven that these signs and wonders of the Holy Spirit's work rather than pointing to the gospel *are* the gospel: a demonstration of the core mission of Jesus Christ to bring the *shalom* of the kingdom to mankind.

5.6 Conclusion

An African proverb says that the Sankofa bird knows the journey's end because it looks backwards to see where it came from. Post-independence Ghana used this symbol to promote national unity and encouraged Ghanaians to go back to their pre-colonial cultural heritage. Sankofa can benefit the church: not by looking at national or cultural beginnings but from a longer view to Jesus and to the gospel of the kingdom of God, for it is there our heritage is found.

In Jesus the kingdom became an *incarnation* – a visible person. Now the Spirit leads His Body, the church, as a wedge into new socio-cultural settings where it visibly demonstrates the nature of the kingdom of God and manifests Christ to the world: "...not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction."⁴⁷⁴ It is Christ in us who frees us to do what is right; it is His rule in our lives in our concrete historical and contextual situations that proclaims the dawning of the kingdom of God here, now, on

⁴⁷³ Jon Ruthven, "Can a Charismatic Theology Be Biblical?"

⁴⁷⁴ 1 Thessalonians 1:5

earth. "The ultimate allegiance of those whose father is Abraham," writes Miroslav Volf, "can be only to the God of 'all families of the earth, not to any particular country, culture, or family with their local deities."⁴⁷⁵ God is transcendent, and the land is His (Lev 25:23).⁴⁷⁶ We are but strangers and sojourners.

To be a child of Abraham and Sarah and to respond to the call of their God means to make an exodus, to start a voyage, become a stranger (Genesis 23:4; 24: 1 - 9). ... There are, of course, wrong ways of being a stranger, such as when an alien culture (say one of the Western cultures) is idolatrously proclaimed as the gospel in another culture (say one of the Asian cultures). But the solution for being a stranger in a wrong way is not full naturalization, but being a stranger in the *right* way. ... At the very core of Christian identity lies an all-encompassing change of loyalty, from a given culture with its gods to the God of all cultures. A response to a call from that God entails rearrangement of a whole network of allegiances. ... Departure is part and parcel of Christian identity.⁴⁷⁷

*Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done
On earth as it is in heaven.
(Matthew. 6: 10)*

⁴⁷⁵ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, p. 39

⁴⁷⁶ c/f Exodus 19:5

⁴⁷⁷ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, pp. 39 - 40

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