Missional Interpretation of Scripture

During the final two decades of the 20th century several new movements in theology developed in North America. One of these was known as the Missional Church or Missional Theology movement. The word “missional” was becoming a buzz word in that era and a wide variety of approaches to church and business fly under the banner “missional.” However, the Missional Theology movement and the Missional Church approach have a very specific orientation. Missional Theology traces its theological roots to Barth in the middle third of the 20th century, but it was the work of Lesslie Newbigin that sparked the development of Missional Theology.

Newbigin, whose life spanned most of the 20th century, was a British missionary from the Church of Scotland to Madras, India, and who became one of the first bishops of the Church of South India. Though he made a significant impact in the ecumenical movement during his days in India, Newbigin found a second vocation when he returned to England following his missionary service. Encountering what many regarded as a thoroughly secularized culture in Europe generally and Britain particularly, he proposed a strategy of mission for evangelizing the post-Christian West. His books, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (1978); *Foolishness to the Greek: Gospel and Western Culture* (1986); *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society* (1989); and *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth* (1991), became influential in the emerging Missional Church Movement in the United States. Newbigin and David Bosch (*Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shift in Theology of Mission* (1991), provided an integration of missiology and theology that found North American expression in “The Gospel and Our Culture Network”, a think tank on Missional Church and Missional Theology, headed by George Hunsberger. Part of the publishing endeavor of “The Gospel and Our Culture Network” included a series of books published by Eerdmans Publishing Company collected as “The Gospel and Our Culture Series.” Perhaps most influential of these books was *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (1998) edited by Darrell L. Guder.

It is this focused understanding of Missional Church and Missional Theology as articulated “The Gospel and Our Culture Network” and inspired by the work of Newbigin and Bosch that is the perspective behind this paper. This understanding of “Missional Church” was influential in the final years of Wilbur Brannon’s tenure as Director of Clergy Development for the Church of the Nazarene and, beginning in 2004-2005, the NTS faculty engaged this perspective and began seeking ways to articulate it from the standpoint of Wesleyan Theology.

The fundamental transition point for the Missional Church/Missional Theology movement was the shift from speaking of the “mission of the church” to the “mission of God.” The mission of God is the starting point for Missional Theology. From this perspective the church does not have its own mission, but participates in the Mission of God. In its most fundamental form the Mission of God is the restoration of all creation to God’s creation design and purposes. This fundamental orientation to the mission of God has significant implications for Missional Theology. Obviously the nature of God as a missional God is important and Missional Theology gives significant attention to the Triune being of God. The central place of Christ in the mission of God to redeem and restore all creation makes Christology important. The role of the Spirit in enabling the church to participate in God’s mission gives Pneumatology a special place. Obviously, Ecclesiology is critical as the church comes to understand itself primarily in terms of its participation in the mission of God. Theological anthropology – the nature of human beings – . Hamartiology, and Cosmology are of special interest to Missional Theology because God’s original creation designs of both human and non-human creation is the goal toward which we work and the loss of creation perfection through the sin is the whole reason for God’s mission. For this reason Missional Theology has a particular interest in culture as the way in which human societies organize and express themselves. This leads to significant emphasis on Soteriology because the redemption and restoration of Creation is – again- the whole point of Missional Theology.

Given these theological focal points and the influence of Barth in its formulation Missional Theology has a clear interest in Scripture and for the last four years “The Gospel and Our Culture Network” has sought to clarify a missional way of reading Scripture, a Missional Hermeneutic. In 2008 George Hunsberger identified four distinguishable, but overlapping ways in which missional readings of Scripture are being done.

The first approach or stream of missional hermeneutics Hunsberger identifies as focusing on the missional direction of the story. This approach declares that the ***framework*** for biblical interpretation is the story it (the Bible) tells of the mission of God and the formation of a community sent to participate in it. This approach has perhaps been the most influential in discussions of missional interpretations of Scripture. Wesleyans will find this approach appealing because it begins with the large sweep of Scripture and interprets specific passages in light of the grand scheme of the mission of God. The approach is also appealing in the contemporary context because it tends to be narratively focused. The large sweep of Scripture gives special attention to Genesis 1 and 2 as well as certain Psalms and passages from the prophets that describe God’s original creation design. From Genesis 3 on the impact of sin on God’s creation is revealed and at least from Genesis 12 on the steps of God’s missional plan of redemption unfold with the life, death, and resurrection of Christ forming a significant climax, though not the final climax. The birth of the church to participate in the mission of God is seen in Acts and the Epistles and the final chapters of Revelation reveal the ultimate goal and final climax of God’s mission, the redemption and restoration of all creation.

Old Testament scholar, Christopher Wright, illustrates this approach. The most detailed presentations occur in his three books, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (2006); *Knowing Jesus through the Old Testament* (2007); and *The Mission of God’s People: A Biblical Theology of the Church’s Mission* (2010), though he has also written a number of articles and chapters in edited books that present this approach to missional interpretation of Scripture. A second and increasingly influential voice in this approach to missional interpretation is Michael Goheen. His 2011 book, *A Light to the Nations: The Missional Church and the Biblical Story*, highlights the major sections/subjects of Scripture that reveal the unfolding narrative of God’s mission. His book contains the following chapter titles, “God Forms Israel as a Missional People,” “Israel Embodies Its Missional Role and Identity amid the Nations,” “Jesus Gathers an Eschatological People to Take Up Their Missional Calling,” “The Death and Resurrection of Jesus and the Church’s Missional Identity,” “The Missional Church in the New Testament Story,” and “New Testament Images of the Missional Church.” He concludes with a chapter on “What Might This Look Like Today?” sharing commitments arising from this missional way of reading Scripture in the life of two congregations in Canada that he has recently pastored.

This approach to interpreting Scripture does not deny or negate other methods of historical, literary, and theological exegesis. Rather, it situates the interpretation of individual passages in light of the grand narrative of Scripture. In this sense this approach can be related to the traditional biblical theology approach to Scripture that was influential in the mid-20th century. When one applies this approach to a specific passage, the whole range of exegetical methods are in play, but the orienting question regarding the ultimate canonical purpose of the passage is the role the passage plays in the grand narrative. This not only enables us to see the purpose of the passage in the biblical context, but also the way in which we should read it in our context.

A brief example of this approach with reference to 1 John 4:7-12. From historical exegesis we discover that 1 John was written in the context of a split within the Johannine church. This particular passage with its focus on love attempts to prevent further fragmentation of the church and to create the relational context in which reconciliation between the divided parties might be achieved, though the author is not willing to receive back those who deny that Jesus came “in the flesh.” The call to love one another echoes the command of Jesus given in the Gospel of John and the direct statement in verse 8 that God is love provide a profound theological foundation for the command. The author notes that the sending of Christ as the atoning sacrifice for our sins was (and is) the supreme evidence of God’s love. The appeal is that we ought to love one another since God loved us so much. This appeal can easily degenerate into moralism without the kind of theological grounding provided by a missional reading of the passage.

The declaration that God is love is not nearly so much an ontological statement as it is a missional explanation. The reason God sent his son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins is because that is the way God has chosen to advance his mission of redeeming and restoring all creation. The truth that God is love points us to the fundamental motivation for God’s mission. Because of he is love and because of his love for us, God’s mission is our redemption and the restoration of all creation. As the church we are invited into that mission which is a mission of love and so we love one another within the church, we love those who have been but no longer are part of the church, and we love those who are not yet, but we hope soon will become part of the community of love participating with the God of love in the loving mission of redemption and restoration of all creation. Verse 12 brings this understanding to its fulfillment, “if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.” It is by loving one another that we participate in the missional life of God which is a life of love. The perfecting of God’s love in us is not an abstraction or an individual religious experience. It is the concrete reality of loving one another in community and in the world.

The second approach or stream of missional hermeneutics Hunsberger identifies as focusing on the missional purpose of the biblical writings. This approach declares that the ***aim*** of biblical interpretation is to fulfill the equipping purpose of the biblical writings. “Darrell Guder is the one who has most forcefully made this case. ‘Jesus personally formed the first generation of Christians for his mission,’ he argues. ‘After that, their testimony became the tool for continuing formation.’ (2004:62) Thus, ‘the apostolic strategy of continuing formation of missional communities became the motivation of their writings.’ The New Testament writings have as their purpose to equip the churches for witness. (2008)” Though Guder gives primary exposition of this approach in terms of the New Testament (especially the epistles), Goheen extends this understanding to the whole of the canon. He declares that the “’Old Testament scriptures were written to 'equip' God's people for their missional purposes.’ The New Testament also, he goes on to say, was written in order to ‘form, equip, renew the church for their mission in the world.’”

This approach does not deny the grand narrative sweep of Scripture as an interpretative tool, but begins with the role a specific passage plays in the formation and equipping of the people of God. This means attention to the genre and literary forms used by biblical authors and to the historical contexts in which they wrote. This approach also builds on the assumption of narrative interpretation that the formation of identity is a fundamental purpose of the biblical materials. Once we discern how a passage functioned in Scripture to form and equip the first audience for their participation in the mission of God, it is a very short step to see how the passage should function for us today.

Lets return to 1 John 4:7-12 and think about it in terms of how the author may have been wishing to form or equip his readers. Clearly the author is seeking to form his congregation as people of love. The first task to which he commits himself to form them into a people who love one another. If they can be formed as people who love one another then he promises that they will be born of God and will know God. It appears that the author wants to draw them into one of his favorite definitions of Christian community, those who have been born of God or born again as the Gospel of John puts it. He has already used the language of little children, children, young people, and children of God. In that culture to be a child of someone meant to share an identity and a character. Children of a Father demonstrated the family characteristics of the father, which were the characteristics of the family as a whole. The author of 1 John is attempting to form his readers into authentic children of God who demonstrate the characteristic and identity of love with God. This is characteristic language and purpose of this author.

But he also promises that they will know God if they are formed as people of love. Here the author offers something he knows that his readers highly value. The culture from which they came before their entrance into faith and the church valued religious knowledge, *gnosis* in Greek. Their culture united knowing God with gnostic view that anything material was evil. This meant that Jesus could not have come from God in the flesh, since the flesh was matter and thus evil. The author of our epistle is trying to form his readers into people who love one another and if they will do so he promises them the ultimate good of their culture – knowing God – but knowing him through Jesus Christ who came in the flesh to be an atoning sacrifice for their sins.

If the author can form this community of love among his people then they are equipped to embody the love that God is and the love that God shows in Christ in their relationships within the community and to those outside. The first readers of 1 John cannot become participants in the mission of God to redeem and restore the world unless they learn to love. For them learning to love will not come as some disembodied religious experience. It will come to them through the concrete and difficult task of loving the other persons in their community, even those who have attachments to the people who split from the church and brought much pain to it.

With this focus on the missional aim of the text, it is easy to see how it applies to us today. 1 John 4:7-12 intends to form us into people who love each other, first within the community we call the church. But this love is not a theoretical concept or an abstraction in which we hold hands and sing, “We Are One in the Bond of Love,” and then go our separate ways with no concern for, no thought of, and no relationship with those whose hands we held until the next week or two when we see them again in a church service and again hold hands and sing the same song. The love that we are to have for one another is the love that we have received from God who loved us in such a way that he sent his Son to redeem us from our sins. If we are truly formed as a community that loves one another like God loves us, we will forgive each other’s sins, we will cover for each other’s failures, we will give of what is precious to us to bring those others into the community of love. To the degree that we are formed into those kind of people, to that degree we are born again and know God. The abstraction of our theology accomplishes little toward this goal. It is in the concrete and difficult relationships with each other where we learn to love like God loves that we actually begin to know God.

The third approach or stream of missional hermeneutics Hunsberger identifies as focusing on the missional locatedness of the readers. The ***approach***  required for a faithful reading of the Bible is from the missional location of the Christian community. Hunsberger identifies the work of Michael Barram as most characteristic of this approach. Barram “defines a missional hermeneutic as ‘an approach to the biblical text rooted in the basic conviction that God has a mission in the world and that we read Scripture as a community called into and caught up by those divine purposes.’ He makes the claim that ‘Christian congregations caught up in the missio Dei read the Bible from a social location characterized by mission.’” The language of “social location” was not used in Biblical studies until about 25-30 years ago. The phrase reflects a post-modern assumption that all communication proceeds from and to a context in which writers/speakers and readers/listeners “make judgments, understand, value, and think.” The concept of social location assumes that purely objective communication does not exist. What one says or writes and what one hears or reads is significantly shaped by the context – the social location – in which one lives and finds identity.

Barram agrees with Guder that the Scriptures exist for our equipping. However, he does not assume that the focus should be on those who interpret the text for the community, telling them how the text is trying to form or equip them. Rather than scholars or pastors standing above the community to equip it, Barram envisions scholars and pastors being part of the community that reads Scripture asking how it is to read Scripture faithfully. Hunsberger focuses the issue of the social locatedness of the community in reading Scripture by appealing to the Latin American base ecclesial community theologian, Pablo Richard. Richard described hermeneutic space as “that institutional *place* where a specific interpretive *subject* gets its identity, proper to that place and different from any other subject. This space makes a certain *interpretation* of the Bible proper to that place and different from those other interpretations made in other hermeneutic *places*. Our interpretation of the Bible depends on the place where we find ourselves.

There are two traditionally accepted hermeneutic *spaces* which are thoroughly legitimate and always useful and necessary. The first is the *academic space*. These are the faculties of theology, the seminaries, and centers for studies. The Bible is interpreted here scientifically, according to the canons of the methods of historical-criticism, of classical literary methods, and of the new methods of human sciences. In this space, the subject of the Bible's interpretation is the expert, the exegete, the biblical professor, the graduate of biblical sciences and other related sciences.

The second traditional hermeneutic *space* is that of the *institution of the liturgy* of the Church. In it the Bible is read and interpreted in the context of the liturgy and in the context of the ordinary teaching and magisterial function of the Church.... In this liturgical space, the celebration of the Word is done within the community, but this community follows the hermeneutic logic dictated by liturgical prescriptions, with its calendar, its rules and liturgical norms. In this hermeneutic space the subject is the ordained minister or the layman authorized to exercise his function.

The reading of the Bible in community is beginning to provide a third new and just as legitimate and necessary space for the experience of and the correct interpretation of God's Word. We would like to provisionally call this the *communitary space*. In it the Bible is read and interpreted in community.... The interpretation of the Bible performed in community possesses characteristics which are different from the academic or liturgical-institutional interpretations. The community, in the first place, is a space where those who normally cannot share in society (the poor, the rejected, the youth, women, indigenous natives) can participate. It assumes its importance in places where large institutions do not hold sway. It is also a place where solidarity and spirituality, commitment to freedom and gospel inspired mission are found. The community, inasmuch as it is a direct and representative expression of the Church as the People of God, is the space par excellence for spiritual, mystical, prophetic and apocalyptic creativity.... In this space *the subject* of the interpretation of the Bible is neither the exegete nor the ordained minister but the community itself.”

Barram understands the missional interpretation of Scripture to occur when the church understands its social location as a community participating in the mission of God. The church asks, “How does this passage equip us to be a community participating in the mission of God?” The church does not look to some outside experts – scholars or administrative/church leaders – to tell it how the text equips it. The church, which includes scholars and administrative/church leaders as part of it, asks the text to form it into a missional community.

Barram identifies six questions as among those (and illustrating those) asked by a church interpreting Scripture from the social location of a missional church:

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

Notice the way these questions interlace the community’s reading of the text and actual text itself.

Returning to 1 John 4:7-12, reading the text from a missional location would begin not with individuals reading the text (whether scholars, pastors, or lay leaders). Rather it would begin with a communal reading in which the question was “what does this text mean for us as it equips us for our missional identity?” Such a community would likely ask, “what does this text about loving one another say about our community practices? Do our actions, our behavior, show that we love one another? What changes in our practice might bring about a clearer demonstration of love for one another and of God’s love within us?” They might well ask, “In what ways do we demonstrate redemptive and atoning love for each other? Do we cover each other’s sins? Do we demonstrate forgiveness in a public way? What evidence is there that God is living within us? Do we have any measures that would suggest God’s love is being perfected in us?”

Such questions do not have predictable answers. Answers to such questions are not found in commentaries or sermons? They are found in dialogue and community openness in conversation. The impact of Scripture is ultimately not discovered in the content of the biblical exegesis, but in the transformation of the community as it examines itself in light of the text.

The fourth approach or stream of missional hermeneutics Hunsberger identifies as dealing with the missional engagement with cultures. The gospel functions as the interpretive *matrix* within which the received biblical tradition is brought into critical conversation with a particular human context. Hunsberger identifies Jim Brownson as the pioneer of this approach toward missional interpretation of Scripture. This approach considers how the biblical authors as leaders of a missional community addressed “the people of their own time and place in terms of the received tradition. How do we interpret the dynamic of the way they draw on elements of prior tradition and bring them into critical relationship with the current moment? This is happening, of course, throughout the Old Testament period. Brownson, though, is drawn especially to ask the question about what is happening in the New Testament when authors appropriate Old Testament materials and with them engage the moments of the new circumstance of living "in Christ." How are they doing that and what is at stake?

This feature is important to watch, Brownson assumes, because what we can observe New Testament authors to be doing in this regard has a parallel with what Christ-followers in every place and culture are doing when they (we) give witness to the good news. In such cases, the fruit of what the New Testament authors did has come to be part of the received canonical tradition. But the way they functioned, in addition to where it led them, is important for the formation of our own missional hermeneutic. What happens in the New Testament, in other words, is paradigmatic for the daily engagement of the gospel with our own culture or cultures today. This encounter is the stuff of the church's calling and mission.”

Brownson built on the significant work of J. Christiaan Beker, the Pauline scholar who taught at Princeton in the last quarter of the 20th century. Beker is well known for developing Paul’s theology through a hermeneutical spiral seeking to identify Paul’s coherent core theological convictions by reading across his letter which gave contextually contingent interpretation to that coherent core. Brownson believed there was at least one more piece in Paul’s thought. This led him “ultimately to posit a third, perhaps less tangible but nonetheless critical, element in what Paul was doing. That is, there was some inner guidance system, an inner gyroscope, that guided Paul with respect to which parts of the tradition were brought to bear upon which dimensions of the presenting context, and in what particular ways. This Brownson has called the ‘interpretive matrix,’ and the gospel as Paul has come to grasp it was that matrix!” Brownson believed that for Paul the gospel as most fundamentally “the good news that in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we see the culmination of God's saving purpose for the world.”

Though Brownson did his work with reference to Paul and Hunsberger illustrated this fourth approach with the work of Ross Wagner’s work on Romans, the text we have been considering today can also be interpreted in light of the way the Johannine understanding of the gospel challenges the culture of first century Ephesus. We might well consider the Johannine understanding of the gospel to incorporate God’s love for the world, God’s sending of his Son into the world to redeem the world, the appropriation of that love through believing in Christ and receiving life in his name, and the embodiment of that love through the formation of a community characterized by the members loving one another.

This understanding of the Johannine gospel provided the matrix by which 1 John challenges the assumptions of his community inherited from the culture of Ephesus at the end of the 1st Christian century. Ephesus was at the intersection of the East and the West in the Roman Empire. As such there was a significant gnostic/mystery religions influence in the religiosity of the city at that time. Salvation was the result of knowledge of God received through initiation into the mystery of the religion. That knowledge was individualistic and devalued matter. Deity was disconnected from humanity. Deity had no passion, but was unmoved mover. Flesh was evil and a threat to one’s immortality. Sin was not moral, but lack of true *gnosis*. One could be confident of salvation through this knowledge mediated by initiation into the mystery without one’s life being changed and without consideration of anyone else.

Such cultural assumptions were radically challenged by the proclamation of a God who loved, a God who became incarnate and took on human flesh. These assumptions were challenged by the gospel that one could know God and participate in the life of God by believing in the incarnate Christ and by loving one another. The individualism of the gnostic and mystery religion approaches was challenged by the Christian expectation of a community which demonstrated its salvation by loving one another.

The same Johannine gospel challenges a number of assumptions that fly under the banner of Christianity even to this day.

**Conclusion:**

Neither Hunsberger nor I believe that these four approaches are mutually exclusive or contradictory. Hunsberger frequently illustrated one approach by quoting from the primary promoter of a different approach. I am sure that some biblical texts are more easily read through a missional lens using one approach rather than another, but in many, if not most, texts these four readings compliment each other and often overlap in the interpretative results they produce. Hunsberger gives the following four question summary of these approaches:

1.     What is the story of the biblical narrative and how does it implicate us? (*missio Dei*)

2.     What is the purpose of the biblical writings in the life of its hearers? (equipping witness)

3.     How shall the church read the Bible faithfully today? (located questions)

4.     What guides our use of the received tradition in the context before us? (gospel matrix)

I would probably suggest that when attempting to incorporate all four that the fourth question be considered third and the question of how the church reads the Bible faithfully today become the final question that most thoroughly subjects ourselves to examination of our life together in light of the Scripture.

A missional interpretation of Scripture does not involve a series of radically new and different methods of interpretation. It involves the standard questions of historical, cultural, literary, and theological exegesis asked from a different perspective, the perspective of the mission of God in redeeming and restoring the world. That perspective builds on a characteristically Wesleyan vision of “new creation” and provides an orientation to Scripture that invites us to become faithful participants in the mission of God.