Preaching and Missional Engagement: Indwelling the Word, Performing the Word, Engaging the World

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ABSTRACT

This project is an appreciative inquiry of a homiletical method that involves interiorizing Scripture for performance as it’s offered at Pillar Church leading to increased missional engagement within the congregation. Through conversations with members of the Pillar congregation, as well as reflections from other pastors who practice a similar homiletical method, there is evidence that this homiletical method influences congregational missional engagement. The process is long and requires patience, but the stories suggest there is a connection.

As this project unfolds, I do hope to demonstrate through the lives of some of the participants in Pillar’s life and worship that there is a relationship between indwelling the Word for the sermon and a congregation’s missional life. I intend to offer a homiletical vision rooted in the missionary work of Leslie Newbigin, and the pastoral work of Eugene Peterson. This vision is demonstrated in the church’s first sermon by the Apostle Peter at Pentecost. A homiletical vision that calls the preacher to indwell the story of God as it is given in Scripture and offered to the people of God such that the missional engagement of a congregation increases. I intend to offer a homiletical method congruent with this vision that engages Newbigin’s notion of indwelling the word and Peterson’s notion of the pastoral ministry. In this way it will bring into conversation two leading voices in different sectors of the Western church today who are often not recognized as calling the church to a similar vision. A consequent contribution of this project will be to identify and introduce a theological paradigm operative in both Newbigin and Peterson that neither clearly articulate as a pattern. That is, God’s revelation is the necessary
starting point for the developing of a *plausibility structure* for the gospel which requires the Christian to *indwell* Scripture to enter that plausibility structure in order *to act* in unbroken continuity with the heart and message of the gospel if the church is going to engage its context in mission. In other words, for both Newbigin and Peterson, revelation is the starting point which creates a plausibility structure that is entered by indwelling Scripture in order to act in faithful and fruitful witness to Jesus Christ in the world.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

I was sitting on the brown leather chair in our living room, with my feet resting on the ottoman, several years ago. Our then four-year-old daughter, Miriah, was playing with a set of Strawberry Shortcake dolls on the coffee table near me. That day we had purchased a Strawberry Shortcake book that came with several dolls, including Strawberry and all her friends. I was reading. Miriah was playing. I was enjoying the opportunity to overhear her hosting conversations for her little friends. She was imagining the details of their days, relationships, and lives. She had entered a whole new world. She was in Strawberry Shortcake Land. At one point, she stopped talking for them, picked up the Strawberry Shortcake book, and hopped on my lap. She invited me kindly, “Daddy, will you read for me?” I was delighted and started to read the little book about Strawberry and her friends. When the book was finished Miriah hopped off my lap and went back to playing with her Strawberry Shortcake friends on the coffee table.

Miriah entered the land of Strawberry Shortcake and friends and was doing her best to play out their lives in such a way that made sense with their characters established in the book. In a certain way she was making sure that the way she comported herself, as host of their play lives, was plausible in light of the character development established in the book. She was not looking for specific lines to say or to replay verbatim the details of the book. She was indwelling\(^1\) the story of Strawberry Shortcake so as to play it out on the coffee table in unbroken continuity\(^2\) with the book.

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\(^1\) The word “indwelling” will be used frequently throughout this project and will be defined more thoroughly in chapter 2. For the sake of clarity, the word “indwelling” in this project means to interiorize the story of God as its revealed in Scripture so deeply that one becomes only tacitly aware of its influence. Indwelling
Miriah’s indwelling is a central act of Christianity - a central act of missiology.

As Leslie Newbigin writes,

Authentic Christian thought and action begin not by attending to the aspirations of the people, not by answering the questions they are asking in their terms, not by offering solutions to the problems as the world sees them. It must begin and continue by attending to what God has done in the story of Israel and supremely in the story of Jesus Christ. It must continue by indwelling that story so that it is our story, the way we understand the real story. And then, and this is the vital point, to attend with open hearts and minds to the real needs of people in the way that Jesus attended to them, knowing that the real need is that which can only be satisfied by everything that comes from the mouth of God (Matthew 4:4). As we share in the life of worship of the Church, through fellowship, Word and sacrament, we indwell the story and from within that story we seek to be the voice and the hands of Jesus for our time and place.3

Newbigin suggests that before an evangelistic effort can happen or justice mission can occur or mercy movement can take place, the church as a whole community and a gathering of individuals must *indwell* the story of Jesus as it comes to us in Scripture, through the sacraments, and among the community of believers. He invites Christians to immerse themselves in the story that we become characters in the story who are living, moving, acting, and behaving as the ongoing actors of a redemption story. Or as he puts it, “How does the telling of [the biblical story] challenge the reigning worldview? The answer is that it can do so through the witness of a community which, in unbroken continuity with the biblical actors and witnesses, indwells the story the Bible tells.”4

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4 Ibid., 97.
The Problem

The missional church movement has been an incredible development for the church in North America over the last thirty years. The reflections offered by the Gospel in Our Culture Network (GCN) awakened the church from its decades long slumber. The practical theologians who have developed and popularized the work of the Gospel in Our Culture Network have helped plant hundreds of churches across the United States and invited mainline Protestant churches into conversations that were necessary for it to have. I am deeply indebted to the work that has already been done by those missional church theologians and pastors.

The leading missional theologian is Lesslie Newbigin. Newbigin is widely acknowledged as one of the leading voices in the missional church movement. He was a missionary to India over two stints for the better part of forty years only to return to his home country of England to realize that it, too, needed a missionary engagement with the gospel. He set his sights on the Western World, namely Europe and North America, in the latter part of his life. He urged the Western church to be an agent of mission with God in those places. He wrote of the church,

The church is the bearer to all the nations of a gospel that announces the kingdom, the reign, and the sovereignty of God. It calls men and women to repent of their false loyalty to other powers, to become believers in the one true sovereignty, and so to become corporately a sign, instrument, and foretaste of that sovereignty of the one true and living God over all nature, all nations, and all human lives. It is not meant to call men and women out of the world into a safe religious enclave but to call them out in order to send them back as agents of God’s kingship.5

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His use of the phrase sign, instrument and foretaste caught hold among missional church leaders and writers.\(^6\) His vision for the church as sign, instrument and foretaste is the operative definition for me of the missionary nature of the church.

A word search of the leading missional church literature shows that nearly every one of them borrows his language of sign, instrument and foretaste. Although Newbigin is widely regarded as a primary leader in the missional church movement far fewer, if any, missional church leaders and authors have taken up his notion of indwelling the Word. Very few pay attention to the role of preaching in the missional church and none pay attention to the way that indwelling the Word for the sermon increases a congregation’s missional engagement.

There may be any number of reasons for this lack of attention to preaching and Newbigin’s idea of indwelling the Word. First of all, Newbigin himself insists on a declericalized theology, that is a commitment of the pastoral leadership to empower the laity into mission.\(^7\) Missional engagement is not meant to be left to the professional theologians and pastors. Newbigin’s emphasis on a declericalized theology reduces the Protestant focus on preaching. Secondly, Newbigin wrote profusely; and books like Foolishness to the Greeks\(^8\) and The Open Secret\(^9\) pay little to no attention to indwelling the Word. If those are a person’s primary sources of Newbigin’s thought and call to

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\(^7\) Newbigin, Foolishness to the Greeks, 83.

\(^8\) Ibid.

action, for the missional church, it is very likely an emphasis on indwelling the Word would be minimal.\(^\text{10}\) Third, the lack of attention on indwelling the Word may also be a result of a more felt need among missional church thinkers and practitioners to awaken the Western church from its decades long slumber to now engage its context with a missionary encounter of the gospel. The conviction is that the central \textit{task} of the church is a missionary one. While Newbigin insists in multiple places that the church’s missionary nature is not opposed to the call to indwell the Word. However, the state of the church at the end of and turn of the 20th century required a focus on the missionary nature of the church. To be clear, my purpose is not to take away that necessary alarm but to enliven it with Newbigin’s own invitation to indwell the Word as a missionary encounter. I desire to heed mission and ecclesiology through the practice of indwelling the Word as Scripture performance in a sermon.

The problem as I review \textit{missional} church literature is that it largely ignores the task of preaching. There are a few notable exceptions, particularly Clay Schmidt\(^\text{11}\) and the book \textit{Sending and Gathering} or Al Tizon and his work, \textit{Missional Preaching}.\(^\text{12}\) Acknowledging their efforts, there still remains a very small number of missional church theologians and pastors addressing the necessity and centrality of preaching for the missional church. I have co-taught a graduate level course with Rev. Brian Keepers at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan titled \textit{Preaching and the Missional Imagination}. One of the great challenges we find in teaching the class is the lack of

\(^{10}\) On the other hand, Newbigin writes about it extensively in \textit{The Gospel in a Pluralist Society} and it shows up in more general ways in books like \textit{The Good Shepherd} and the \textit{Household of God}. To excuse anyone for highlighting Newbigin’s \textit{sign, instrument and foretaste} call on the church while simultaneously ignoring his insistence on indwelling is weak in my mind but possible.


resources that are specific to preaching and the missional church. The practical theologians who do address preaching spend very little, if any, time focusing their attention on the way Scripture appears in the sermon or the necessity of the preacher to indwell the Word as a central commitment to nurture a congregation’s missional engagement with culture.

The lack of attention to indwelling the Word in preaching runs the risk of reducing preaching, specifically missional preaching, to a kind of utility. Preaching points to simply doing something. Hearers might then serve at the local community kitchen, volunteer at the local rescue mission, or invest in a denomination’s foreign mission agency. The church can organize events and opportunities for the congregation to engage in, such as canned food drives, fundraisers for fresh water wells in foreign countries, or collecting items to fill backpacks for the local public schools. All of these attend to matters of justice and mercy, but run the risk of leaving the congregation dislocated from the story and out of touch with why they are doing what they are doing. To borrow from Newbigin, continuity is broken.13

Furthermore, reducing missionality merely to actions to be accomplished by people in the church significantly reduces the place of disabled people, elderly people and young children in the life of the church. Any version of church that that excludes based on ability lives contrary to the very heart of the story of God. In addition, preaching itself, the act of proclaiming the gospel to any gathering of people, is marginalized. Preaching simply is not necessary. Preaching may be welcomed as a moment to call the congregation to act, insisted upon for the job security of the pastoral staff or endured out of obligation, but its vibrancy and centrality for the missionary nature of church is gone.

13 Newbigin, Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 97.
Among the challenges in reducing the centrality of preaching in the missional church conversation is that it takes away one of the primary moments of a congregation’s corporate engagement with Scripture and the primary opportunity to indwell the Word. Preaching then is reduced to a public therapeutic address for self-improvement. Christian life, faith, and mission are then simply things individual people do on their own time to be better people.\textsuperscript{14} The tendency towards self-improvement is highlighted by the results of a recent survey published by Christian Smith.\textsuperscript{15} He argues that the church in the United States has been “colonized” by a very different form of religion altogether, what he calls \textit{Moralistic Therapeutic Deism}.\textsuperscript{16} He writes, “We suggest that the de facto dominant religion among contemporary U.S. teenagers is what we might call ‘Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.’”\textsuperscript{17} And Kenda Creasy Dean, reflecting on the research of Christian Smith, puts it like this,

Churches seem to have offered teenagers a kind of “diner theology”: a bargain religion, cheap but satisfying, whose gods require little in the way of fidelity or sacrifice. Never mind that centuries of Christians have read Jesus’ call to lay down one’s life for others as the signature feature of Christian love (John 15:13), or that God’s self-giving enables us to share the grace of Christ when ours is pitifully insufficient. Diner theology is much easier to digest than all this—and it is far safer, especially for malleable youth. So, who can blame churches, really, for earnestly ladling this stew into teenagers, filling them with an agreeable porridge about the importance of being nice, feeling good about yourself, and saving God for emergencies? We have convinced ourselves that this is the gospel, but in fact it is much closer to another mess of pottage, an unacknowledged but widely held religious outlook among American teenagers that is primarily dedicated, not to loving God, but to avoiding interpersonal friction. There are inspiring exceptions, of course, but for the most part we have traded the kind of faith confessed and embodied in the church’s most long-standing traditions for the

\textsuperscript{14} Newbigin, \textit{Foolishness to the Greeks}, 1-21.


\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 162.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.,162.
savory stew of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. And, for the most part, young people have followed suit.

Both Smith and Dean identify the state of the faith for youth in America as a way for gauging the teaching and preaching of the church. While there is certainly no easy answer or quick fix to the state of faith for the church in America, following Lesslie Newbigin’s invitation to indwell the Word would be a helpful step in the right direction. By indwelling the Word, the congregation is regularly immersed in the story of God that centers on and culminates in the redemption of all things accomplished through Christ’s life, death, resurrection, ascension and return. So, preaching remains centered on proclaiming Christ. As Newbigin writes, “We have to preach Christ as Savior and as Lord, both as the one who helps and delivers and comforts us, and as the one who has the right to absolute rule over our lives.”18

Not only is the removal of preaching from the missional conversation a general concern for the life of the church, it is also a specific concern for those of us in the Reformed tradition. John Calvin, the father of the reformed tradition identified two of the three marks of the true church to be preaching and sacraments. The Belgic Confession, article 29, confessing for the whole church what Calvin taught, states, “The marks by which the true Church is known are these: If the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached therein; if it maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ; if church discipline is exercised in punishing sin.” More anecdotally, but also suggestive of the value of Word and sacrament in the reformed tradition, when a minister is ordained they become Ministers of Word and Sacrament. Furthermore, when elders make their vows at their own ordination they vow to “provide for the preaching of the Word and the

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celebration of the sacraments.” The Reformed tradition which so prizes the centrality of the Word and the Sacraments, is left struggling to find its place in the missional church conversation. Are we supposed to resist all things missional because the missional church largely ignores preaching? Or should we downplay our Reformed commitments to Word and Sacrament because the missional church seems to suggest other things are more important?

**Personal Significance**

I have been serving the Reformed Church in America (RCA) as a pastor in two different local congregations for fifteen years, the first First Reformed Church of Oak Harbor, WA; the second Pillar Church in Holland, MI. In all fifteen of those years I have done my best to demonstrate a particular kind of indwelling the Word in the preaching moment in worship. I have witnessed first-hand the church awakening to its role in the unfolding story of God’s salvation. I have watched people “come alive” to their part in the story. At the same time, I have experienced denominational pressure, at least in part due to a three-decade plus decline in denominational membership, to lead the church in ways that would be characterized as missional. Nearly all of the resources sent to me had nothing to do with preaching and very little to do with a congregational indwelling of the “story of Jesus.” They had more to do with leadership techniques, organizational structures, or behavior modification. Certainly, each of these matters to the life of the

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Christian church and the Christian believer are secondary to what Newbigin would identify as a primary *missional* task, the indwelling of Scripture.

Furthermore, I grew up in a church where my dad, Rev. Dr. Tim Brown began to demonstrate the practice of Scripture indwelling and performance in preaching. It began in the mid-1980s when he attended a play at Hope College in the Dewitt Theatre. The play was performed by a single actor who simply recited the Gospel of Mark. My dad was simultaneously inspired and convicted. As he would say, “If an actor can do this at $5 a ticket, the pastor ought to do it for the good of the flock.” My dad’s influence on me and this project cannot be understated. I watched him do it as a preacher. He taught me to do it as a professor. He encourages me to do it now.

**Project Outline**

This project intends to be an appreciative inquiry of a homiletical method that involves interiorizing Scripture for performance. The method is employed at Pillar Church and elsewhere. This method assesses how the homiletical method impacts missional engagement within the congregation. Through conversations with members of the Pillar congregation, as well as reflections from other pastors who practice a similar homiletical method, there is evidence that this homiletical method influences congregational missional engagement. The process is long and requires patience, but the stories suggest there is a connection.

I intend to offer a homiletical vision rooted in the missionary work of Leslie Newbigin, and the pastoral work of Eugene Peterson. This vision is demonstrated in the church’s first sermon by the Apostle Peter at Pentecost. This homiletical vision calls the
preacher to indwell the story of God as it is given in Scripture, offer this story to the people of God, and trust the Spirit to increase missional engagement of a congregation.

I intend to offer a homiletical method congruent with this vision that engages Newbigin’s notion of indwelling the word and Peterson’s notion of the pastoral ministry. These two are not often in conversation, yet are Western pastors and leaders with a similar ecclesiological vision. A consequent contribution of this project will be to identify and develop a theological paradigm operative in both Newbigin and Peterson.

The paradigm follows: revelation, plausibility, indwelling and action. God’s revelation is the necessary starting point for the developing of a plausibility structure for the gospel which requires the Christian to indwell Scripture to enter that plausibility structure in order to act in unbroken continuity with the heart and message of the gospel if the church is going to engage its context in mission. In other words, for both Newbigin and Peterson, revelation is the starting point which creates a plausibility structure that is entered by indwelling Scripture in order to act in faithful and fruitful witness to Jesus Christ in the world.

The project is organized using Richard Osmer’s method for practical theology. Osmer outlines four fundamental tasks of practical theology: the descriptive-empirical task, the interpretive task, the normative task and the pragmatic task. He defines the descriptive empirical task as the “gathering of information that helps us discern patterns and dynamics in particular episodes, situations, or contexts.” Essentially the descriptive empirical task intends to address the question, “What is going on?” The interpretive task


21 Ibid., 4.
is “drawing on theories of the arts and sciences to better understand and explain why these patterns and dynamics are occurring.” It means to address the question, “Why is this going on?” The normative task is “using theological concepts to interpret particular episodes, situations, or contexts, constructing ethical norms to guide our responses, and learning from ‘good practice.’” This task is meant to address the question, “What should be going on?” The pragmatic task is to “determine strategies of action that will influence situations in ways that are desirable and entering into a reflective conversation with the ‘talk back’ emerging when they are enacted.” This task intends to respond to the question, “How should we respond?” These four practical theology tasks will guide me as I seek to offer a preaching model of indwelling the word for Scripture performance in a sermon that increases a congregation’s missional engagement.

The Context of Indwelling Practice: Pillar Church

Currently, I am the lead pastor of the oldest church in the city of Holland, Michigan. Pillar Church re-established five years ago as a dual affiliation congregation of the Christian Reformed Church of North America (CRC) and the Reformed Church in America (RCA). Albertus Van Raalte and a group of Dutch immigrants originally established the church in 1847 seeking to establish a community that would allow them to live out their Christian faith in the way that they saw as appropriate. Among the first things they did was to plant a church, a church committed to the community and a community connected to the church. The church grew significantly in its first ten years and a building was erected at the corner of what is now 9th St. and College Ave. It

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22 Ibid., 4.
23 Ibid., 4.
24 Ibid., 4.
remains a prominent white building with six pillars, and is strategically located in the
downtown corridor of Holland’s core city and directly adjacent to the campus of Hope
College. For the Holland community, the building is an icon similar to that of the
Windmill. Other waves of Dutch immigrants arrived after Van Raalte and also planted
churches in the area. Those churches, following Van Raalte’s lead, joined what is now
called the RCA. It was called the “Union of 1850.” Soon after, the other waves of Dutch
immigrants became uncomfortable with the union and in 1857 they split off and
established a new denomination, what is now called the Christian Reformed Church
(CRC). Van Raalte and the first church remained loyal to the RCA but in 1876 Van
Raalte died and in 1879 there was a pastoral vacancy at the church with the pillars. The
same tensions that prompted the other waves of Dutch immigrants to form a new
denomination began to arise in the church with the pillars. In 1882 the church split and
Holland’s first church joined the CRC in 1884. The small minority remaining was forced
to establish themselves as First Reformed Church (RCA) in Holland. That split fueled an
animosity that has existed between the RCA and the CRC for more than 130 years.

Though the apparent life and health of the church with the pillars immediately
following the split remained strong and vibrant, over the ensuing century it began to
wane and struggle. Thirty years after the split a new congregational crisis was emerging.
The children born to the waves of Dutch immigrants were becoming increasingly
“americanized.” They spoke English as fluently as Dutch. Whereas the first immigrants
had been speaking Dutch in their homes and worshiping in Dutch on Sunday mornings
and Sunday evenings, their children were starting to grow up, take leadership roles in the
church, and ask for worship to be offered in English. Pillar offered its first English
speaking worship service in 1912; seven years later by 1919 Pillar’s primary worship service was in English. Reverend Tuk, who led the congregation through that change, left that same year. Though the change to worshipping in English has not been identified as a church split, many people left Pillar in those 7 years.

By the mid-20th century the church began to notice a significant decline. According to the historical records, in the 1950s every member of the church’s council lived within the neighborhood of the church. However, as the Hope College campus and downtown corridor developed, the neighborhood houses around Pillar were removed. By the 1990s none of Pillar’s Council members lived in the neighborhood. This shift forced the church to ask an identity question. They had for so long seen themselves as a neighborhood, Christian Reformed church, but now they had disconnected themselves from the college because it was an RCA school and there were no neighborhood homes surrounding the church.

This decline continued into the twenty first century when its pastor, Chris DeVos, invited the church into a season of ecclesial-reflection. They realized quickly they were dying and something had to be done. They imagined a different future for themselves that was primarily motivated by a desire to re-engage the community it had helped to establish 160 years earlier. They had a hunch that a certain kind of preaching was necessary for this congregational shift to occur and a new kind of missional commitment to emerge. Van Raalte, who was committed to the central role of preaching in the life of the church, had established Pillar in 1847 to be a church for the city. The future they imagined would include a return to the convictions of the church at its establishment, preaching and mission. Those commitments prompted the invitation to me to join the
staff at Pillar Church as its lead pastor and primary preacher. For this reason, it is central to my work at Pillar to preach in such a way that increases missional engagement.

Missional Ministry at Pillar

As Pillar reestablished itself, a homiletical vision of Scripture internalization and performance has been offered nearly every Sunday. Additionally, Pillar began to celebrate the sacrament of communion weekly, and every Tuesday and Thursday at noon the entire congregation is invited to join together in the sanctuary to pray for the needs of the church, the community and the world. The elders have begun “prayer walks” throughout the city and the neighborhoods closest to Pillar. In this context, since Pillar reestablished itself in 2012, congregational membership has increased by 600% from approximately 100 people to now more than 600. The average worship attendance has increased by nearly 1000%, going from an average of 70 people on a Sunday morning to more than 800.

Beyond the number of people attending on a Sunday morning, Pillar’s missional engagement both locally and globally has increased significantly. We have hired a full time Pastor of Formation for mission to give guidance to the missional efforts of the congregation. Pastor Jenna Brandsen, the first female pastor in Pillar’s history, has established approximately 20 city groups made up of 10 to 15 people in each group. The intent of city groups is three-fold: create spaces for people to belong, opportunities for people to grow in faith and to extend an invitation to do acts of service in and for the city.

We have increased the number of missionaries and mission agencies that we partner with and support, including missionaries to Israel/Palestine, Nicaragua, and Peru.
Each month we receive a distribution offering to provide tangible items to support organizations like Community Action House or the Holland Rescue Mission. We also partner with local organizations by raising on average more than $50,000 a year outside of our budget to support local organizations like Benjamin’s Hope and Maple Avenue Ministries' NIA after school experience. By nearly every measure, Pillar has grown dramatically in its missional engagement in the community and around the world. In this way, we fully participate in the active practices of the missional church literature.

The preaching life that has nurtured the dramatic growth in missional engagement is committed to and embodies Scripture interiorization and performance. As the Lead Pastor this is a fundamental commitment I bring to the preaching life at Pillar. I am committed to this vision of the homiletical life for several reasons, including obedience, imitation, integrity, resistance and mission. Each of these I intend to explain more fully in chapter four.

Though the primary focus of this project is the necessity of indwelling the Word for preaching as a central act of the missional congregation, additional convictions prompt the performance of Scripture in the sermon as well. Among those convictions has to do with the nature of orality. Walter Ong, in his remarkably important work titled “Orality and Literacy,” acknowledges the pervasive reality in 21st century North America is literacy. We live in a literate culture. However, he writes, “In all the wonderful worlds that writing opens, the spoken word still resides and lives. Written texts all have to be related somehow, directly or indirectly, to the world of sound, the natural habitat of language, to yield their meanings… Oral expression can exist and mostly has existed
without any writing at all, writing never without orality.”

25 Preaching implies speaking. Because “written texts all have to be related somehow” the implication on oral communication is obvious. Written Words, in this case Scripture Words, deserve the best oral expression. Every preacher spends time thinking through how to speak the words that are prepared to preach. We never simply hand out a sermon manuscript and let the congregation read it quietly for 25 minutes during a worship service. We speak them. Most preachers prepare not just what to speak but prepare how to speak what is prepared. Also, every teacher of preaching I know invites the preaching student to think through the use of their body. What do you do with your hands? What do you do with your eyes?

Scripture performance takes Ong’s commitment to orality and the natural process every preacher experiences to its logical next step, in order to relate the written text.

In this vein, another conviction that inspires Scripture performance in a sermon is inspired by the increasingly recognized field of biblical performance criticism. One of the leading voices in biblical performance criticism is David Rhoads. In a lecture titled “Performing the Letter to Philemon” he states, “Even when there was writing, that writing was not done for its own sake. Rather, orality remained primary, and writing was secondary and served the needs of orality.”

27 He goes on to ask provocatively, “Can you imagine a musicologist spending years sitting in libraries looking at scores but never hearing the music performed? Can you imagine theater critics studying scripts but never seeing the performance of a play? Can you imagine how we biblical scholars can study

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26 Ibid., 8.
these texts without hearing them performed as stories and speeches? Scripture performance allows the hearer to experience a fuller engagement with the Scripture stories.

Preaching is a central act of the reformed church and has long been recognized as a necessary instrument by which God is revealed. The Second Helvetic Confession, widely regarded among reformed churches, states it most succinctly, “The preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God. Wherefore when this Word of God is now preached in the church by preachers lawfully called, we believe that the very Word of God is proclaimed, and received by the faithful…” (Second Helvetic Confession). For this reason, a deliberate offering of Scripture through interiorization settle the homiletical vision I am offering squarely in the reformed tradition. This, combined with Newbigin’s notion of indwelling the Word, creates a seat at the table in the missional church conversation.

In the course of the next several chapters I am wanting to invite the missional church conversation into a deeper reflection on preaching and its necessity for the mission of the church, and to locate that invitation in the work of the widely regarded missional church father, Lesslie Newbigin. My intention will also be to involve the work of pastor scholar Eugene Peterson who has situated himself in a different ecclesial conversation and has earned the hearing of many contemporary North American pastors, who may not otherwise pay much attention to, or consider themselves a part of, the missional church movement. In both cases my intention is to call the pastor to indwell the Word as a central act of the preaching task, specifically for the missional church. I will highlight the similarity in the work of Peterson and Newbigin who both insist on the

28 Ibid., 4.
practice of indwelling the Word. I will then seek to offer rhythms and practices that help
the pastor indwell the Word in preparation for preaching and briefly offer the value of
performing the Word in the sermon for the sake of the congregation’s indwelling of the
Word.
CHAPTER 2
NORMATIVE TASK: “NEWBIGIN, PETERSON, AND A SHARED PATTERN”

Introduction

As Kristyn, my wife, and I were discerning God’s call on our lives to join the Oak Harbor, WA community as the pastor of First Reformed Church (FRC) I made several trips out to meet people and hear stories as a way of listening for a call. On one of those trips I visited Reka Nienhuis who lived in the Harbor Towers nursing home just around the corner from the church across the street from Kmart. Reka was in her early 90s and was considered one of the matriarchs of the church. I wanted to meet her to hear her story of her experiences of life on Whidbey Island and with FRC. As part of my visit, with an elder, we brought the portable communion set I had been given as a seminary graduation gift. I had cut small pieces of bread and poured grape juice in a small vial. After visiting for a while, we shared communion together and prayed. The visit and the communion endeared me to Reka.

We accepted the call to Oak Harbor, and shortly after we had arrived Reka fell and broke her hip, a serious injury for her someone her age. It quickly became clear that she would not recover. She was at Whidbey General Hospital in room 24 (the room I later learned people go to when they are not likely to leave). I received a phone call from her nephew, Lanny. He shared with me the circumstances and asked me to come to the

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29 Throughout the course of this project I will offer congregational stories and pastoral testimonies that highlight the congregation’s engagement with Scripture and missional action. In Chapter 5 I will offer a more careful analysis of congregational stories and pastoral testimonies but want the entire project to clearly emerge out of the context of pastoral ministry. I have been a pastor for 15 years, professors and coaches have been my teachers, but the congregation has been my guide.
hospital. It was still very early in my pastoral work there and the hospital was still a new environment. As I drove south on highway 20, I committed myself not to talk too much. I did not want to interrupt her dying with unnecessary words. When I arrived most of her family was already there. They had formed a large circle on the perimeter of the room. Reka was lying in bed and her granddaughter sat next to her holding her hand. I made my way into the room, greeted her by name with a gentle touch to her hand, shared a few salutary words, and then took my place with the rest of the family along the walls of the room. I was sticking to my commitment not to talk too much. I was standing underneath the tv hanging on the wall across from Reka; she was looking at me. She began to muster strength to say something, and she blurted out in a raspy voice, “103.” Everyone turned to me to make sense of her number. I was confused myself. I responded, “That’s right Reka, the church is 103 years old.” She shook her head, mustered more strength and said it again, “103.” This time her voice trailing off in fatigue. Everyone continued to look at me for meaning. I tried again, I said, “Close Reka, you’re 93.” She shook her head obviously agitated, mustered still more strength, gave it all she had, enunciating each number she said, “1-0-3.” I was at a loss. My commitment not to mess this up was not going well. Her granddaughter, the one holding her hand, graciously interjected, “Do you think she means Psalm 103, pastor?” It seemed so obvious, so I began to recite, “Bless the Lord O my soul and all that is within me bless God’s holy name.”

That experience with Reka had a profound impact on me in pastoral ministry. I interpreted that moment with Reka as her wanting to describe her life and now her death with Scripture. She wanted her life to fit into a larger story God was accomplishing in the world. Reka had interiorized Psalm 103 in life and wanted it to give voice to her

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30 Psalm 103, NRSV.
experience as she was dying. I highly doubt Reka knew anything about Lesslie Newbigin’s life or about his notion of indwelling the Word, but she was doing it.

**The background: Lesslie Newbigin and Eugene Peterson in conversation**

There are a host of really good preachers in the world. I am able to name a few that I experience most frequently, Tim Brown, Trygve Johnson, Denise Kingdom-Grier, Neal Plantinga and David Bast. Any preaching student ought to be able to add their preaching pastors and heroes to the list. Additionally, there are a host of wonderful homiletical forms: expository, topical, biographical, narrative exposition, or testimony to name a few. Beyond the content or effectiveness of preaching, many would argue the best preacher is the local pastor. The local pastor who officiated the wedding of your child, who sat in the hospital waiting room while your spouse was in surgery, or the one who baptized your first grandchild. The one who was there is the best preacher. When the local pastor stands to preach the hearer is inclined to listen.31

I was first introduced to Lesslie Newbigin in a seminary class taught by Dr. George Hunsberger, a founding member of the Gospel in our Culture Network.32 He assigned Newbigin’s book *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society.*33 Until that point I had not read Newbigin nor even heard of him. I quickly learned Newbigin was an Englishman, who spent the better part of forty years living and working in India. His retirement to

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31 Newbigin makes the case that a primary role of the pastor is to “know the name of the sheep.” He writes, “[The Good Shepherd] calls them by name. You and I know what that means. No text in Scripture gives me a deeper sense of shame about my own ministry than this: He calls his own sheep by name. I forget people’s names, and I know what this forgetfulness really means. It means that in my deepest heart I am more interested in the programs I am trying to get people involved in than in the people themselves.” Newbigin, *The Good Shepherd,* 15.

32 The GCN recognized Newbigin as an important and vital voice for the church in Northam America.

England demonstrated that his home was more secularized and pluralized than India. He set his sights on North America and saw the same thing. So, he urged the church in those places to be the missionary agent in its context.  

In was in Dr. Hunsberger’s class where I first came across Newbigin’s words that have become a central contention of this project, “Authentic Christian though and action… must continue by indwelling that story so that it is our story, the way we understand the real story,” were deeply impactful to me and connected with much of what I had read from a friend and mentor named Eugene Peterson.

I first met Dr. Peterson while on a trip with West Michigan Christian school teacher Ray VanderLaan. I was a senior in college and needed one more class. It was almost summer and I was panicked. The Hope College provost was willing to legitimate a trip to Israel led by VanderLaan and hosted by Western Theological Seminary. After meeting Dr. Peterson and his wife, Jan, on that trip I began reading his books. I began with the series of his four pastoral works and then his five book set on spiritual theology. In the book Eat this Book, Peterson calls all Christians, including pastors, to a

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34 “The church is the bearer to all the nations of a gospel that announces the kingdom, the reign, and the sovereignty of God. It calls men and women to repent of their false loyalty to other powers, to become believers in the one true sovereignty, and so to become corporately a sign, instrument, and foretaste of that sovereignty of the one true and living God over all nature, all nations, and all human lives. It is not meant to call men and women out of the world into a safe religious enclave but to call them out in order to send them back as agents of God’s kingship.” Lesslie Newbigin, Foolishness to the Greeks, 72 (emphasis added).

35 Eugene Peterson, Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration in Vocational Holiness (GR, MI, Eerdmans, 1992); Eugene Peterson, Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity (GR, MI, Eerdmans, 1987); Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work (GR, MI, Eerdmans, 1980); The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction (GR, MI, Eerdmans, 1989).

36 Eugene Peterson, Eat this Book: a conversation in the art of spiritual reading. (GR, MI, Eerdmans 2006); Eugene Peterson, Tell it Slant: conversation on the language of Jesus in his stories prayers (GR, MI, Eerdmans, 2012); Eugene Peterson, Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: a conversation in spiritual theology (GR, MI, Eerdmans, 2005); Eugene Peterson, The Jesus Way: a conversation on the ways that jesus is the way. (GR, MI, Eerdmans, 2007); Eugene Peterson, Practice Resurrection: a conversation on growing up in christ (GR, MI, Eerdmans, 2010).
kind of reading of the Bible he refers to as *lectio divina* or “spiritual reading.”37 It is a “kind of reading that enters the soul as food enters the stomach and spreads throughout the blood stream as holiness, love and wisdom.”38 He puts it differently in *Working the Angles*, when quoting poet Ezra Pound poem, “Hugh Selwyn Mauberly,” “Tell it to me, all of it, I guzzle with outstretched ears.”39

I learned early on in my pastoral career on Whidbey Island that there is no shortage of voices telling pastors who they ought to be and how they ought to behave. What stood out to me about so many of them was that they placed little, if any, emphasis on the Bible and how a preacher might engage it for a sermon or offer it to the congregation in a sermon.

Many were suggesting the church was in a crisis. The church had to be more missional, was the conclusion. The church had to find ways to get outside of itself. The church had to be more outreach focused. The church had to be activist. The church needed to be relevant. All of which Newbigin himself would affirm and Peterson would celebrate. Both of them emphasize the outworking of the gospel in the Christian life. Both of them highlight the necessity of caring for the poor and extending hospitality to the stranger. Both of them call for Christian participation in the work God is doing in the world. And both of them insist the way towards that participation is indwelling Scripture.

I am not aware that missional ecclesiologist Lesslie Newbigin ever met the pastor scholar Eugene Peterson. They were, for the large majority of their lives, living at the same time. Whereas Newbigin spent most of his life in India, England and other parts of

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37 Peterson, *Eat this Book*, 10.

38 Ibid., 4.

39 Peterson, *Working the Angles*, 89.
the world, Peterson pastored for nearly 30 years in one congregation in Bel-Air, Maryland and invested the rest of his working career to teaching spiritual theology at Regent College in Vancouver, BC. Though they may not have met, they share a similar vision. What Newbigin urges in the church from a missiologist’s point of view, Peterson urges from a pastor’s angle of vision. Whereas Newbigin highlights the necessity of indwelling the story of God in Scripture, Peterson gives rationale for why. The same pattern shows up in Peterson as in Newbigin: revelation, plausibility structure, indwelling, action.

Newbigin’s notion of indwelling the Word

Newbigin’s work, vital and essential to the ongoing mission of the church in the world, caught hold by the Gospel in Our Culture Network. Newbigin became one of the leading voices of what is now known as the Missional Church Movement. The Missional Church Movement offers an important and necessary voice for the 21st century church in the United States. However, as I will point out later, so much of the work of the missional church movement either ignores altogether the practice of preaching for the life of the church or considers it an obstacle to the mission of the church. Newbigin would adamantly disagree. First he writes, “to set word and deed, preaching and action against each other is absurd.” He goes on to add,

There will always be the need to point explicitly to the central reality by which the Church exists, to the central verities of the gospel, to Christ incarnate,

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40 Guider, Missional Church, 3.

41 Ibid., 82.

42 Newbigin, Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 137.
crucified, risen, regnant at God’s right hand and to the promise of his coming to judge the living and the dead. This preaching of the gospel can never be irrelevant.\textsuperscript{43}

Newbigin insists on the value of preaching, not as an archaic holdover for a nostalgic congregation nor as an egocentric crutch for the “attractive church,” but rather as an essential act of the missional church. He puts it even more pointedly in a set of lectures to Indian pastors turned into a book titled \textit{The Good Shepherd},

I want to reflect with you today about our function as ministers of the Word of God, about our work as preachers. Nothing is more fundamental to our ministry than this. Yet we have to recognize there is a general and understandable skepticism about the value of preaching. People are tired of words - words which are just words without reality behind them. The air is filled continually with meaningless words. How can we ensure our preaching does not merely add to this babel of meaningless sound? We have to preach Christ. That is really our only business in the pulpit.\textsuperscript{44}

Newbigin is widely read and sophisticated in his argumentation. However, there is a basic pattern in Newbigin’s thought that leads to the centrality of preaching, and particularly the indwelling of Scripture, in the life of the Christian congregation for the missional engagement of the congregation in its context. Newbigin himself does not clearly identify this as a pattern but it clearly emerges in his work. As I read Newbigin, the pattern could be put like this: God’s \textit{revelation} is the necessary starting point for the developing of a \textit{plausibility structure} for the gospel which requires the Christian to \textit{indwell} Scripture to enter that plausibility structure in order to \textit{act} in unbroken continuity with the heart and message of the gospel if the church is going to engage its context in mission. In other words, for Newbigin, revelation is the starting point which creates a

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 139.
\item \textsuperscript{44} Newbigin, \textit{The Good Shepherd}, 24.
\end{itemize}
plausibility structure that is entered by indwelling Scripture in order to act in faithful and fruitful witness to Jesus Christ in the world.

Revelation

The starting point for Newbigin to urge the church to indwell the Word as mission is revelation. He puts it this way,

It is always required of us that we listen sensitively to both the desires and the needs of people, and that we try to understand their situation. But neither these desires and needs, nor any analysis of the situation made on the basis of some principles drawn from other sources than Scripture, can be the starting point for mission. The starting point is God’s revelation of himself.45

In the *The Good Shepherd*, Newbigin adds,

True preaching of Christ springs out of action and leads into action. The Word which we preach was made flesh, became a part of history. If you and your congregation are really together in tackling the trouble and pain and sin in the world around you, in the slums around your church, in the lives of your members: if you are standing beside your members in their battles with the world and in their trials and problems, then the words you speak in the pulpit will not be empty words.46

God speaks first. God acts before we act. All of our acting is in response to and in accordance with the action of God in the world. “The Christian understanding of the world… is a matter of dwelling in a story of God’s activity, activity which is still continuing. The knowledge which Christian faith seeks is knowledge of God who has acted and is acting.”47

Revelation as the starting point for the preacher, or failing to start with revelation as the starting point is what Newbigin has in mind when he refers to preachers offering “meaningless words” from the pulpit. If the preacher does not stand up to preach what


has been given, what has been revealed, the preaching is off on the wrong foot. The preacher stands up to preach not because she has demonstrated herself the most capable public communicator, as necessary as winsome and effective communication is. Nor does she stand up because she has proven herself the most learned student, as important as learning is to the task of preaching. Nor does she stand because she has had the most meaningful experiences in life that qualify her as wise enough to preach. Rather, she stands up to preach because God speaks, God acts, God reveals. God has been revealed most clearly in Jesus Christ and that revelation has been given to us in the Scriptures. Preaching is first an act of listening, and a “getting to know” the one who has chosen to be known.

The Plausibility Structure called Christianity

Newbigin acknowledges that the notion of revelation as a starting point is troublesome to the reigning plausibility structure of the 21st century western world. Since the enlightenment of the 17th century in Europe, (books like Dialogue Concerning Natural Religion by David Hume or Religion Within the Bounds of Reason Alone by Immanuel Kant) science has emerged as the way “to know.” Rationality, universality and certainty is the reigning modern-era plausibility structure. This requires evidence and observable or quantifiable data to prove what is true. The Christian faith in the West has been co-opted by reason as its starting point and has resulted in a bifurcation of what Newbigin calls “public facts” and “private values.” Public facts are those things renders true within the reigning plausibility structure as verifiably true. Private values are those

48 Newbigin, Foolishness to the Greeks, 218.
things individuals may or may not choose to believe but have no real bearing on the
public life of society. Religion is in the sphere of private values.

Newbigin is careful not to ignore a helpful critique, yet gently resists conceding to
the reigning plausibility structure of the Western world. He resists the reign of
rationality in this way:

In discussions about the authority of the gospel the word “reason” is often used as
though it were an independent source of information to be set alongside tradition
or revelation. But clearly this is a confusion of categories. Reason does not
operate in a vacuum. The power of the human mind to think rationally is only
developed in a tradition which itself depends on the experience of previous
generations. This is obviously true of the vast edifice of modern science sustained
by the scientific community. The definition of what is reasonable and what is not
will be conditioned by the tradition within which the matter is being discussed.
Within the intellectual tradition dominated by methods of natural science it will
appear unreasonable to explain things in terms of personal will or purpose. But if
God exists and he is capable of revealing his purposes to human beings, then the
human reason will be summoned to understand and respond to this revelation and
to relate it to all other experience. It will necessarily do this within a tradition
which determines whether or not any belief is plausible - in this case the tradition
of a community which cherishes and lives by the story of God’s saving acts.

Revelation is made visible, or mediated, by a tradition. Christianity, as a tradition,
reasons that God acts first; God reveals himself; and this revelation creates a community
of people who embrace God’s action in history. It is necessary to start with the
“community which cherishes and lives by the story of God’s saving acts.”

49 Ibid., 218.

50 “When reason is set against revelation, the terms of the debate have been radically confused. What is
happening is not that reason is set against something which is unreasonable, but that another tradition of rational
argument is set against a tradition of rational argument which takes as its starting point a moment or moments of
divine self-revelation and which will therefore naturally continue to say, not “We discovered,” but “God spoke and
acted.” Newbigin, Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 62.

51 Ibid., 8.

52 Ibid., 8.
Revelation is the starting point which creates and opens up to the Christian believer the possibility of entering a new plausibility structure. A plausibility structure is the set of assumptions that allow a person and a culture to decide what is conceivable. To the 19th century person the statement, “go to the moon,” is absolutely inconceivable. To the 20th century person the same statement brings up memories of the words by famous American astronaut, Neal Armstrong, “One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.” The plausibility structure of the 19th century person had no capacity to conceive of traveling to the moon. The 20th century person watched it on TV. The 21st century person thinks about travel to Mars. A plausibility structure, that which is reasonably possible, is created. Newbigin, borrowing from the work of 20th century sociologist Peter Berger, puts it like this,

Every society depends for its coherence upon a set of what Peter Berger calls, “plausibility structures,” patterns of belief and practice accepted within a given society, which determine which beliefs are plausible to its members and which are not. These plausibility structures are of course different at different times and places. Thus when, in any society, a belief is held to be “reasonable,” this is a judgement made on the basis of the reigning plausibility structure.

He goes on to amplify Berger,

It is no secret, indeed it has been affirmed from the beginning, that the gospel gives rise to a new plausibility structure, a radically different vision of things from those that shape all human cultures apart from the gospel. The Church, therefore, as the bearer of the gospel, inhabits a plausibility structure which is at variance with, and which calls into question, those that govern all human cultures without exception.

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53 Just 150 miles from where I currently sit writing this chapter there is a prepared launch of a Tesla into space. Is that even plausible?

54 Newbigin, Gospel in a Pluralistic Society, 8.

55 Ibid., 8.
Newbigin’s call on the Christian church is to enter into and live by the plausibility structure the life in Christ creates and the gospel of Christ proclaims as it is revealed in Scripture. Revelation is a central element to the plausibility structure of Christianity.

Newbigin is willing to acknowledge the challenge of developing such a plausibility structure. He acknowledges the Christian is always a part of two plausibility structures, the reigning plausibility structure of the Western world and the plausibility structure held by the community whose starting point is revelation. It is not likely that a person can simply leave one in favor of another. Newbigin asks, “In some situations it is possible to escape from the problem by withdrawing into a ghetto where, a small community, the Christian tradition can function as the plausibility structure which is not questioned. as if one can simply leave the culture’s reigning plausibility structure. There are places where that can happen, but they are few. How then do we deal with the threat of this relativism of a consumer-oriented society?”

He answers his own question in this way:

It is that one learns to live so fully within both traditions that the debate between them is internalized. As a Christian I seek so to live within the biblical tradition, using its language as my language, its models as the models through which I make sense of experience, its story as the clue to my story, that I help to strengthen and carry forward this tradition of rationality. But as a member of contemporary British society I am all the time living in, or at least sharing my life with, those who live in the other tradition. What they call self-evident truth that are not self-evident to me, and vice versa. When they speak of reason, they mean what is reasonable within their plausibility structure. I do not live in that plausibility, but I know what it feels like to live in it. Within my own mind there is a continuing dialogue between the two. Insofar as my own participation in the

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56 He writes, “[Modernization] is the way of understanding the world which provides the ‘plausibility structure’ for most of the educated and urbanized people of the world. If we adhere to the Christian tradition, we thus do so in conscious recognition of the fact this is a personal decision.” Ibid., 96.

57 Ibid., 64.
Christian tradition is healthy and vigorous, both in thought and in practice, I shall be equipped for the external dialogue with the other tradition.  

While Newbigin is willing to acknowledge the challenge of existing solely in a “kingdom plausibility structure” he does not back off from the need for the Christian church to challenge the reigning plausibility structure of its culture,

When “reason” is invoked as a parallel or supplementary authority to “Scripture” and “tradition” what is happening is that Jesus is being co-opted into the reigning plausibility structure. But the business of the missionary, and the business of the Christian Church in any situation, is to challenge the plausibility structure in the light of God’s revelation of the real meaning of history.

God has revealed himself to his people in history, that revelation has been given to us in the form of Scripture and it creates for us and opens to us the possibility of entering its plausibility. The Christian is involved in both plausibility structures and at the same time the Christian must challenge the reigning plausibility structure of the culture.

The Plausibility Structure of the Gospel

It is important to highlight that the plausibility structure of the Christian faith is given in the form of a narrative. The Christian church enters the plausibility structure by interiorizing the story it is given in Scripture. The Christian church is not given a set of principles to follow, or values to hold or morals to achieve, but rather a story to live into, to indwell. The Christian story has a main character, a protagonist, a central figure who is Jesus Christ. Newbigin writes,

What is unique about the Bible is the story which it tells, with its climax in the story of the incarnation, ministry, death and resurrection of the Son of God. If that story is true, then it is unique and also universal in its implications for all human history. It is in fact the true outline of world history.

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58 Ibid., 64.
59 Ibid., 96.
60 Ibid., 97.
The narrative nature of revelation is necessary for the Christian to internalize the
plausibility structure and to understand our part in it. Newbigin writes, 

The structure is essentially narrative. An actual history, enacted at specific times
and places which form the background of the Bible, provides the clue for
understanding contemporary history. As we face new opportunities and new
dangers, we are the people who know what it is to cross the Red Sea on dry land,
to be fed with manna in the wilderness, to return with singing from Babylon, to
stand before the cross, and to meet the risen Lord in the breaking of the bread.
This is our story, and it defines who we are. Just as character can only be truly
rendered in narrative form, so the answer to the question, “Who am I?” can only
be given if we ask, “What is my story?” and that can only be answered if there is
an answer to the further question, “what is the whole story of which my story is a
part?” To indwell the Bible is to live with an answer to those questions, to know
who I am and who the one to whom I am finally accountable.\textsuperscript{61}

An aspect of the narrative form of God’s revelation to acknowledge is that the
story is ongoing. The ongoing nature of the story is important to the Church’s role in
moving the story forward, “The story is carried forward… by men and women who must
take responsibility for their decisions about how to act here and now in situations which
are always new, but who can also trust in the infinite resources of the one who has called
them.”\textsuperscript{62} The Scripture and testimony demonstrates the narrative plausibility structure.
Again, Miriah has demonstrated this and the way of the child as testimony also to the
way of God in Scripture. Jesus puts it like this, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and
become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”\textsuperscript{63}

The necessity of the missional activity of the Christian church will be addressed
shortly. For now, notice that the ongoing nature of the story is also important to

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 99.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 100.
\textsuperscript{63} Matthew 18:3, NRSV.
\end{flushright}
Newbigin to insist on hope as a necessary conviction of the Christian believer. The story moves forward not in an endless journey of progress but rather that the one who revealed himself first will come again to make all things right. Newbigin puts it plainly,

The distinguishing mark of this community will be hope.”\(^6^4\) He goes on to write, “For a Christian the horizon for all action is this. It is advent rather than future. He is coming to meet us, and whatever we do - whether it is in our most private prayers or our most public political action - is simply offered to him for whatever place it may have in his blessed kingdom. Here is the clue to meaningful action in a meaningful history: it is the translation into action of the prayer, “Your kingdom come, your will be done, as in heaven so on earth.”\(^6^5\)

The reason hope is so important to Newbigin is that the Christian church not merely looks back at a God who did things in history and so takes its only cues from what has happened, but the context for understanding what has happened is the expectation that God acts still and will act again. It is also hope that gives the Christian church a place to stand in its plausibility structure in conversation with the reigning plausibility structure of the culture. Once again Newbigin writes it so poignantly,

Faith enables us to be at the same time realistic and hopeful. We can be realistic, knowing that no human project can eliminate the powers of darkness as they operate in human life. This realism delivers us from the utopian fanaticisms which have condemned millions of people to misery and death in the cause of an imagined future. But at the same time, we can be hopeful, acting hopefully in apparently hopeless situations, not dreaming of an absolute perfection on this side of death, but doing resolutely that relative good which is possible now, doing it as an offering to the Lord who is able to take it and keep it for the perfect kingdom which is promised.\(^6^6\)

What may be now is not all that will be. Advent is a part of the story the Christian church indwells. Clues for action in the present are not only available from history but also from


\(^{6^5}\) Ibid., 101.

\(^{6^6}\) Ibid., 114.
what is still to be, advent. The way towards faithful and fruitful participation in mission of God now come from indwelling the revelation offered in Scripture.

Indwelling

The starting point for Newbigin is revelation, God choosing to make himself known in Jesus Christ. Revelation becomes the context for an alternative plausibility structure. To Newbigin’s way of seeing things, it is incumbent on the Christian believer and the Christian church to accept or receive the new plausibility structure by indwelling the Word. The revelation of God as its recorded in Scripture becomes for us the plausibility structure which is entered only through indwelling the Word. As Newbigin puts it, “To indwell the Bible is to live with an answer to those questions, who am I and the one to whom I am finally accountable.”67 Indwelling the Word becomes the gateway into the plausibility structure of the Kingdom of God. Newbigin’s use of the word “indwell” is borrowed from an epistemologist named Michael Polanyi, a Hungarian writer whose focus was an answer to the question “How do you know?”68 Others have delved more deeply into Polanyi’s life and work and I will let their work stand for itself.69

An important aspect of Polanyi’s work that Newbigin borrows is the notion of tacit awareness or tacit knowledge.70 Tacit awareness is in contrast to focal awareness.71

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67 Ibid., 99.
68 Ibid., 33.
70 Tacit knowledge is the knowledge from skills, ideas and experiences that people have but are not codified and may not necessarily be easily expressed. For instance, riding a bike is a tacit knowledge.
71 Focal knowledge is the knowledge that can be verified and expressed. For instance, that Holland is a city in Michigan is focal knowledge.
The act of indwelling Scripture is meant for one to so deeply interiorize the story of God that one becomes tacitly aware of its influence on one’s life. Polanyi suggests tacit knowledge is “living in it as in the garment of our own skin.” Tacit awareness is “know how.” Focal awareness is “know what.” It would be like riding a bike. Riding a bike can be explained to someone but until a person does it repeatedly over the course of some time they will not know how. Once they know how, short of some significant developmental interruption, they will always know how. Newbigin’s purpose is for the Christian to so indwell Scripture that we have a tacit awareness of it. The point is not to enter a situation, analyze it, and then search the Scriptures for an appropriate response. Rather the call is to enter a situation with the story of God so deeply planted in one’s being that they simply respond, and the response resonates with the Christian story. Or to put it the way Newbigin would, to act in unbroken continuity.

Newbigin’s point in using the language of indwell or in other places “inhabit” is to invite the Christian into a slow, careful, and thoughtful engagement with the story of God given in Scripture until it becomes our story, or to use Polanyi’s words “to live in it as in the garment of our own skin.” To use a different metaphor, to indwell the story is similar to putting on a pair of spectacles and to see the world through a new set of lenses. Newbigin himself borrows this metaphor when inviting the Christian, “not to


see things as the culture sees them, but - with new lenses - to see things in a radically different way.”76 This is the operative metaphor of John Calvin as he thinks about the Bible.77 Things that happen in your life and in your community are seen through and understood by this way of seeing. As helpful as this may be, Newbigin goes on to urge the Christian a step further, to enter into the biblical story so that the biblical story enters into the Christian believer. Newbigin writes, borrowing from a Latin American theologian he does not name, “What is required, according to the Latin American writer, is that one lives in the text and from that position tries to understand what is happening in the world now.”78 He writes further, “Our proper relation to the Bible is not that we examine it from the outside, but that we indwell it and from within it seek to understand and cope with what is out there. In other words, the Bible furnishes us with our plausibility structure.”79 He restates the point this way,

If we follow these suggestions we get the picture of a Christian life as one in which we live in the Biblical story as part of the community whose story it is, find in the story the clues to knowing God as his character becomes manifest in the story, and from within that indwelling try to understand and cope with the events in our time and the world about us and so carry the story forward. At the heart of the story, as the key to the whole, is the incarnation of the Word, the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Indwelling Scripture becomes for Newbigin a central act for the church to have an authentic engagement with culture in its context.

76 Ibid., 38.
77 “For just as eyes, when dimmed with age or weakness or by some other defect, unless aided by spectacles, discern nothing distinctly; so, such is our feebleness, unless Scripture guides us in seeking God, we are immediately confused.” (John Calvin, Institutes, I.xiv.1). John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, (Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1960).
78 Newbigin, Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 97.
79 Ibid., 97.
Borrowing from the work of Polanyi, Newbigin focuses on tacit and focal awareness. He likens the indwelling the story of God to the way that we indwell our bodies. We have tacit awareness of the organs of our body as we seek focal awareness of the things around us that our organs encounter. One does not really feel their thumb until the thumb comes in contact with an object. We have indwelled our bodies so as to engage that which our bodies encounter. He suggests,

While we are using words, we are only tacitly aware of the words we are using: we are focally aware of the thing they refer to. We *indwell* our language, our concepts, our whole plausibility structure. That is why no one is conscious of the plausibility structure unless something happens to show that it is failing to cope with reality as it is being experienced.\(^{80}\)

Newbigin is urging the church to enter into the plausibility structure of the Christian faith that it is “as riding a bike.” From our tacit awareness of this plausibility structure we become focally aware of everything outside of it. It becomes the way we engage the world.

Newbigin writes, “The Christian community is invited to indwell the story, *tacitly* aware of it as shaping the way we understand, but *focally* attending to the world we live in so that we are able confidently, though not infallibly, to increase our understanding of it and our ability to cope with it.”\(^{81}\) Newbigin spends little time on how a Christian goes about indwelling the story but he does, as the central conviction of this project highlights, make this case, “Authentic Christian thought and action begin … by attending to what God has done in the story of Israel and supremely in the story of Jesus Christ. It must

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\(^{80}\) Ibid., 97.

\(^{81}\) Ibid., 38.
continue by indwelling that story so that it is our story, the way we understand the real story.\textsuperscript{82}

Action

Revelation creates a plausibility structure the Christian church enters through indwelling the story of God in Scripture, and then engages its context in unbroken continuity with the indwelled story. Indwelling becomes action rooted in Christ and embodied through hope. This is how mission is enacted through the indwelled story. The Christian church must be active in the world. It is not meant to be a safe religious enclave. However, action, witness, or engagement is done by participants in the ongoing story of God. This is the point at which most of the Missional Church joins Newbigin. Most tend to the activities of the church, what the church does, how the church organizes itself, and where the church goes. All of which are necessary and important as Newbigin points out,

> It is clear that action for justice and peace in the world is not something which is secondary, marginal to the central task of evangelism. It belongs to the heart of the matter. Jesus’ action in challenging the powers that ruled the world was not marginal to his ministry; it was central to it. Without it there would be no gospel.”\textsuperscript{83}

However, Newbigin also suggests those actions disconnected from a fuller indwelling of God’s story fall short. He writes,

> Many have answered, and still answer, that question by invoking some highly general concept. \textit{Jesus means Freedom} is the title of a widely read book. Jesus is the liberator, and whatever liberates men and women is authentic following of Jesus. Or, perhaps, “Jesus means justice,” and whatever serves to overturn injustice is authentic discipleship. Or, perhaps, more common, “Jesus means love.” Following Jesus means living a life of universal and unconditional love.

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., 151.

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 137.
The effect of these moves, of course, is that the gospel is replaced by a moral law or a political program, or - more often - a combination of the two in which a particular program is invested with a degree of moral passion which raises it above the level of merely pragmatic argument. The other effect is that the Church is bypassed, since it is obvious that many people who are committed to the practice of freedom, justice, and love have nothing to do with the church.\(^\text{84}\)

In other words, as important as freedom, justice and love may be to the Christian story they are not the end of God’s unfolding story in the world but byproducts of it. To stop at freedom, justice, and love is to run only a part of the race.\(^\text{85}\) It is only through the indwelling of Scripture that authentic Christian thought and action can begin and continue. It is only through indwelling the story of God in Scripture that Newbigin’s profound vision of the church can be realized.\(^\text{86}\)

**Lesslie Newbigin meets Eugene Peterson**

Peterson wrote a four-volume set of books intended for pastors. All of them attend to the idea of “indwelling the Word” which he sometimes calls *lectio divina*, or “spiritual

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\(^\text{84}\) Ibid., 14.

\(^\text{85}\) “It will not be by the universal application of an unchanging pattern of personal and social behavior as laid down in the faith and practice of Islam. It will not be in a series of abstract moral and political principles. It will be in the life of a community which remembers, rehearses, and lives by the story which the Bible tells and of which the central focus is the story told in the New Testament. This remembering and rehearsing will be through the continual reading of and reflection on the Bible and the continual repetition of the sacraments of baptism and eucharist. And it will maintain its link with, its continuity with the body of men to whom Jesus said, “As the Father sent me, so I send you,” through a ministry in which the personal call of Jesus, “Follow me,” is continued through the generations, not in abstract moral or political principles but in the actual personal encounters in which men and women who have themselves been called, call other to follow.” Ibid., 147.

\(^\text{86}\) “The church is the bearer to all the nations of a gospel that announces the kingdom, the reign, and the sovereignty of God. It calls men and women to repent of their false loyalty to other powers, to become believers in the one true sovereignty, and so to become corporately a *sign*, *instrument*, and *foretaste* of that sovereignty of the one true and living God over all nature, all nations, and all human lives. It is not meant to call men and women out of the world into a safe religious enclave but to call them out in order to send them back as agents of God’s kingship.” (emphasis added). Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*: 72.
reading” or “contemplative reading.”

87 Peterson, Under the Unpredictable Plant; Peterson, Working the Angles; Peterson, Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work; Peterson, The Contemplative Pastor.

88 Peterson, Eat this Book; Peterson, Peterson, Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places; Peterson, Tell it Slant; Peterson, Practice Resurrection; Peterson, The Jesus Way.

89 Peterson, Eat this Book, 4.

90 Peterson, Working the Angles, 103.

91 Peterson, Eat this Book, 3 (emphasis mine).
Peterson is calling the Christian person to indwell the story of God. Remarkably the same pattern that emerges in Newbigin shows up in Peterson too: revelation, plausibility structure, indwelling, action.

Revelation

Acknowledging Peterson’s primary focus on “eating the book” or “indwelling the Word” he is calling the church to begin with revelation. He writes, “The Christian conviction is that God speaks reality into being - creation into shape, salvation into action. It is also a Christian conviction that we are that which is spoken into a creation shape and a salvation action.” God speaks first. God acts first. All of our acting is in response to the One who has acted, is acting, and will act. Peterson goes on to clarify,

Scripture is revelation. When a living God reveals himself, the result is a living truth. The moment, though, that the truth is written we find ourselves up to our knees in paradox: ink on paper is not living. How can a living Word be conveyed by means of a dead word? Pastors do their work in the midst of the paradox…. And because Scripture, whatever else it is, comes into our sensory experience primarily as a book, it is possible (probable, in fact, given the large quantity of books we observe and handle) that we misconstrue this living revelation as inanimate information. The church’s task (and its pastors have a large measure of responsibility in carrying out this task) is to prevent this misconception- to prevent revelation, which always involves personal histories and personal responses, from being treated as information, which usually involves impersonal facts and abstract ideas.

Peterson insists on the revealing nature of God and wants to make sure the church preserves and protects that revelation. The idea that the Bible might be misconstrued as an encyclopedia of information or a glossary of definitions or a history book with dates to be recalled entirely misses the purpose of revelation recorded. As he puts it, “Words work

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92 Peterson, *Working the Angles*, 89.

93 Ibid., 113.
differently when they are read than when they are heard: a discerning appreciation keeps
the pressure on all who read Scripture continually to return to its originating context in
worship and *hear* the Word of God." 94

Plausibility Structure

Peterson also shifts from revelation as the starting point to the recognition of
revelation as a new plausibility structure. He doesn’t use the same language, but carries
the same idea. Reflecting on Karl Barth, whom Newbigin also borrows, Peterson writes,

Barth insists that we do not read this book and the subsequent writings that are
shaped by it in order to find out how to get God involved in our lives, get him to
participate in our lives. No. We open this book and find that page after page it
takes us off guard, surprises us, and *draws us into its reality*, pulls us into
participation with God on his terms. 95

The reality of which Peterson speaks is of an old order, a kingdom God already
established. This strange world or plausibility structure negotiates what is conceivable.

He goes on to write,

My task is to bring awareness and focus to what is on the other side of the coin,
that this Scripture text, in the course of revealing God, *pulls us into the revelation*
and welcomes us as participants in it. What I want to call attention to is that the
Bible, all of it, is livable; it is the text for living our lives. It reveals a God-created,
God-ordered, God blessed world in which we find ourselves at home and whole. 96

He gets closest to speaking in terms of plausibility structures when he writes,

Reading Scripture constitutes an act of crisis. Day after day, week after week, it
brings us into a world that is totally at odds with the species of the world that
newspaper and television serve up to us on a platter as our daily ration of data for
conversation and concern. It is a world where God is active everywhere and
always, where God is fiery first cause and not occasional afterthought, where God
cannot be procrastinated, where everything is relative to God and God is not

94 Ibid., 113.

95 Peterson, *Eat This Book*, 6 (emphasis mine).

96 Ibid., 18 (emphasis mine).
relative to anything. Redeeming Scripture involves a dizzying reorientation of our culture-conditioned and job-oriented assumptions and procedures.\(^97\)

Again, the categories may not be stated in identical terms, but the reality is the same. Scripture “brings us into a world that is totally at odds with…” or “a dizzying reorientation of our culture-conditioned and job-oriented assumptions…” God’s revealing himself creates a whole new reality and a whole new way of seeing the world, a set of spectacles to see the world, a place to inhabit as one engages the world or even a whole new world altogether.

Peterson even touches on the tacit and focal awareness relationship of entering into a new plausibility structure through indwelling. He uses different words but moves towards the same idea; “Readers become what they read. If Holy Scripture is to become something other than mere gossip about God, it must be internalized.”\(^98\) It becomes so a part of who we are, so to speak, we only become tacitly aware of it in us and our real awareness of it is when we become focally aware of that which surrounds us, a different plausibility structure, a different way of seeing the world. We become aware of it when we experience its contrary. He gets at the same point differently when quoting Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel, “The great challenge to those of us who wish to take the Bible seriously is to let it teach us its own essential categories; and \textit{then for us to think with them,} instead of just about them.”\(^99\) Again he is urging for an entrance into a sort of plausibility structure where we become tacitly aware of our place in the world as we engage its other in the world. Peterson puts it most alarmingly, “Without this text,

\(^97\) Peterson, \textit{Working the Angles}, 132.

\(^98\) Peterson, \textit{Eat This Book}, 20.

\(^99\) Peterson, \textit{Working the Angles}, 137 (emphasis mine).
firmly established at the authoritative center of our communal and personal lives, we will flounder. We will sink into a swamp of well-meaning but ineffectual men and women who are mired unmercifully in our needs and wants and feelings.”\textsuperscript{100} The revelation of God as its recorded in Scripture becomes for us the plausibility structure which is entered only through indwelling the Word.

Once again, similar to Newbigin, Peterson refers to the form of the revelation as a story, a large meta-narrative that God is unfolding in the world and the Christian church.

The text for Christian living, and therefore for spiritual theology, set within the spacious contours of this Jesus-welcoming, Spirit-anchored, God defined, Trinity-framed context, is the Bible, our Holy Scriptures. This Bible turns out to be a large, comprehensive story, a meta-story. The Christian life is conducted in story conditions. The Bible is basically and overall a narrative - an immense, sprawling, capacious narrative.\textsuperscript{101}

The call on the Christian believer is to immerse herself in that story, to let it become her story. The way to that immersion is indwelling the Word.

Peterson: Indwelling Practices

Peterson spends a good majority of his energy on the idea of indwelling the Word. The primary metaphor he uses gives rise to the title of one of his books, \textit{Eat This Book}. Quoting St. John in the book of Revelation, “Eat the book. It will be like honey to your mouth but bitter to your stomach.”\textsuperscript{102} Peterson writes, “The angel does not instruct John to pass on information about God; he commands him to assimilate the Word of God so that when he does speak, it will express itself artlessly in his syntax just as the food we eat, when we are healthy, is unconsciously assimilated into our nerves and muscles and

\textsuperscript{100} Peterson, \textit{Eat This Book}, 35.

\textsuperscript{101} Ibid, 40.

\textsuperscript{102} Revelation 7:9, NRSV.
pet to work in speech and action.” Peterson suggests that one of the primary ways the Bible is known is through ingesting it. He refers to Psalm 1 and the Hebrew word Hagah which is translated in most cases to meditate, the same word used in Isaiah to describe the sound a lion makes while eating its prey. The Christian community is invited to “feed on Scripture.” Peterson continues, “Holy Scripture nurtures the holy community as food nurtures the human body. Christians don’t simply learn or study or use Scripture; we assimilate it, take it into our lives in such a way that it gets metabolized into acts of justice in Jesus’ name, hands raised in adoration of the Father, feet washed in company with the Son.” We are what we eat.

The language Peterson uses is different than Newbigin, but the central commitment remains the same, that is, not to leave the revelation of God that comes to us supremely in Jesus Christ as offered in Scriptures. It is not a distant object we consider but a living reality we enter, a place we inhabit, a plausibility structure. It seems that the differences between Peterson and Newbigin are more about intended audience than intended purpose. Newbigin is writing as a call to the church to be the mission agent of God in the world. Peterson is writing as a call to the church to remain connected to its source and inspiration. Both look to make the word down for the sake of mission as faithful action.

Action

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103 Peterson, *Eat This Book*, 21.

104 Ibid., 1-3.

105 Ibid., 18.
The purpose of indwelling the Word or eating the book is not merely to become something set apart from the rest of the world, but rather to become something for the rest of the world. Newbigin, naturally, spends more time on fleshing out what that something for the world is, but Peterson includes it, as well. The kind of reading Peterson wants is made visible in the congregation through “holiness, love and wisdom;” he writes, “the Bible, all of it, is livable. It is the text for living our lives;” he continues “Christian reading is participatory reading, receiving the Words in such a way that they become interior to our lives, the rhythms and images becoming practices of prayer, acts of obedience, ways of love.” Peterson’s focus is the whole Christian church, to indwell the story of God as it comes to us in Scripture and leaves the details of how that indwelling plays itself out in a person’s life to the work of others. However, there is no missing the fact that that is what Peterson has in mind. The call to livability is clear,

Our imaginations have to be revamped to take in this large, immense world of God’s revelation in contrast to the small, cramped world of human “figuring out.” We learn to live, imagine, believe, love, converse in this immense and richly organic and detailed world to which we are given access by our Old and New Testaments.

Far from an invitation to some sort of private Christianity that has a few kids memorize select confessions and a gathered congregation recite certain creeds for their own sake, Peterson is calling for an eating of the book that shows up in the lives of Christian believers wherever they are and wherever they go. Peterson happily agrees with Newbigin,

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106 Ibid., 4.
107 Ibid., 18.
108 Ibid., 28.
109 Ibid., 67 (emphasis mine).
If the gospel is to challenge the public life of our society… it will not be by forming a Christian political party, or by aggressive propaganda campaigns…. It will only be by movements that begin with the local congregation in which the reality of the new creation is present, known, and experienced and from which men and women will go into every sector of public life to claim it for Christ, to unmask the illusions which have remained hidden and to expose all areas of public life to the illumination of the gospel. But that will only happen as and when local congregations renounce an introverted concern for their own life, and recognize they exist for the sake of those who are not members, as sign, instrument and foretaste of God’s redeeming grace for the whole life of society.110

**The sermon has already been preached: Pentecost**

The combination of Newbigin’s biblical mission and Peterson’s biblical worship illicit a certain kind of preaching. My aim is to offer a way of preaching that remains consistent with the pattern: revelation, plausibility structure, indwelling and action. As an example, to help clarify what it might look like for the preacher, the Apostle Peter’s sermon at Pentecost provides help:

> When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, ‘Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.’ All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, ‘What does this mean?’ But others sneered and said, ‘They are filled with new wine.’

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them: ‘Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I

say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

“In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

‘You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know— this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power. For David says concerning him,

“I saw the Lord always before me, for he is at my right hand so that I will not be shaken; therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced; moreover, my flesh will live in hope. For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One experience corruption. You have made known to me the ways of life; you will make me full of gladness with your presence.”

‘Fellow Israelites, I may say to you confidently of our ancestor David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Since he was a prophet, he knew that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would put one of his descendants on his throne. Foreseeing this, David spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, saying,

“He was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh experience corruption.”
This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear. For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says,

“The Lord said to my Lord,
‘Sit at my right hand,
until I make your enemies your footstool.’”

Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.’

Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, ‘Brothers, what should we do?’ Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.’ And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, ‘Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.’ So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.111

The Pentecost story including Peter’s sermon gives a lived example of a sermon that demonstrates revelation, plausibility structure, indwelling, and action.

Revelation

First of all, the context of the Pentecost celebration is God’s action in history. Jews from all over Israel were gathering to commemorate God’s showing up to Moses on Mt. Sinai and giving him the law. The premise of Pentecost is revelation, God showing up. God revealing himself. Pentecost means fifty and was celebrated 50 days after the

111 Acts 2, NRSV.
festival of Passover. The early band of Christ followers who had witnessed his resurrection and ascension were “all together in one place.” Suddenly the Spirit of God showed up in the sound of a rushing wind, with the appearance of tongues of fire. The result being that they all began to speak in languages they did not previously know. The initial observation is God acts. The God who acted on Mt. Sinai providing the law to Moses acts again at Pentecost by the Spirit. Revelation.

Plausibility Structure

The crowd gathers and is bewildered because they hear people from Galilee speaking in their own native languages. Amazed and astonished some ask, “What does this mean?’ But others sneer and say, ‘they are filled with new wine.’” For some the most plausible explanation for this extraordinary activity was drunkenness. Drunkenness was the closest comparison they could find in their world of what was possible. Peter offers an alternative, “But Peter standing with the eleven addressed them saying, ‘Men of Judea and you that live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you and listen to what I have to say. These men are not drunk as you suppose, for its only nine o’ clock in the morning. No this is what was written by the prophet Joel.’” The plausibility structure that Peter and the people share has room for the activity of God in the world. Joel promised it. Peter makes sense of the events of the day according to the terms of the reigning plausibility structure, that the men were drunk, but also in the terms of the new plausibility structure they had all inhabited. It was all quite conceivable. Israel was entering a new plausibility structure.

Indwelling
Peter goes on to quote the prophet Joel and two different Psalms, three times on the spot, without grabbing a scroll.\textsuperscript{112} Peter simply recited Scripture from memory. The recitation is the evidence he had indwelled the story of God. He had taken the time to “eat the book” and to inhabit God’s revealed world. He entered the plausibility structure of God’s story by indwelling the Word and was able to make sense of the events of the day because of it. Peter goes on to highlight how these events are a part of a much larger story God is telling in the world that centers on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The plausibility structure does not belong solely to Peter but to his hearers also. Entering that plausibility structure through indwelling the Word is not only his responsibility. He appeals to the crowd’s preconceived notions of what is authoritative. As he ties the moment and experiences to the prophet Joel, people listen and begin to indwell the story, too, Peter invites them to release their suspicion and to enter another interpretation of the event.

Action

As the sermon is concluded some who hear ask, “What should we do?” And Peter invites them into participation, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins, to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, for the promise is for you, for your children, for those who are far off, everyone whom the Lord God calls to himself.” Three thousand respond in baptism. Even more, “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”\textsuperscript{113} Not only was Peter a participant in the ongoing work of God in the world,

\textsuperscript{112} Joel 2:28-32, NRSV. Psalm 16:8-11, NRSV. Psalm 110:1, NRSV.

\textsuperscript{113} Acts 2:42, NRSV.

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those who received the message were, too. “They held everything together in common and gave to all as any had need.” Action unfolds.

The Pentecost experience provides a singular moment when revelation, plausibility structure, indwelling and action are all on display. The kind of homiletical project I am offering is meant to invite pastors to indwell the Scripture and offer them back to the church as their own story, the way they see the real story, and call us into participation in missional living. It is not a call to mere activity or just more Bible study, but rather an invitation to enter the plausibility structure created by the God who has acted, acts still, and will act finally through indwelling the word in such a way that it shows up in the life of the congregation as sign, instrument and foretaste of God’s kingdom. The task is not easy and the currents of ecclesial waters are pushing the pastor in another direction. In the next chapter I offer a review of what is currently going on in the church and why indwelling the Word as an essential act of missional engagement might find the pastor a bit lonely.
CHAPTER 3: INTERPRETIVE TASK
A REVIEW OF THE MISSIONAL CHURCH LANDSCAPE:
MISSIONAL ECCLESIOLOGISTS, MISSIONAL THEOLOGIANS,
AND MISSIONAL TECHNICIANS

Introduction

Having spent nearly four years as a seminary student and having been freshly ordained into pastoral ministry, I was equipped as anyone could expect to be in pastoral ministry. I was ready to go. Western Theological Seminary had prepared me well to enact the things I knew and to engage the realities I did not know. Kristyn and I packed everything we owned into a small Ryder truck and travelled West. I was going West to become the Senior Pastor of First Reformed Church in Oak Harbor, Washington. We paid our tolls in Chicago, drove over the mighty Mississippi, traversed the Rockies and climbed the Cascades before settling down into the jagged shorelines of the Pacific Northwest. The church I served was on Whidbey Island about 50 miles northwest of Seattle. The church was languishing after a 10-year stint of ecclesial mishaps. Things had gotten so tough for the church they were willing to take a chance on a rookie. I was committed to preaching sermons as best as I knew how, visit people as regularly as I could, and say, “I’m sorry” whenever I messed up.

First Reformed Church was the only RCA congregation within 50 miles. Classis meetings had more of a pastoral retreat feel to them. Most of the Classis members could not get to and from a meeting in a single day as the geographical range of the Classis extended to four large states. The meetings felt like retreats. The Classis pastors were geographically isolated from each other and it was good to be together, to share space
with other pastors and reflect on our shared work and shared difficulties. They felt like retreats because we only met once a year and we usually met at a Christian camp or conference grounds for several days at a time.

### Meeting the Missional Church

The second Classis retreat I attended in 2004 and was held near Seattle at Warm Beach Camp. The conversation in the church in the United States, especially among mainline protestant churches, revolved around declining membership, declining cultural influence and declining social power. The larger social narrative about the US church in decline was matched by our denominational narrative bemoaning 30 straight years of declining membership. Our Classis retreat was devoted to addressing our own tales of this decline. We wanted to turn the corner and plant new churches and revitalize existing ones for the sake of mission. We wanted to be missional.

We knew we needed help so we invited a guest speaker, Paul Borden, who was a member of the American Baptist Denomination. In preparation for his visit and our retreat we all received a copy of book, *Hit the Bullseye: How Denominations Can Aim the Congregation at the Mission Field*.\(^{114}\) We were honored to have him join us.

The first night at the retreat Paul suggested that the primary role of the pastor was to be the visionary. He used the metaphor of a tree. The pastor climbs the tree to survey the landscape, the elders stand around the tree to protect the pastor from the needy congregation, and the pastor declares what he sees to the elders in order to move the congregants to the places they needed to be in order to carry out the vision the pastor saw from his spot high in the tree.

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I tried to listen well. I was just a rookie and knew I had so much to learn, but his metaphor was not working for me. I was less interested in telling people where they had to go in order to carry out my mission and more interested in inviting people into the wide-open spaces of God’s narrative given in Scripture. I wanted, as a missional act, to learn their names and hear their stories. I wanted to invite them to see their story as a part of the much larger story God was unfolding in the world. After one of the sessions with Dr. Borden I chose to sit by him at dinner. I also chose to share my concerns about his metaphor for the pastor as visionary leader. He listened kindly, and then responded, “You know, I really don’t think you’re a pastor, you’re probably more of a hospital chaplain.”

I was crushed and confused. He was the professional with all the experience whom the Classis had invited to urge us on in mission. My pastoral instincts were called into question. My pastoral vision was dismissed. My pastoral convictions about preaching and pastoral care were diminished. I travelled back to Whidbey Island personally hurt and vocationally resistant to the idea of the missional church. Others in the Classis did not have the same resistance. Over the next several years, the Classis pastors were sent more books from denominational leaders of the Regional Synod of the Far West urging us in mission, including: *Winning on Purpose: How to organize Congregations to Succeed in their Mission*[^116] and *Experiencing Leadership: Letting Go of Leadership Heresies*.[^117] I noticed my pastoral colleagues latching on to the ideas in

[^115]: At the time I was personally offended and hurt. However, over time it also dawned on me how offensive this was to hospital chaplains too. As if somehow their work isn’t at the very heart of God’s mission.

[^116]: Kaiser, *Winning on Purpose*.

[^117]: Cousins, *Experiencing Leadership*. 
them, grasping for some way of doing church better, being more missional, and ultimately growing. Each new book developed into new denominational initiatives and evolved into technical conversations about how to do things differently. I found myself significantly disheartened and at the same time determined as ever to offer a kind of preaching that was less reactive to the anxiety of declining membership and more embracing of a deeper vision for what God has been doing in the world for a very long time. I preached sermons that attempted to be congregationally sensitive and sensible. I was determined to offer the people at First Reformed Church in Oak Harbor, Washington a kind of preaching that would take Scripture and missional ecclesiology seriously.

As I continued to hone the craft of preaching, I also continued to pursue missional church literature. Though the Classis book offerings had been disheartening, the notion of the church as God’s missionary agent in its context resonated deeply with me. I wanted to imagine the homiletic I was practicing, of indwelling Scripture for performance in the sermon, could be connected to the missional activity of the church. Indwelling Scripture and paying attention to people was not “chaplaincy work” as it had been accused of by Dr. Borden, but the missional work of the church.

One example of this was demonstrated by an elderly woman in the church who struggled through the debilitating realities of osteoporosis. Though her bones were brittle and her body was weak, her heart and mind were alive to God’s heart for the world. Recognizing the need to be prayed for, she also became increasingly aware of the need to pray for others. She loved to knit and had a few other friends who did too. She started a knitting group that would knit prayer shawls for anyone in their community or neighborhood that was experiencing a challenge in life. When the prayer shawl was
complete the group would spend time praying for its recipient and then deliver it to that person. The warmth of the prayer shawl around a person’s shoulders was meant to be a physical reminder of the warmth of a caring community and a gracious God.

It appeared that the missional life and heart of the church was being nurtured. I continued to think more deeply about preaching and the missional church. Missional has taken the church in the US by storm. It is everywhere. A google search of the word missional at Amazon.com “all departments” produces thousands of results. The list of resources is long and in so many cases helpful. The missional literature might be divided into three primary categories: Missional Ecclesiologists, Missional Theologians, and Missional Technicians. The vast majority of work seems to fit into missional theology. The Classis in Washington was sending us primarily works from missional technicians. Missional preaching and indwelling connect more so to missional ecclesiology and missional theology.

Missional Ecclesiologists

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Lesslie Newbigin was born in 1909 in the United Kingdom. Originally ordained in the church of Scotland, he spent most of his professional life as a missionary to India. There he became connected to the church of South India and the United Reformed Church. From his experiences in India and with his roots in the church of Scotland he wrote extensively throughout his career. He has become widely recognized as the father of the missional movement. Though others had major influence on the missional movement, Newbigin is given primary acknowledgement by the Gospel in our Culture Network which in large part catalyzed the missional movement.

As a missionary statesman and leader who had returned after decades in India to minister in Britain, Newbigin analyzed with penetrating clarity the challenge presented by the changing context of Western society. In a word, what had once been a Christendom society was now clearly post-Christian, and in many ways, anti-Christian. Newbigin brought into public discussion a theological consensus that had long been forming among missiologists and theologians. He then focused that consensus on the concrete reality of Western society, as it has taken shape in [the 20th] century. His conclusions have mobilized Christian thinkers and leaders on both sides of the Atlantic.119

The missional ecclesiologist invites the church to ask the fundamental question, “Who are we?” Before it intends to address any action of the church it means to address the identity of the church. The Gospel in our Culture Network has captured well the missional ecclesiological conviction,

We have come to see that mission is not merely an activity of the church. Rather, mission is the result of God’s initiative, rooted in God’s purpose to restore and heal creation. ‘Mission’ means ‘sending,’ and it is the central biblical theme describing the purpose of God’s action in human history.120

Lesslie Newbigin awakened the church in the United States, and elsewhere, to this fundamental shift in orientation. An awakening was required. The church in the United

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119 Guder, Missional Church, 3.
120 Ibid., 3.
States had reached a crisis. For so long the church in towns across the US enjoyed social and political influence. A church building on a corner was a sufficient tool for drawing people into the life of the Christian community. But in the latter half of the 20th century that changed dramatically. Mainline Protestant denominations began a precipitous decline. As church membership declined, social and political influence declined as well. The church found itself in an identity crisis. Guder writes, “Bishop Newbigin and others have helped us to see that God’s mission is calling and sending us, the church of Jesus Christ, to be a missionary church in our own societies, in the cultures in which we find ourselves.” The response to the identity question too often becomes a pragmatic or technical one. In the face of identity challenges, the church has been less about doing something novel and returning to remember something biblical, namely the death and resurrection of Christ.

The conviction that God is a sending God is a primary one of the missional church. Throughout Scripture God is sending. The sending intention of God, fulfilled in Jesus Christ who himself was sent, and continued by the Holy Spirit who is also sent, finds clear expression in the Words of Jesus. Just after he has been raised from the dead, the disciples are all gathered in one place and Jesus says to them, “‘As the Father has sent me so I send you.’ And he breathed on them and said receive the Holy Spirit.” Just as God sent Israel to bless the nations, and the Father sent Jesus to accomplish redemption, so the Father and the Son sent the Spirit to enliven the church for God’s continued work

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121 The stated thesis of Missional Church acknowledges this state of crisis. Guder, Missional Church, 2.
122 Ibid., 5.
123 John 20: 21, NRSV.
in the world. “It has taken decades to realize that mission is not just a program of the church. It defines the church as God’s sent people. Either we are defined by mission, or we reduce the scope of the gospel and the mandate of the church. Thus, our challenge today is to move from church with mission to missional church.”

Newbigin was influenced by another missional ecclesiologist, Roland Allen. Allen was an English missionary to China in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It was necessary for him to leave China due to an illness, so he devoted much of his time and attention to reflection on the great missionary movement of the previous centuries. His primary work was titled, Missionary Methods: Paul’s or Ours. He influenced Newbigin in at least two primary ways. First of all, his insistence on what Newbigin referred to as a “declericalized theology.” Newbigin identifies this as one of the primary marks of the missional church in the book Foolishness to the Greeks, when he writes, “The third requirement for a missionary encounter with our culture, I would list what might be called a ‘declericalized theology.’” He describes what he means when he adds,

Christian men and women who are deeply involved in secular affairs view theology as an arcane pursuit of professional clergymen. This withdrawal of theology from the world of secular affairs is made more complete by the work of biblical scholars whose endlessly fascinating exercises have made it appear to the lay Christian that no one untrained in their methods can really understand anything the Bible says.

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124 Guder, Missional Church, 6.
125 Roland Allen, Missionary Methods: Paul’s or Ours? (Dallas, Gideon House Books, 2016).
126 Newbigin, Foolishness, 141.
127 Ibid., 141.
128 Ibid., 142.
Newbigin goes on to highlight the sphere sovereignty work of Abraham Kuyper as an exception. Largely, though, Newbigin’s concern is that the work of theology and the church have been co-opted by religious elites and professionals and removed from those who are most involved in every other arena of public life. Allen acknowledged this same concern. He critiqued the methods of the great missionary movement of previous centuries for their paternalistic tendency to create churches in foreign places that carried with them more than merely the “gospel” but western culture too. He imagined a return of church, Allen writes,

This then is what I mean by spontaneous expansion. I mean the expansion which follows the unescorted and unorganized activity of individual members of the Church explaining to others the Gospel which they have found for themselves; I mean the expansion which follows the irresistible attraction of the Christian Church for men who see its ordered life, and are drawn to it by desire to discover the secret of life which they instinctively desire to share; I mean also the expansion of the Church by the addition of new churches.

Allen’s second influence on Newbigin, and particularly important to this project, is Allen’s understanding of missionary communication. Allen puts Scripture and sacraments alongside sending. Newbigin wrote:

What must have been done if the gospel is to be truly communicated? Allen answered: There must be a congregation furnished with the Bible, the sacraments, and the apostolic ministry. When these conditions are fulfilled, the missionary has done her job. The young church is then free to learn, as it goes and grows, how to embody the gospel in its own culture.

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129 Ibid., 142.


Newbigin enhances Allen’s argument by removing it from the arena of cross-cultural mission work and relocating it for the church in any context. He adds,

How is the life of Christ, the life which is a true foretaste of the kingdom, continued in the period between the ascension and the parousia? The answer must be somewhat as follows. It will not be by the universal applications of an unchanging pattern of personal and social behavior as laid down in the faith and practice of Islam. It will not be in a series of abstract moral and political principles. It will be in the life of a community which remembers, rehearses and lives by the story which the Bible tells and of which the central focus is the story told in the New Testament. This remembering and rehearsing will be through the continual reading of and reflection on the Bible and the continual repetition of the sacraments of baptism and the eucharist. And it will maintain its link with, its continuity with the body of men to whom Jesus said, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you,” through a ministry in which the personal call of Jesus, “Follow me,” is continued through the generations, not in abstract moral or political principles but in the actual personal encounters in which men and women who have themselves been called, call others to follow.133

Newbigin concludes his application of Allen with the primary call on the Christian to indwell the Word. Missional ecclesiology is related to liturgy, worship and preaching, on may even say missional ecclesiology is dependent upon it. Newbigin’s central idea that shapes this homiletical project as missionary or missional is this:

I am saying that authentic Christian thought and action begin not by attending to the aspirations of the people, not by answering the questions they are asking in their terms, not by offering solutions to the problems as the world sees them. It must begin and continue by attending to what God has done in the story of Israel and supremely in the story of Jesus Christ. It must continue by indwelling that story so that it is our story, the way we understand the real story. And then, and this is the vital point, to attend with open hearts and minds to the real needs of people in the way that Jesus attended them, knowing the real need is that which can only be satisfied by everything that comes from the mouth of God (Matt. 4:4).134

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133 Ibid., 147 (emphasis added).
134 Ibid., 151.
There are other important missional ecclesiologists that have had a great influence on the missional church conversation and formation.\textsuperscript{135} The purpose of this project is to offer a homiletical vision for the missional church rooted in Newbigin’s notion of indwelling the Word. Newbigin’s impact on the missional church cannot be overstated and his own acknowledgment of Allen is important to include. Newbigin works out a missional ecclesiology that informs what has become the missional church movement. It was the missional practical theologians who attempted to contextualize Newbigin’s work for a broadly North America context.

\textbf{Missional Theologians}

Newbigin wrote, \textit{The Other Side of 1984: Questions for the Church}. This work, published in 1983, initiated conversations by a group of people that became called, The Gospel in our Culture Network (GCN).\textsuperscript{136} It began in the United Kingdom and emerged later in the U.S. The US group published an important book, \textit{Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America}.\textsuperscript{137}

The GCN adopts a missional ecclesiology as articulated by Newbigin and others and seeks to bring it to bear up on the church in the United States. After assessing the current situation of the church in the United States, the primary focus of attention is given


\textsuperscript{136} https://gocn.org

\textsuperscript{137} The basic thesis of this book is that the answer to the crisis of the North American church will not be found at the level of method and problem solving. We share the conviction of a growing consensus of Christians in North America that the problem is much more deeply rooted. It has to do with who we are and what we are for. The real issues in the current crisis of the Christian Church are spiritual and theological. Guder, \textit{Missional Church}, 3.
to missional communities. “The key to the formation of missional communities is their leadership.”138 The writers describe missional communities form its people through practices:

Missional communities representing the reign of God will be intentional about providing the space, the time, and the resources for people to unlearn old patterns and learn new ways of living that reveal God’s transforming and healing power. As a culture-forming endeavor, Christianity is ‘a cultivating process that produces people in a particular way.’ Tertullian, another early theologian, declared: ‘Christians are not born, they are made.’ Just as the various forces and influences of the modern world socialize or enculturation us into the values of freedom, individualism, self-reliance, and self-advancement, so the church is challenged to form people with distinctive habits of the heart. As an alternative social reality, the church is called to teach people how to talk, how to act, how to fight, how to love, how to see the world in a peculiar way - a Christlike way. As pointedly expressed by Stanley Hauerwas, the role of the church is to cultivate a people who “can risk being peaceful in a violent world, risk being kind in a competitive society, risk being faithful in an age of cynicism, risk being gentle among those who admire the tough, risk love when it may not be returned, because we have the confidence that in Christ we have been reborn to a new reality.139

Missional communities then become the primary means by which Christians are formed for this new reality.

In order to accomplish formation for a new reality, concrete ecclesial practices are necessary. The missional community must commit to certain basic practices that will form Christians to be the kind of people described so poignantly by Stanley Hauerwas,

The ecclesial practices of missional communities are many and varied. Among them are baptism, the Lord’s Supper, reconciliation, discernment, hospitality, the reading and interpretation of Scripture, the development and exercise of leadership, the loving care and support of one another, the proclamation of God’s Word, the active evangelization of all peoples, the exploration and learning of the faith, as well as the responsible and responsive stewardship of all of God’s abundant gifts.140

138 Ibid., 183.
139 Ibid., 152.
140 Quoted in Guder, Missional Church, 159 (emphasis added).
The Gospel in our Culture Network insists that leadership is the key to these missional communities. “Leadership is a critical gift, provided by the Spirit because, as the Scriptures demonstrate, fundamental change in any body of people requires leaders capable of transforming its life and being transformed themselves.”\(^{141}\) The identification of leadership as the key for missional communities gives way to a critique of the state of leadership in the 20th century church. After Constantine, “the church moved into a more settled, established and organized form. No longer a mission band of God’s people, it became a religious organization in which the means of grace were sacramentally communicated through an ordained priesthood and the reign of God identified with the church structures and its sacraments.”\(^{142}\) What happened to leadership in the church post-Constantine was not altered during the Reformation and “new definitions of the ‘true church’ based on the marks of pure doctrine, pure sacramental administration and pure discipline shaped the Protestant-Christendom conception of church and clergy. The church as static server of religious grace and power within a Christian society was neither challenged nor transformed by the Lutheran, Reformed, and Anglican reformers.”\(^{143}\)

The *Missional Church* critique of leadership also included a critique of the leadership practices of churches and their leaders, including preaching. In the same way that Newbigin called for the church to be marked by a “declericalized theology,”\(^{144}\) so does the *Missional Church*. Guder writes, “Across the varieties of today’s models of

\(^{141}\) Ibid., 183.

\(^{142}\) Ibid., 191.

\(^{143}\) Ibid., 192.

\(^{144}\) Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 144.
ministry, there remains this underlying notion of church leadership functioning as specialized professionals." The critique gets sharper:

Ministry remains identified with the static roles of clergy as priest, pedagogue, or professional, all dispensers of spiritual resources. Even where the priesthood of all believers stands as a theological conviction of an ecclesiastical community, it is rarely practiced in the church. In most denominational structures, leadership in the church involves a series of clearly marked requirements that mean few can have leadership without some form of seminary education that prepares them for ordination to the professional ministry. Therefore, the priesthood of all believers is continually undermined by the practices of ordination.

The critique is an important one. Without question, a challenge facing the church in the US in the 21st century is equipping and empowering the laity to witness to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in the public sectors of their daily lives. However, the unfortunate consequence of this critique within missional church circles has been the relativedismissal of traditional pastoral practices, particularly preaching. It becomes either assumed as a practice, but not encouraged as a central role for the mission of the church, or is seen as an obstacle to the work of empowering the laity because it assumes a professional class of Christians. Evidence of the dismissal or minimization of the role of preaching in the missional church, or preaching being an obstacle to the missional church shows up in this way: “Current seminary offerings in counseling, preaching, church administration, and methodologies of growth will not develop the missional leaders identified in this book. These offerings are inadequate for the formation of leaders for the covenant community.”

145 Guder, Missional Church, 195.

146 Ibid., 195.

147 Ibid., 218. Further evidence of the minimization of the role of preaching in the life of the missional church shows up as it is considered a central act of the attractional church, “Attractional churches come in many forms: they can be very traditional or very innovative; they can be large or small; the preaching can be Bible centered or liturgy driven. The common theme is that church is about an event (usually the Sunday morning service)
Missional (Preaching) Theologians

Other missional theologians do acknowledge the role and value of preaching in the missional church. Al Tizon takes up the task of preaching for the missional church. His primary concern is with the state of preaching in the US, not its diminished role in the life of the missional church. He writes,

I argue in this book that the root cause of lifeless sermons - which ultimately produce lifeless churches - is the lack of missional substance. By ‘substance’ I do not mean that these sermons lack right doctrine; they may or may not. I mean that they lack awareness of the very reality that gives ultimate meaning to the church - namely, the missio Dei, the mission of God.

He goes on to add, “suffice it to say that God’s people desperately need to reclaim their missional identity, and I contend that much of the responsibility to secure this identity lies on those who “rightly divide the word of truth,” that is, those who preach and teach in and for the church.”

Tizon helpfully makes a case for the value of preaching for the missional church. “The Center for Parish Development has it right: ‘God has a mission, and God’s mission needs a church.’ And I doubt anyone would argue if I were to add, ‘…and the church needs preachers who understand that God has a mission.’

Tizon also makes a case for a kind of preaching that would be considered missional. He suggests,

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149 Ibid., 9.

150 Ibid., 10.

151 Ibid., 24.
At least three essentials, which are respectively theological, biblical, and liturgical in nature, define preachers who have been possessed by the God of mission. First, we need to have a clear and firm grasp of the idea of the missio Dei, a biblical reality that theologically grounds mission in the person of God. Second, we must read the Bible missionally; that is, we need to see mission as the interpretive framework within which all of Scripture derives its meaning. And third, we need to commit to keeping the integral relationship between worship and mission liturgically intact. To the extent that we incorporate these three essentials in our sermon craft, the possibility of missional preaching is within range.\footnote{Ibid., 18.}

He continues through the rest of the book to establish more fully what he means by each of the three essentials. The first theological essential affirms the primacy of God and God’s initiating activity in the world. In other words, it begins with revelation. The second biblical essential affirms the sweeping story of God’s activity and the narrative nature of Scripture. The third liturgical essential celebrates that preaching happens in a worshiping context and is both informed by and informs the rest of the gathering for missional formation. Newbigin’s notion of indwelling the Word asks for something more than merely a biblical hermeneutic for preaching. It is more than an attempt to understand Scripture correctly. It is an invitation to internalize Scripture until its story becomes, not the way we rightly understand the story, but the way we see life, the world, ourselves and our context.

John Addison Dally, another missional theologian, also situates the value and role of preaching in the missional church. He also identified a crisis. In his book, \textit{Choosing the Kingdom: Missional Preaching for the Household of God}.\footnote{John Dally, \textit{Choosing the Kingdom: Missional Preaching for the Household of God}, (Durham, NC. Alban Institute 2007). This book was offered as part of the “Vital Worship, Healthy Congregations Series” of the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship. The title of the book indicates two helpful connections: 1. \textit{Choosing the Kingdom} is an echo of books by Jamie Smith, \textit{Desiring the Kingdom} and \textit{Imagining the Kingdom}. This book is very} This time it’s the crisis of preaching,
Sadly, from the most erudite and interesting of preachers to the most hackneyed and unoriginal, the Christian sermon has for a very long time been reduced to the status of an essay on religious ideas or an interesting story with theological significance rather than a life-changing oral event that confronts its hearers with the *krisis* of God’s reign breaking into human history and demanding a response of faith and allegiance.\(^{154}\)

Not unlike Tizon or the authors of *Missional Church*, Dally recognizes the crisis in preaching in the US and that it can be an obstacle to the missional life of a congregation, “Sermons are shaped by the needs of the church rather than by the demands of the kingdom, and therefore cannot avoid becoming consumer products available in a variety of shapes and sizes to be purchased by the religious listener/shopper.”\(^{155}\) Having identified the crisis he offers a description of what missional preaching entails:

Missional preachers are sent by Jesus, not by institutions. Missional preachers are empowered by Jesus specifically for their work of proclamation. Missional preachers proclaim the kingdom of God. The proclamation of the kingdom of God is accompanied by healing. The people who hear missional preaching experience it as a “crisis” (*krisis*): a moment of free decision for or against the kingdom of God. Missional preachers travel light. Jesus does what he sends his preachers to do: he speaks about the kingdom of God and heals. Missional preaching brings the preachers to the attention of the secular government.\(^{156}\)

He continues to describe what he means by each of those descriptions. As he continues to articulate a vision for missional preaching his focus turns to the agency of the laity. Quoting Roman Catholic educator and theologian, Michael Warren, he writes, “My underlying conviction is that the potential of the church to be a sign of good news will not be realized unless the conditions of speaking in the local assembly are changed.

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\(^{154}\) Ibid., 19.

\(^{155}\) Ibid., 2.

\(^{156}\) Ibid., 34.
Where the people of a local church exercise little social and cultural agency, it is a sign that the procedures of that local assembly actively, though in many cases unwittingly, foster passivity.”

Similar to Tizon, Dally addresses the role of Scripture in missional preaching. “Preaching out of a missional understanding of Scripture requires big picture thinking….

These speakers place their listeners in the context of a great history and invite them to write its next chapter.” He helpfully highlights the narrative nature of Scripture. Like Tizon he also urges for a missional hermeneutic, “Preachers will have to read the Bible missionally as well. We will need to stop reading it as a closed book of ancient stories and fixed rules and start reading it as a testimony to the missional God whose activity continues to this moment.” As important as that is, it also does not develop an action-oriented hermeneutic that Newbigin asks us to take, namely “indwelling the Word.” Newbigin invites us to so internalize Scripture that it becomes not simply a hermeneutic for reading, but so a part of us that it becomes a hermeneutic for living in the world.

Other missional theologians take the important work of the missional ecclesiologists and contextualize it. Notably, Clayton Schmit in the book Sent and Gathered, addresses preaching. His primary focus is the whole worshipping life of the missional church. He intends to offer a worship manual for the missional church and so acknowledges the central role of preaching. Schmidt suggests, “The word typically

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157 Ibid., 74.
158 Ibid., 104.
159 Ibid., 93.
comes to us in two forms: reading Scripture and preaching.\textsuperscript{161} Schmidt pays particular attention to the way Scripture is offered to the gathered congregation in worship. He writes,

> Bringing a written text to life in the hearing of an audience is an art that is related to oratory and drama. Oral interpretation calls on the reader to study a text, discern an adequate interpretation of it, and practice its oral presentation with an eye toward phrasing, use of pause, inflection, emphasis, tempo, tone, volume, eye contact, gesture, and diction.

Schmidt gives more focus to “bringing a written text to life” in \textit{Public Reading of Scripture: A Handbook}.\textsuperscript{162} Schmidt offers five key principles for preaching:

1. Preaching is textual;
2. preaching is contextual;
3. Preaching is theological;
4. Preaching speaks to the mind of the listener; and
5. Preaching speaks to the heart of the listener.\textsuperscript{163}

Tizon, Dally, and Schmidt all offer important work for the preacher of the missional church to engage. Particularly they demonstrate the contextualization of the missional ecclesiologists for their own contexts and especially the role and value of preaching for the missional church. They also identify the role and significance of Scripture for missional preaching.

\textbf{Missional Technicians}

\textsuperscript{161} Ibid., 175.
\textsuperscript{162} Ibid., 180.
\textsuperscript{163} Ibid., 118.
Missional technicians are those who seem less aware of or concerned with an articulated missional ecclesiology and seek to offer best practices to urge the church forward in mission. In my experience as an RCA pastor, specifically in the Pacific Northwest, it has been the missional technicians who have been given the most time and attention by denominational leaders.

I had been in pastoral ministry for just over a year when Borden’s book came in the mail. Because of my experience with Dr. Borden at the Classis retreat, I was admittedly skeptical to read it. The unfortunate exchange with Dr. Borden kept me from realizing the value a best practices approach can have. *Hit the Bullseye* retells the story of a revitalized set of American Baptist Churches in Northern California. It addresses 6 key changes that were required to move from a plateaued or declining denomination to a growing one. It attends specifically to the organizational life of the church to achieve numerical growth, and focuses on measurability. Borden writes, “We must first develop a new measure of what it means to be successful as a judicatory.” He identifies two primary metaphors that hinder change: shepherd and family. He notes the biblical metaphor of shepherd as pastor has become problematic in the less agrarian context of the United States; “We suggest to our congregations that the pastor be called the leader. After all, shepherds are called to lead sheep.” The second metaphor that hinders change is when a congregation is referred to as family. While that metaphor is biblical and has value, he writes,

> The primary image of the congregation is to function as an army, with Jesus Christ, our leader, who attacked the stronghold of Satan. The Church is on mission and is constantly in a battle for the souls of people. The battle with evil is not only an individual one, for each Christian to wage in her or his daily life. It is

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164 Borden, *Bullseye*, 16.
the mission of the congregation to be used by God to move women and men from the Kingdom of Darkness to the Kingdom of Light.”165

He continues by adding, “Local congregations exist to fulfill the ‘Great Commission,’”166 and he identifies the approach to accomplish this mission as, “The basic principles behind our strategies and tactics are:

1. Fruitfulness is as important as faithfulness;
2. What we count we value;
3. Accountability is a basic requirement for change and must be based upon objective measurement.”167

Borden intends to offer a universal model of how to revitalize a region of congregations by retelling the story of the work he was a part of in Northern California. There are important practices to embrace but his work seems to be born not out of a deep missional ecclesiology but rather a technical concern to fix the crisis facing churches in the United States. The insistence on measurability and success suggest it is less about the missio Dei and more about a growing the army and winning a game.

There are important overlaps though. For instance, Borden’s hesitation with the metaphor of shepherd to refer to pastors and his preference for leader as the operative one is in part meant to return to the laity the work of the church. He writes, “The leader makes sure the congregation is cared for because sheep do need to be fed, watered, and protected. However, the leader does not perform this caring ministry; the leader equips others to provide the care for sheep. The leader serves the sheep by casting vision,

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165 Ibid., 23.
166 Ibid., 31.
167 Ibid., 37.
maintaining focus, and modeling risk so the sheep will be excited and challenged to resist the enemy. “168

Another important overlap is Borden’s focus on structural change for the sake of mission. Guder in Missional Church suggests organizational change is necessary for the missional church and Newbigin agrees with Allen that the structure of the missional church must be different than it has in previous generations.

A third important overlap is the instrumental role that Borden implies the church plays in carrying out the mission of God in the world. Borden does not use Newbigin’s language of sign, instrument, foretaste but highlights the role of the church in accomplishing God’s purposes for the world.

At no point in Hit the Bullseye does Borden discuss the role and value of preaching (or gathering for worship) for the missional church. It may be implied as the conduit for casting vision or simply ignored because it is not the focus of their story. However, if Newbigin, who wrote the book The Good Shepherd, is right, there must be a place for preaching in the missional church.169

The lack of attention to preaching in Hit the Bullseye is paralleled with a lack of any notion of indwelling the Word. The primary focus is the programming of a congregation and accomplishing results in measurable and specific ways.

168 Ibid., 23.

169 “Nothing is more fundamental to our ministry than this. Yet we have to recognize there is a general and understandable skepticism about the value of preaching. People are tired of words - words which are just words without reality behind them. The air is filled continually with meaningless words. How can we ensure our preaching does not merely add to this babel of meaningless sound? We have to preach Christ. That is really our only business in the pulpit.” Newbigin, Good Shepherd, 24.
Another book sent to me was John Edmund Kaiser’s, *Winning on Purpose: How to Organize Congregations to Succeed in Their Mission.*170 The programmatic approach of the book is once again highlighted by the subtitle, *How to Organize Congregations to Succeed in Their Mission.* Kaiser credits Borden as “My mentor and the greatest single influence on my development of the Accountable Leadership strategy.”171 As the title implies the focus of the book is on “winning.” He writes,

Wait - doesn’t God love losers? Of course! In moral terms, all of us sons of Adam and daughters of Eve are losers. But God doesn’t love us because we’re losers. And his love doesn’t leave us as losers. God is the Ultimate Winner, and he makes a place for us on the winning side. The name of his team is not Losers Anonymous, it is Those Who Overcome. God has a redemptive purpose in the world and is serious about prevailing. This positive view of triumph, though not triumphalism, is a key assumption in this book.172

He goes on to identify 5 problems that every church leader face:

1. Problems of inward focus, it’s hard to win if you’re not in the game;
2. Problems of anarchy, it’s hard to win if no is sure who is picking the plays;
3. Problems of Democracy, it’s hard to win if everybody picks the plays;
4. Problems of Oligarchy, it’s hard to win if a committee picks the plays; and
5. Problems of hierarchy, it’s hard to win if bureaucrats pick the plays.173

Throughout the book Kaiser outlines how to win, a primary focus of which is his Leadership Accountability Strategy.

Kaiser engages the work of practical theologians in ways that Borden does not. *Hit the Bullseye* does not include a bibliography, but *Winning on Purpose* offers an

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170 Kaiser, *Winning on Purpose.*
171 Ibid., 174.
172 Ibid., 19.
173 Ibid., 31-38.
annotated one. In it Kaiser writes of *Missional Church*, “Guder provides a theological foundation for Emerging Church and Missional Church movements. It is not a how-to book but a why-to book. On p. 239, a few strategies appear but only as an end in themselves without accountability for bearing fruit.”174 Kaiser’s concern is primarily a programmatic one. Though he is more willing to engage the work of missional theologians, his primary influences are other missional technicians.175 There is a functional missional ecclesiology, but it is never clearly articulated and the primary focus is on achieving results and how to ensure those results are achieved.

The focus of the book is the accountability of the primary church leader. Notions of a declericalized theology are not as obvious, but are implied, “The strategy this book offers to help congregations set up their pastors for success is Accountable Leadership. It can be summarized by four points:

1. The role of the board is to govern;
2. The role of the pastor is to lead;
3. The role of the staff is to manage;
4. The role of the congregation is to minister.176

There are other important overlaps with missional theologians to highlight as well. Much like *Missional Church*, Kaiser identifies leadership as a primary focus to catalyze missional change in a congregation. He is also addressing the way churches organize themselves, which nearly all people in missional church conversations agree needs to

174 Ibid., 176.
175 Ibid., 174 - 177.
176 Ibid., 170.
happen. Much like most of the missional church work, there is not an engagement with preaching in any way, nor is there a call to indwell the Word as a necessary first act of the Christian for missional living.

A third book I received from the Synod of the Far West was *Experiencing Leadershift: Letting Go of Leadership Heresies*\textsuperscript{177} by Don Cousins. Much like other missional technicians, *Leadershift* does not explicitly engage the work of missional ecclesiologists or missional theologians. The book is largely autobiographical in that it is primarily a reflection of Cousin’s experiences. He offers the best practices from those experiences. As evidenced by the title, Cousins identifies leadership as a key focus for congregational change, “There’s no question that leadership is a critical issue in any endeavor. A great deal of truth rests in the saying, ‘Everything rises and falls on leadership.’ Equal truth is in the statement ‘Speed of the leader, speed of the team.’ Strong, effective leadership makes a big difference.”\textsuperscript{178}

Cousins is concerned that leadership has been too narrowly defined or not defined biblically. He writes, “Leadership is important - critically important, but believing that leadership is most important or most needed gift is heretical. It’s also heretical to believe that leadership’s expression is limited to just one gift.”\textsuperscript{179} The shift in leadership he calls for is to reorient our understanding of leadership to a more biblical one, “We need to experience a leadership shift - \textit{a return to a biblical definition and understanding of leadership that functions as God intended.}”\textsuperscript{180} He describes the gift of leadership this

\textsuperscript{177} Cousins, *Experiencing Leadershift*.

\textsuperscript{178} Ibid., 32.

\textsuperscript{179} Ibid., 20.

\textsuperscript{180} Ibid., 41.
way: “People with this gift: provide direction for God’s people in ministry, motivate others to perform to the best of their abilities, present the ‘big picture’ for others to see, model the values of the ministry, and take responsibility and establish goals.”

Although Cousins does not explicitly engage the work of missional ecclesiologists or missional theologians, there is overlap with other missional church work. He, too, very clearly identifies a crisis facing the church, “The institutional church isn’t working - even for those who are a part of it.” But his contention is that it is not only the institutional church that needs an overhaul, “While churches and ministries certainly need paradigm shifts, the reform most needed is not of the organizational variety, but the individual. Hearts and minds are broken… and in desperate need of being repaired.” He continues by adding, “Something is definitely wrong, and not just with those in professional ministry. Laypeople, too, are struggling. They need more of God than they’re getting.”

In addition to the widespread conviction that there is a crisis and that change is required within the missional church conversation, Cousins also highlights a kind of declericalized theology, “At the very foundation of any church with strong serving involvement is a deeply held belief in the priesthood of all believers.” He also adds, “There’s an intense hunger among the laity to be engaged in a movement of God, and these people want God to use them to help propel such a movement. The days of ‘hire the

181 Ibid., 27.
182 Ibid., 129.
183 Ibid., 53.
184 Ibid., 55.
185 Ibid., 229.
pastor to do the work of ministry’ are fading away - thankfully! Laypeople want to do more than hand out bulletins, count the offering, and attend monthly committee meetings to plan programs and coordinate events.”

_Leadershift_ also demonstrates a missional ecclesiology that resonates with what missional ecclesiologists refer to as the _missio Dei_. _Leadershift_ intends to address more than just “how” but also “why.” Cousins notes, “Why _does_ God call us to participate in the work of His Kingdom? The answer to this important ‘why’ question comes in two parts. Biblical Truth 1: Our participation in the work of His Kingdom brings His blessings to and through our lives… Biblical Truth 2: God displays Himself through His blessing to us, thereby bringing glory to His name.”

There is also a discernible awareness of the nature of church as “sign, instrument and foretaste.” Most missional technicians focus solely on the church as instrument, those who bring about the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. _Leadershift_ implies sign too, “God has given each of us a different piece of His heart for His world. When we bring each piece to the work of service, we collectively display the heart of God to one another and the heart of God for humankind.” There is also an implicit understanding of the church as foretaste, “The biblical church is organized to serve one another. It’s a community that takes care of itself.”

Very little attention is devoted to the role and value of preaching in _Leadershift_ but it is not ignored entirely or claimed to be an obstacle. In his attempt to broaden how

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186 Ibid., 56.
187 Ibid., 94.
188 Ibid., 240.
189 Ibid., 141.
leadership is defined he writes, “the prophet *leads* by bringing a message that edifies and exhorts, the evangelist *leads* by proclaiming the gospel to those who aren’t yet saved.”\(^{190}\) And he adds later, “Once we’ve invited God to send forth His Spirit to provide the power for change, we need to teach His Word so His people understand His will.”\(^{191}\) His willingness to acknowledge preaching is important; however, it is offered not as a central act of the leader nor is it connected to a deep theological vision of indwelling the Word.

**Conclusion**

The Synod of the Far West sent several books and communicated what nearly all missional church conversationalists recognize:

- There is a crisis facing the church;
- Change is needed for the church to move forward into the future;
- empowering and equipping the laity for that change is necessary.

All of these are important missional church convictions. The missional ecclesiologists offer the helpful vision of who the church is and why it exists. The missional theologians do the challenging work of a missional hermeneutic in the 21st century context of the United States. The missional technicians offer helpful best practices. However, each of these can tend to be disconnected from a deeper missional ecclesiology that moves the whole person and so end up as a church program or technique or something absolutely contrary to the convictions of Newbigin and the *missio Dei*.

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\(^{190}\) Ibid., 33.

\(^{191}\) Ibid., 163.
As a young pastor receiving books written by missional pragmatists largely disconnected from a deeper missional ecclesiology, was challenging. I was still learning the names of members of my congregation and still learning to contextualize the theological convictions and missional commitments I had grown to embrace as a seminary student, much of which included a deep commitment to preaching and to the sacraments. I was receiving books from denominational leaders about “changing the scorecard in the church” and “leadership accountability.” I was aware of denominational membership decline and concerned about it but was not yet willing to concede a deeper ecclesiological vision in order to grab the best practices that were being offered to me. I also noticed so little attention was given specifically to preaching by the missional technicians I was being encouraged to read. That dissonance for me as a young pastor catalyzed a 15-year journey in the missional church conversation. Though preaching is addressed by some, it is a vast minority of the missional church work and none of the work on preaching offers a homiletical vision rooted in Lesslie Newbigin’s notion of indwelling the Word. It is my intention to offer that practice to the Pillar Church community in such a way that missional engagement increases. There is good evidence that such an engagement is taking place.
CHAPTER 4: EMPERICAL TASK: A HOMILETICAL METHOD

Introduction

A member of First Reformed Church in Oak Harbor articulated that missional engagement is influenced by the homiletical method I practice and intend to outline in this project. She was commenting on what she experiences during a sermon and said, “God is not being reduced to fit the circumstances of our lives but our lives are being invited into the wide-open spaces of God’s heart.” She found preaching to be about God and to be an invitation into God’s heart for the world (revelation), she was being drawn into something (plausibility structure) through Scripture interiorization (indwelling the story) that required something of her (action).

Interiorization and Mission at First Reformed Church, Oak Harbor, WA

What that church member articulated, the community of Oak Harbor was seeing as well. We realized the community was becoming aware when a Walmart clerk asked Kathy, the chair of the deacons of the church, “Who are you people?” The clerk’s question was inspired by a question Kathy had asked the clerk, “Do you have any more safety pins in the back?” On its own the clerk’s response would seem a bit strange. Kathy’s question was close-ended, its either “yes” or “no” or possibly, “I’m not sure, let me check.” Instead, the clerk responded, “Who are you people?” Kathy was clearly not the first in search of safety pins at the Walmart that day. Somehow the store clerk had surmised there was some sort of effort to accomplish some sort of task, some kind of mission. The group of people pursuing the purchase of safety pins must share a common
vision or must at least be committed to a common mission, the clerk intuited. Why else would so many people show up in such a short window of time all asking for the same item, the otherwise rarely required safety pins? So, when Kathy inquired the clerk responded, “Who are you people?”

I had been serving First Reformed Church as its pastor for nearly 8 years at this time. The congregation had experienced a steady diet of preaching that included Scripture interiorization by the preacher and Scripture performance in the sermon. The congregation began to catch a vision of their lives being wrapped up in the much larger story of God’s salvation in the world.

The church had been struggling for decades. The three pastors that preceded me all ended their time on difficult terms with the church. One pastor left in 1989 after having a heart attack while preaching on a Sunday. The next pastor left after having had an affair with the church choir director. The pastor just before me left at 14 months because things had been so difficult. I showed up as a freshly ordained pastor ready to do my job the best way I knew how. I was committed to a certain kind of preaching that was inviting people to *indwell* the story of God. My youth and inexperience were to my benefit. I think the church felt sorry for me. They saw me as a young son who needed to be nurtured rather than the leader of an organization.

In my estimation we both needed some time to figure out life together. I needed time to grow up and mature. They needed time to heal. This fracturing church needed to work on caring for each other. They needed a less contentious season where they could re-engage in relationship without the drama of another church conflict. So, we started something called, “Free Food Wednesday.” It was a free meal every Wednesday evening.
followed by choir rehearsals and children and youth ministries. The title for the meal was important to us. It was free. We did not want anyone to resist coming for fear of not being able to afford it. What began as 20 people became 80 people and reached upwards to 150 people. Beyond the healing realities of being together the growth occurred because the congregation started inviting friends and neighbors that needed a meal. “Free Food Wednesday” was serving a wider community purpose.

There was some concern by a few that a free meal was financially unsustainable over the long term. Enough people caught the vision to commit anyway. There was never a sermon preached on the need to offer a free meal to those in poverty in our community. However, the sermons did attempt to open the breadth of God’s redeeming work in the world and the congregation began to do different missional things. At some point, someone heard that when Christians hundreds of years ago would come to the table on Sundays, they would bring goods to be offered to the poor. So, this person had the idea of a “distribution offering.” Every month a different organization was identified and on a specific Sunday of that month the church, as the offering in worship that day, would come carrying bags of items to be donated to the designated organization. The first time we tried it I worried no one would bring anything. My worry could not have been more misplaced. The church chancel was covered in bags of goods. There was never a sermon preached that asked people to take a “distribution offering,” but someone’s imagination had been stirred by God’s heart for the poor and so they did something about it. Experiences like this became more of the norm than the exception. One woman, riddled with osteoporosis and rheumatoid arthritis, started a prayer shawl ministry. She and a few friends would meet monthly, they would enjoy conversation as they knit scarves for
people they knew who were struggling. They would end their gatherings in prayer for the
person the shawl was for and then deliver it to them. The shawl’s warmth was a reminder
of a community that cared and was remembering. I never preached a sermon about prayer
shawls. However, the sermons continued to invite people deeper and deeper into God’s
heart for people and the world, and congregational members started responding in their
own ways. Admittedly, there are always other factors that influence an outcome, and in
the case of FRC in Oak Harbor, preaching is one of those influencing factors.

Kathy had gone to Walmart to buy safety pins and other items to fill baby care
baskets to be sent to the victims of the earthquake in Japan in 2011. She had gone to
several stores already to find the necessary items, but they were all sold out. By the time
she got to Walmart, her last hope, both Kathy and the clerk were astonished. Kathy
asked, “Do you have any more safety pins in the back?” The clerk responded, “Who are
you people?” The Walmart clerk had become aware, simply by observation, there was a
concerted effort by some group somewhere that included the need for safety pins. The
congregation had so deeply internalized the story of God that even a Walmart clerk took
notice. This once fractured church with a run of disappointing pastoral endings had
become a church on mission. It would be impossible and naive to suggest or imply that
preaching was solely responsible for the turn around. However, it would also be naive to
suggest preaching had nothing to do with it. This project tests how a, slow weekly rhythm
of hearing longer passages of Scripture inviting people into God’s story had begun to
change how the church engaged one another and engaged its community.

A story behind the homiletical method
I was 20 years old when I first memorized the Sermon on the Mount. It was by far the longest Scripture passage I had memorized to that point in my life.\textsuperscript{192} I grew up in church ministries and had attended Sunday school. I memorized short Bible verses, but nothing of length. For some reason, when I was in middle school my mom encouraged me to do the topical memory system which also invited me to memorize single Bible verses or short passages of Scripture.

The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew chapters 5, 6, and 7) was something altogether different. I had been inspired by my dad who, at that point in my life, had demonstrated Scripture memorization in his preaching life for many years. I was pursuing a career in medicine and I wanted to be a doctor. In an effort to improve my medical school application I traveled to the state of Chiapas in Southern Mexico for seven weeks one summer. I, with two other college students connected to the RCA, were living in Ocosingo, Chiapas, staying with missionaries Jim and Sharon Heneveld. Our primary responsibility there included following a doctor named Dina into the jungle villages of Southern Mexico and providing basic medical care for the indigenous people living in villages where basic medical care was not readily available. I took vital signs, pulled teeth and learned from Dr. Dina. It was an eye-opening experience.

It was in the early mornings that I began for the first time to memorize long passages of Scripture. For at least an hour every morning for seven weeks I began the process of memorizing the Sermon on the Mount. The practice was life-giving. There was a sense of accomplishment I enjoyed, but it was more than that. It took me the entire seven-week experience, and every hour I could give to it each morning. It was a fairly

\textsuperscript{192} My mom had encouraged me to memorize “Casey at the Bat” for a fifth-grade presentation so I had already been nurtured in the ways of memorization. I can still recite it to this day.
simple task, even while it was also a laborious one. I have since learned and developed skills and techniques that have significantly improved my capacity to memorize long passages of Scripture. It started on a summer medical mission experience in Ocosingo, Chiapas, Mexico.

I was not aware of it during those weeks in Mexico, but Lesslie Newbigin was calling the church to the same kind of Scripture indwelling. He invites Christians to indwell Scripture as the initial and necessary act for authentic Christian thought and action. There are several implicit rationales for indwelling Scripture in addition to the missional engagement it involves.

**The Assumption and the Practice**

1. Scripture indwelling is an act of obedience. To enter the plausibility structure of Scripture is to participate in its paradigms and live with its rules. When the Bible speaks of itself, so often it speaks of internalizing the Word. The psalmist prays,

   Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked,  
   or take the path that sinners tread  
   Or sit in the seat of scoffers but their delight is in the law of the Lord and on his law they meditate day and night.  

   The word “meditate” as the psalmist uses it is the same word used to describe what an animal does as it devours its prey. “*Hagah* is a word that our Hebrew ancestors used frequently for reading the kind of writing that deals with our souls. But ‘meditate' is far too tame a word for what is being signified…. When Isaiah’s lion and my dog meditate, they chewed and swallowed. Using teeth and tongue, stomach and intestines: Isaiah’s lion meditating his goat (if that’s what it was); my dog meditating on his

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193 Psalm 1, NRSV.
bone.”

Or in Deuteronomy, the Shema, the basic creed of the Jewish tradition, offers this:

Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart” (emphasis mine).

The fundamental conviction of people of faith has been to keep the Word “in their hearts.” The Apostle Paul picks up on this ancient conviction in the book of Colossians when he writes, “Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly” (emphasis mine). Or as St. John, in the book of Revelation invites, “Eat the book, it will be bitter to your stomach but like honey to your mouth.” The invitation the biblical authors extend to its readers is to internalize Scripture. Participation in the plausibility structure of the Christian story requires participation on its terms, and the Bible asks us to do with Scripture what we do with food. Eugene Peterson calls this spiritual reading. He writes, “I am urging for a kind of reading where Scripture enters the soul as food enters the stomach and spreads throughout the bloodstream as holiness love and wisdom.” For this reason, it is out of obedience that I am committed to Scripture interiorization for the preaching life.

2. It is inspired by imitation. Imitating Christ is a conviction of the Christian plausibility structure and Jesus himself demonstrated a commitment to Scripture interiorization. This was on display when Jesus was tempted by the devil as it’s recorded in Matthew 4, “The tempter came and said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command

194 Peterson, Eat this Book, 1-3.
195 Deuteronomy 6:7, NRSV.
196 Colossians 3:16, NRSV.
197 Revelation 7:10 NRSV.
198 Peterson, Eat This Book, 4.
these stones to become loaves of bread.’ But he answered, ‘It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’’ Without reading from the scroll, Jesus recited from the book of Deuteronomy chapter 8 verse 3. And the earliest apostles, following Christ’s example, showed the same commitment to Scripture interiorization. Not only did Paul urge for it when he said, “Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly,” but the Apostle Peter, when he stood to preach his first recorded sermon, in Acts 2, borrowed from the prophet Joel,

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them: ‘Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel… (Acts 2:14-16).

In that same sermon he recites from Psalm 16 and Psalm 110 at three different moments. Peter had clearly interiorized the Word and was able to perform it in the sermon. The plausibility structure of the Christian faith calls for indwelling the Word as an act of imitation. The plausibility structure of Scripture invites us to imitate those who have preceded us in faith, namely Christ and the early apostles. Newbigin’s invitation to indwell the story of God is to “meet the needs of people in the way that Jesus met them.”

Indwelling Scripture is so that we might become more like Jesus. Much like what the great prayer of Thanksgiving prays will happen for us at communion, “Send your Holy Spirit upon us we pray, that the bread we break and the cup we bless may be to us communion with the body and blood of Christ. And grant that being joined together in him we may attain to the unity of the faith and grow up into all things into Christ our

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199 Newbigin, Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 152 (emphasis mine).
head.”  

3. Scripture interiorization is an act of resistance to all the other narratives that seek to define what is good and right and beautiful. A professor of mine, Dr. Craig Gay at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia once suggested in a lecture that people who train to detect counterfeit money spend nearly no time evaluating counterfeit money, but virtually all of their time paying attention to the real thing. The logic behind the practice, Dr. Gay suggested, was that there will always be new and evolving forms of counterfeit money but the real thing stays the same. Similarly, the Christian practice is to immerse itself in the “real thing” of Scripture and so be equipped to identify any counterfeit narratives that appear, whatever form of counterfeit it may take. The plausibility structures of a particular culture remain relatively invisible to most people in the culture, “it’s just the way it is” or “it’s the air we breathe.” This is what Newbigin has in mind, when he borrows from Michael Polanyi in referring to the tacit dimension. 

Noticing how the gospel becomes more or less acceptable or more or less reasonable to a particular culture depends on their plausibility structures. As Newbigin writes,

Jesus is understood in the light of the assumptions which control our culture. When “reason” is invoked as a parallel or supplementary authority to “Scripture”

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201 Ephesians 4:11-13, NRSV.

202 Newbigin, Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 98.
and “tradition,” what is happening is that Jesus is being co-opted into the reigning plausibility structure. But the business of the missionary, and the business of the Christian Church in any situation, is to challenge the plausibility structure in the light of God’s revelation of the real meaning of history.\footnote{Ibid., 96.}

To indwell the story, making it our story, the way we see the real story equips the Christian to resist all the other narratives that seek to “co-opt” people. This is the business of the missionary and the work of the missionary congregation.

4. Scripture interiorization is an act of mission. Not only does Scripture interiorization help disclose the plausibility structure of the Kingdom of God and so equips one to resist other plausibility structures that exist in the world, it also offers the opportunity to “meet the needs of people in the way that Jesus met them.”\footnote{Ibid., 151.} As has already been highlighted, Newbigin is inviting Christians and the Church to immerse itself in the story of Israel and supremely the story of Jesus so that it becomes the way we see the world. Thus, the Church is available to meet needs in a way that is consistent with God’s heart for the world as it is embodied in Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul offers an interesting qualifier to the command to love in Philippians when he writes, “And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you determine what is best….”\footnote{Philippians 1: 9-10, NRSV.} It is not simply love, but a love informed by knowledge and insight. Scripture indwelling creates the space for love to overflow in this way.

5. Scripture interiorization continues the convictions of the reformed tradition: Scripture interprets Scripture. Peterson puts it clearly, “It takes the whole Bible to read
any part of the Bible.”206 A necessary component to understand any single passage of Scripture is in light of the whole story of Scripture. As one passage after another is interiorized the more the preacher is invited to notice how each one passage echoes another or even borrows from it. One of the great joys of sermon preparation that includes Scripture indwelling are the moments of connection from one Bible passage to another. For instance, the troubling lines of Genesis 3, “they hid themselves from the presence of the Lord among the trees of the garden”207, are met by the good news of Colossians 3, “Your life is hid with Christ in God.”208 Having internalized the story of the Fall in Genesis 3, and the story of redemption as it’s recorded in Colossians 3, the preacher and the hearer are open to see the connections; no longer hidden by the sin and shame of disobedience, but “hid with Christ in God.” There are many other ways to accomplish this sort of cross referencing but the ease with which it can occur when the passages are “kept” in the heart and mind of the preacher increases significantly.

6. It is also an act of integrity. The Christian tradition has made bold claims about the Bible itself and there have been ongoing conversations about the nature and authority of Scripture in the life of the Christian. The Belgic Confession, article 2, says, “God makes himself known to us more clearly by his holy and divine Word, as much as we need in this life, for God’s glory and for our salvation.”209 The same confession in article 5 goes on to add, "We believe that this Holy Scripture contain the will of God completely

206 Peterson, Eat This Book, loc. 48.
207 Genesis 3:7, NRSV (emphasis mine).
208 Colossians 3:4, NRSV (emphasis mine).
209 Belgic Confession article 2 https://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/confessions/belgic-confession
and that everything one must believe to be saved is sufficiently taught in it.\textsuperscript{210} Others argue about inerrancy and authority and infallibility. It is an act of integrity then to confess certain things to be true about the Bible and then enact those things in the way we engage the Bible. If the Bible is left on the coffee table as a decoration or in the pastor’s library as another volume and not engaged in a way consistent with what is said about it, there is an inconsistency in what is being said about it and what is being done with it. There is also inconsistency if the preacher’s inclusion of Scripture in the sermon is not aligned with what we say to be true about Scripture. Scripture interiorization, the slow process of indwelling the whole story of God, invites the Christian to do with the Bible what is said to be true about the Bible.

\textbf{The Process}

The preaching life is relentless. Sundays come with staggering consistency. In order to commit to the weekly act of Scripture indwelling I have had to embrace a long view of the preaching life. So, the process begins by situating each sermon in the larger context of my discipleship and the preaching life. When I began as a preacher, I would divide the year into five or six sermon series. In the fall, as new school rhythms were being established, I would preach a series of sermons on the nature of the church. The fall series on the church would give way to an Advent series of sermons leading up to Christmastide. In January, I would preach through a specific book of the Bible until the season of Lent. The six Sundays of Lent became a series of sermons itself leading up to Eastertide. Like Lent, Eastertide would be its own sermon series and then Eastertide would give way to a summer series. It was helpful for me to have the whole year in mind.

\textsuperscript{210} Belgic Confession article 5, \url{https://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/confessions/belgic-confession}
as I approached each Sunday’s sermon. Realizing each sermon is a part of a longer journey with the congregation added value and importance to the indwelling work required for each Sunday.

Recently I have moved away from series-based preaching and have begun to preach a form of the lectionary called the Narrative Lectionary. The Narrative Lectionary was initiated by two professors at Luther Seminary, Rolf Jacobson and Craig Koester. Over the last four years preaching at Pillar has mostly followed the narrative lectionary as a way of inviting people not only into longer biblical passages each week but to situate each of those passages in the larger context of the whole story of God revealed in Scripture. The Narrative Lectionary was developed in distinction from the Revised Common Lectionary. Jacobson and Koester write,

Though the Revised Common Lectionary has united the church in its reading of Scripture and has given much-needed structure, it doesn’t present Scripture -- especially the Old Testament -- in a way that helps people to become fluent in the first language of faith. The Narrative Lectionary is an attempt to take nine months to do just that.

The language used to describe the rationale is important to note, “[it] helps people to become fluent in the first language of faith.” Though different language is used, the notion of a plausibility structure is inherent in the rationale.

Internalizing the Word

The process of internalizing the Word for the sermon begins on Sunday, a week before the sermon is to be preached. Take an hour or two on Sunday afternoon or

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212 Working Preacher & Luther Seminary, “Narrative Lectionary.”
213 Ibid.
evening to familiarize yourself with the passage from the narrative lectionary. Begin by reading the passage and taking notes as to what stands out. Though it is the beginning of the memorization process, this is not the hardest work of memorizing. The purpose is to familiarize yourself with the passage and where it fits in the larger chapter or book in which it is located. For example, John 3:16, though it is often recited independent of its context, is a part of a story and a conversation with a Pharisee named Nicodemus. That context informs the meaning of each verse. This is an added value of interiorizing Scripture and performing it in the sermon. People are given a larger context for each verse. It is helpful to become more aware of the context that surrounds whatever passage will be preached. Ask simple questions and take basic notes. Are there words repeated that seem to be repeated intentionally? Is there another Bible passage that this one seems to draw from? What are the key words? What is the driving action? Where does your spirit resonate with the passage? Where do you find dissonance?

Reading, Re-reading and Memorizing

On Monday morning, carve out several hours to continue the work of memorizing the passage. Be alone and be quiet. Begin by reading the entire story several times and then begin memorizing the first phrase of the first verse and slowly add subsequent phrases and verses. Memorizing the passage on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday allows time and space to follow up on some of the exegetical work. On Thursday morning, write the sermon manuscript, which allows the preacher to set it aside on Friday.

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214 The realities of pastoral ministry rarely allow for this process to play out undisturbed. Each week takes on its own character and its own process. The process outlined here is the intended one, the desired one that is regularly adjusted to meet the weekly needs of pastoral ministry.

215 Early in my pastoral career it took much longer than a few hours on a single morning. When I began as a preacher, I would carve out 5 hours every day of the week, from 7 am to noon. A large portion of that time was devoted to the work of internalizing the Bible narrative. As I continued the practice of Scripture interiorization I became much more proficient. Now by Monday morning I usually have the passage memorized.
to keep sabbath. Return to it on Saturday to internalize the sermon to preach it without notes. Wake up early on Sunday morning. Recite the Bible passage, then read it again to see the words one last time. Read the sermon aloud, and then preach the sermon aloud, including reciting the Bible passage. It will take time, but trust you are prepared to preach the sermon to the congregation.

Interiorizing - Six helps along the way

The act of interiorizing a biblical passage is a fairly mechanical one. Each biblical passage requires its own process and encourages different techniques but there are six basic techniques I use to memorize a Bible passage: repetition, orality, embodiment, mnemonic devices, drawings and writing. Using Psalm 134, here is how each technique aids memorization or interiorization.

Come, bless the Lord, all you servants of the Lord,
who stand by night in the house of the Lord!
Lift up your hands to the holy place,
and bless the Lord.

May the Lord, maker of heaven and earth,
bless you from Zion.216

Repetition

Repetition is required for Scripture interiorization. There is no way around it. People will often suggest that, “you must have a photographic memory to memorize.” However, the reality is repetition overtakes the photographic. Begin by repeating as many words as possible without looking. For instance, “Come, bless the Lord,” is the first set of words. Repeat them multiple times. As you are able to recite the first set of words without looking, then add a second set of words. In this case, “All you servants of the Lord.”

When you are able to recite the second set of words without looking combine the two sets

216 Psalm 134, NRSV.
and recite them together, “Come, bless the Lord, all you servants of the Lord.” Then add a third set of words, “who stand by night.” Once you are able to recite the third set of words without looking combine them with the first two sets of Words and repeat them together. At that point, add a fourth set of Words, “in the house of the Lord,” and so on.

**Orality**

Orality is also necessary. Orality is speaking the words aloud. This is why it is really important to be alone. It looks like talking to yourself which is hard to do with other people around. Do not simply read the words with your eyes and recite them quietly in your mind. Speak them out loud. This is necessary to the internalization process primarily because it employs more senses. Not only is the passage seen with the eyes, but tasted by the tongue and heard with the ears. Rather than involving only one of the senses now three of the senses are involved. The capacity to internalize the passage increases significantly.

**Embodiment**

Embodiment is an additional technique. Embodiment is the act of including physical movement to the work of memorization. For Psalm 134, memorize the first set of words, “Come, bless the Lord.” Choose a physical motion that is consistent with the action words of the Psalm. In this case make a motion with the right hand as if inviting someone over. It is important that the motion is consistent with the action of the set of words, and it is also important not to use too many motions. The motions themselves will assist in remembering the words to say. Not only is “sight,” “sound” and “taste” present but also “touch.” Four of the five senses are involved. The fifth sense of smell is more difficult to involve in a meaningful way.
Mnemonic Devices

Mnemonic devices are very helpful. Some biblical passages easily lend themselves to the use of mnemonic devices, some less so. In the case of Psalm 134, take the first letter of key words in the Psalm. The C of “come” in verse 1, and the A of “all” in verse 1, and the L of “lift” in verse 2, and the M of “may” in verse 3, create the convenient acronym C-A-L-M.

Come, bless the Lord, all you servants of the Lord,

who stand by night in the house of the Lord!

Lift up your hands to the holy place,
and bless the Lord.

May the Lord, maker of heaven and earth,
bless you from Zion.\textsuperscript{217}

Not every biblical passage allows for such a convenient acronym, but common human capacity remembers a list of five to seven items. Sometimes the mnemonic devices become words like CALM, other times they are a seemingly random ordering of letters, but in any case, they are helpful in memorizing the larger passage. This is especially the case when combined with the other techniques. The challenge with acronyms is that as more and more passages are memorized it is difficult to remember the acronym. However, they are helpful aids to memorizing the biblical passage and once the passage is internalized, the aid is less necessary.

Drawings

Drawings can also be helpful. Words themselves, especially the number of words a longer passage includes, can run together. Drawings help to see the passage as

\textsuperscript{217} Psalm 134, NRSV.
something more than Words. I draw little stick figures representative of the action of a set or sets of words. In the case of Psalm 134. Draw four pictures in the column of the page. This requires printing the biblical narrative rather than drawing in the margins of a Bible. The drawings look like this:

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Come, bless the Lord, all you servants of the Lord,

Who stand by night in the house of the Lord!

Lift up your hands to the holy place and bless the Lord.

May the Lord, maker of heaven and earth, bless you from Zion.
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The drawings themselves are a helpful way to see the passage unfold. This technique works very well for biblical narratives but less so for Pauline epistles where the action is less visible.

Each of these techniques are best employed when they serve each other. For instance, the action associated with embodiment and the drawing can go together. When reciting, “Lift up your hands to the holy place,” it is better for the embodiment to be arms lifted in the air and for the drawing to be an image of an individual with arms raised in the air, rather than the embodiment action being arms raised in the air, but the drawing attempt to picture a “holy place.” And all of the techniques serve the first technique of repeating the passage over and over again.

Writing

After employing each of these techniques, then write the passage out. Do this with pen and paper or type it. Close the Bible and put away the notes taken and simply write or type out the passage. This is helpful in a number of ways. First, it allows for the passage to be repeated again. Secondly, it provides opportunity to notice where you are struggling in a passage and need more time. Once you are able to type the entire passage, you can be confident that you have the passage memorized.

Additional Techniques

There are other techniques people have suggested as well as the practice of Scripture interiorization is engaged. The most commonly suggested is putting a passage to music. This is a very common technique, especially used to help children memorize.

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218 I do not always actively draw the picture but I am always seeing the action of a biblical story unfold in my mind and in that way “drawing” a mental picture.
Bible passages. It is helpful to get the words right, but can also present an obstacle to the work of interiorization. First of all, music is powerful and has a way of connecting deeply with an individual. The music then becomes the thing interiorized rather than the biblical passage itself. Associating music with the biblical passage also undermines the preacher’s capacity to perform without the music associated with it. Additionally, in many cases a biblical passage has an internal rhythm to it and has its own music, so to speak. The music imposed on it may actually distract from the music inside of it.

A second technique that has been suggested to me is to include the sense of smell. For instance, to memorize the trial narrative in the Gospel of John while sitting by a fire and so to include the smell of smoke. The trial narrative includes, Peter stood “warming himself by the fire.” That is a helpful way of recalling that portion of the narrative, but the story continues from that point and does not include the smell of smoke. It may be difficult then to introduce a new sense of smell or eliminate the smell of smoke.

**Indwelling the entire week**

After memorizing the passage continue to repeat it throughout the week, multiple times every day. In this way, the preacher is more available to the work of the Spirit through the biblical story than you would be if you had not taken the time to memorize the passage. You do not need the Bible with you to work on the sermon for the Bible is in you and so is working on you. For instance, I will walk into the hospital and visit a congregational member who is going into surgery and pray over them Psalm 134, asking the God who made heaven and earth to bless the person as they go through surgery. I ask God to bless the surgeon’s hands for the work and bless the nurses and technicians with all they need. Also, because the biblical passage is always with me the connections
between a conversation with someone and the biblical passage become clearer and more available. A scene in a movie or a quote from an author or a report in the news are all seen through the lens of the biblical passage I am memorizing. The text comes to life in the everyday; frankly, every day comes more to life because of interiorization.

Memorization towards Interiorization

There is a difference though, between having the passage memorized and being able to perform the passage as part of the sermon. It is one thing to be able to sit alone in my study and recite aloud a biblical passage, it is another thing to have it so internalized that I can stand before a congregation of people and recite it. I have more control of the environment when I am alone in my study, so I can minimize distractions. However, in the sanctuary on a Sunday morning there is a baby crying, someone coughing, a car alarm sounding in the parking lot, or a person getting up to use the bathroom. Then there is the person leaving the church making the preacher wonder, “Is it something I said?” The noise is constant. Also, it is a difficult thing to perform a biblical passage while seeing people so moved by it they are weeping or so seemingly disinterested they are staring at the ceiling tiles. For this reason, there is an additional technique I use to prepare to perform the passage, rapidity. I speak aloud the passage so quickly it is largely unintelligible to anyone listening. I repeat so fast I myself do not have time to think about the next word or set of words. It simply has to come from deep inside. I will often do this as part of the sound check before a service on Sunday morning. When I am to the point where I can recite the passage that fast, I am confident I not only have it memorized but have it internalized so that even though I hear the person coughing and the sound of the
car alarm and see the person walking out of the sanctuary I am able to engage those congregational realities while simultaneously also able to perform the biblical passage.

From Preacher to Congregation

For the preacher to have internalized the biblical passage in such a way so as to perform it, is a necessary initial step. However, the intention is also that the congregation would be involved in the act of indwelling the Word. There are several ways the sermon invites the congregation into the act of interiorizing the passage. Such as Newbigin’s pattern of revelation, plausibility structure, indwelling, and action, so the preacher acknowledges a primary first task of the sermon is to proclaim “God has acted.” Missional preaching is not meant simply to get people to do something but to proclaim and celebrate God acts. The fullest of God’s action is revealed in Jesus Christ, so the sermon centers around the person and work of Christ. For this reason, Newbigin writes, “We have to preach Christ. That is really our only business in the pulpit.” The sermon does other things too, but a primary focus of the sermon is the proclamation God acts in history. There is a refrain in sermons that I preach; this is not spoken every Sunday but often enough for the church to know it well, “God sent his son Jesus Christ into the world, he suffered on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins and rose from the dead to overcome the power of sin and death. He ascended into heaven where he rules and reigns until he comes again to make all things new and to make all things right.” God acts, and acts supremely in Jesus.

There is a copper rooster that sits high on the steeple at Pillar Church. The iconic Pillar building built in 1856. It would seem to be an odd object to situate on the top of the

\[219\] Newbigin, Good Shepherd, 24.
church building, there are more predominant Christian symbols, most notably the cross. There is discussion as to why Pillar specifically, and other churches too, placed the rooster on the top of their buildings. Though several explanations have been suggested, a church symbologist of the 12th century named William Duranda suggested that churches placed roosters on the tops of their buildings because roosters rose early in the morning before the sun would rise to proclaim “the light is coming.” Roosters are meant to represent the herald function of the church. That rooster is a good reminder not only to the church of its function, but also to the preacher’s task. We proclaim the light, we proclaim God acts.

Peter in his Pentecost sermon, after the Spirit had descended with the sound like the rush of a violent wind, and tongues of fire as people began to speak other languages, stood up to preach. Some who saw what was going on wondered, “What does this mean?” Others laughed it off as if they were drunk. Peter began his sermon by saying, “This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel, ‘In the last days it will be God declares, I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh…” Peter began his sermon by declaring God acts.

God’s action creates a whole new plausibility structure that the hearer enters by indwelling the Word. The preacher does not create the plausibility structure, but names its reality, identifies its conditions, and articulates what is reasonable because God acts. The congregation is invited to enter the plausibly structure through indwelling the Word, and the preacher assists that indwelling in several ways. First of all, sermons are oral experiences. The act of speaking aloud the Scripture helps people to receive it differently.

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221 Acts 2:14, NRSV.
If left just listening to it while they read along or even reading it aloud themselves can be limiting for the work of internalization. Anything that stands between a hearer and the speaker serves as a potential obstacle to the reception of a message. Sometimes those obstacles are helpful and necessary, they create a sense of safety for the hearer. In a certain way it is like when someone is standing too close to you in a conversation and has invaded your personal space. The conversation is distracted by the proximity, and space is required for the conversation to be most meaningful. However, sometimes those obstacles are themselves the distraction. A preacher standing so far away from the congregation on a chancel and behind a pulpit reading from a Bible are obstacles to the hearer. Many people in churches are quite used to such a set up so are less distracted, but it remains an obstacle. Even the Bible itself, as an object, can be an obstacle to hearing the scriptural story. The Scripture is inherently oral.

Additionally, there has been research done on the way that the eye will deceive a person into seeing what it already knows to see. A person will be able to read a misspelled word as if it were spelled correctly if the first and last letters of a word are in the right place. They are able to do this because they know what the word is supposed to be. The middle letters of a word can be in any order, and yet the person will read the word as if it is spelled correctly. Here is an example, "Aoccdrnig to rscheearch at Cmabrigde Uinervtisy, it deosn't mttaer in waht oredr the ltteers in a wrod are, the olny iprmoatnt tihng is taht the frist and lsat ltteers be at the rghit pclae."222 The actual research behind this is not intended to address the value of orality but does demonstrate that the eye will see what it knows to tacitly see. Performing a biblical passage minimizes

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that tendency of the eye and so invites the hearer to internalize the biblical story in new and fresh ways by hearing.

learning from the practice

There are other important ways the preacher of a sermon helps the hearer internalize the biblical passage. When the structure of the sermon arises out of the biblical story rather than imposed on it. A direct line can be drawn from every point of the sermon to the biblical passage itself. A question I keep in mind about every point in every sermon, “Where does this come from?” If I am not able to see very clearly for myself how the point I am trying to make in a sermon emerges from the biblical narrative it will be that much more difficult for the hearer to make the connection. However, if the connection is clear it becomes a portal for the hearer to enter the world of the passage.

I will also regularly invite the congregation to repeat a verse as part of the sermon and go through the very same process of memorizing that I do. I begin by asking them to repeat after me a single Word or phrase and then add to that Word or phrase a second set of Words until we can repeat together the whole verse. I will then return to that verse as a refrain throughout the sermon so that they hear it, taste it and see it as I perform it as well as repeat it multiple times.

Congregational indwelling of the Word has become a spoken and practiced value within the Pillar Church congregation. In addition to the way that a specific sermon invites people to indwell a biblical story, we regularly use liturgical seasons as a space to invite people to memorize Scripture. For instance, during the season of Lent 2018 the congregation was invited to memorize Philippians 2:5-11, known as the Christ hymn. After memorizing the congregation was invited to do something with or for someone else
because there was a prompting from Philippians 2:5-11. Then they were asked to share
with someone what they did. During the season of Pentecost 2016 the series of sermons
was called “The Summer Psalms’ Project.” The project was to pick any Psalm in the
Book of Psalms and to memorize that Psalm. With the Psalm indwelled by members of
the congregation the church was encouraged to “see” the Psalm in the world. Once able
to see it, the church was asked to show what they saw in the form of any art medium.
Some people wrote songs, others took pictures, or painted, or knit, one man made a piece
of art out of copper. Anyone who wanted to gather on a Thursday evening toward the end
of that summer was invited to share their work of art. It was a congregational art gallery
of sorts. The purpose in each of these cases was to invite the congregation to indwell the
Word so as to enter its plausibility structure and from that place engage the contextual
realities of life where they are. In other words, these particular seasonal projects and the
weekly preaching practice at Pillar seeks to follow Newbigin’s pattern of revelation,
plausibility structure, indwelling and action.
CHAPTER 5: EMPIRICAL TASK:
THE IMPACT OF THE METHOD THROUGH STORIES,
QUESTIONS, AND CONNECTIONS

Lesslie Newbigin never articulated a homiletical method that encouraged the preacher to indwell the Word for Scripture performance in a sermon. This method though resonates with Newbigin’s call to the church to indwell the story of Israel and supremely the story of Jesus Christ until it becomes our story, the way we see the real story, and then from that point meet the needs of people in the way that Jesus met them. Over the course of my fifteen-year pastoral career, preaching in this way as the primary homiletical method, I have seen evidence of the relationship between this method and the increase of a congregation’s missional commitment. It would be too bold an assertion to make that this method is solely responsible for a congregation’s increased missionality. However, it would also be too bold an assertion to say there is no correspondence between the two. The Pillar congregation gives further evidence of the relationship, and other pastors from around the country who offer to their congregations a similar homiletical method suggest the same. Here are some of those stories.

There is a two-fold action that happens when a preacher commits to indwelling the Word for performance in the sermon. First, the preacher both models for the congregation the very thing she is asking of the congregation and remains alive and

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223 On Sunday afternoon April 29, 2018 seven members of the Pillar congregation gathered with Dr. Kyle Small and Ryan Hall to engage in conversation around the homiletical method they experience at Pillar. The purpose of the conversation was to gather stories and explore connections between the homiletical method of Scripture indwelling and performance in a sermon with missional engagement. Dr. Small facilitated the conversation and Ryan took notes. The conversation was recorded and transcribed by Katie Bast. The names of those present have been changed but their context and comments have not.

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attentive to God’s Spirit in her own life. Newbigin highlights the value of this sort of modeling and attentiveness when he writes,

To abide in Christ means to let his Words abide in us and constantly to refer everything to him. It means going back to them again and again and being willing again and again to start afresh like a child going down to the bottom of the class. It means, specifically, giving the first place in our time every day, and the first priority in our thinking, to this hidden life of the soul with Jesus.”

He goes on to add, “A lawyer, a doctor, a carpenter, a driver, a baker - all of them may be bad men, but yet fulfill a useful function in society. But what is the use of a pastor who is not doing this one thing?”

Second, the sermon actively invites people of the congregation to begin and continue the work of indwelling the Word. The preacher cannot be available to walk through every life circumstance with each congregation member and act as an advisor. The preacher is not aware enough nor schooled enough in the details of everyone’s work and the complexities of their jobs and lives and details of their contexts. The investor is not likely going to ask the pastor for advice on making good investments. If, the preacher though, can invite the investor to internalize the Word, the investments they make will be influenced not for the sake of making the most money, but for the purpose of investing in such a way that reflects the commitments of the plausibility structure of the biblical witness. The preacher cannot possibly know the circumstances and details of every congregants’ life but can invite them into the world of Scripture as a way of urging them to live in unbroken continuity with the story in their own lives.

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**Indwelling as Healing Mission: and other Congregational Stories**

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224 Newbigin, *Good Shepherd*, 142.

225 Ibid., 142.
Anne Heyns began to participate in Pillar’s life several years ago. She memorized Psalm 23 as part of the Summer Psalms Project. She did not attend our art gallery gathering. She had never memorized anything the length of Psalm 23 before so it was a challenge for her, but she was diligent and accomplished it. She kept it to herself though. Two years later, on a Sunday morning, a much beloved member of the Pillar community, Steve Dykstra, announced to the church that he was diagnosed with ALS. ALS, or Lou Gherig’s disease, is a vicious disease with no known cause and no known cure. Our congregational heart was broken and we wept with Steve that Sunday morning. On that day, as Steve shared his testimony in worship, he recited Psalm 23; he had interiorized it for his journey with ALS. Anne was deeply moved to hear those words from someone “walking through the valley of the shadow of death,” the same Words she had chosen to interiorize herself years earlier. Her Scripture indwelling work was reengaged and she went home and put Psalm 23 to music, dedicated it to Steve, and performed it for him as an act of prayer and a demonstration of care. This is God’s mission of love and healing.

A Story from the Lake to the Core City

Hector and Amy have been a part of the Pillar community for several years. They are both retired and approximately 70 years old. They connected to Pillar shortly after it re-established itself in 2012. Their primary residence was Indiana, but owned a second home in Holland where they would spend weekends or longer stretches of time in the summer. The commute from Indiana kept them on the periphery of community life at Pillar, and their sole interaction with the church was Sunday morning worship. I noticed them sitting alone in the balcony during the first service. There was still plenty of space
in the main floor sanctuary seating, but they chose the distance and relative anonymity of the balcony.

As they continued to worship at Pillar, they demonstrated a deeper sense of belonging to the Pillar community. After many months they moved to the main floor seating. After a year or two, I began to have more personal conversations with them. We moved from simply greeting each other in the pew. After a few years, in hopes of hearing more of their story, I asked if we could get together for coffee. We sat at Lemonjellos, a local coffee shop across the street from the church, for several hours one weekday morning. Their posture was wonder and affection. They were in awe over the ways they were experiencing God in their lives. They were making decisions about their lives that even surprised themselves. They were overcome with emotion that demonstrated itself through tears.

They recalled an important moment in their discipleship. They were sitting in Pillar one Sunday morning. The sermon asked “Who is going to go?” It was a part of a sending series. In the sermon I invited anyone willing “to go” to raise their hands. Neither Hector nor Amy knew where they were going but they raised their hands anyway. They were sharing with me at Lemonjellos that morning that they discerned they were being sent to Holland, but not in the way they had expected. They decided to forego their life long intention of retiring in Holland to live in their second home near the lake and decided to sell that lake home and move into Holland’s core city area. As Amy put it, “We are going to move into the neighborhood. I don’t know what we’re going to do there, but we’re going to have a front porch and coffee will be served with conversation to anyone who will sit with me.”
Hector and Amy were able to point to a particular sermon that prompted a major life decision for them with missional engagement as the primary purpose. The sermon did not ask them to move, but it did invite them to participate in unbroken continuity with the actors in the biblical story. Hector and Amy describe the preaching life at Pillar, “It’s not a theological discourse, it’s your life.” “It’s like hearing anew for the first time.” Hector, reflecting on the Scripture indwelling and performance in the sermon said, “It opens you up to possibilities that you can do. It opens you up to things that I can do for the kingdom that I hadn’t before.” In a certain way Hector and Amy were giving voice to the tacit awareness Scripture indwelling causes: “Opens you up,” “hearing anew,” and “it’s your life.”

Hector and Amy were able to identify a clear connection between a sermon preached and life lived. Mission and preaching were intertwined - seamless. Such connections are not always so obvious, but a relationship between this kind of preaching and missionality is experienced.

A Story from the Funeral Home

Kevin is another Pillar attendee who works for a local Funeral Home. He and his wife and their three children have been a part of the Pillar community for several years. They moved to Holland in 2015 in order for him to work in the family owned and operated funeral home. Kevin is approximately 35 years old. He grew up in Holland, but moved to the south years ago with his wife to pursue a career in the music business before their return to West Michigan.

As a funeral director Kevin is invited into people’s homes and lives during moments of tremendous loss. Kevin was recently invited to Holland Hospital to attend to
an infant that had died in pre-term labor. He arrived to realize the child was a son of childhood friends. It was a simultaneously heartbreaking and tender experience. One of Kevin’s responsibilities in that situation is to share with the family the costs of his services. He experiences that as an extremely difficult and awkward moment. As he puts it, “You’re experiencing one of the saddest moments of your life, and I hand you a bill.” This experience with his childhood friends was not the first time he was in a similarly awkward situation, but it opened him to experience it differently. He wondered to himself, “There has to be a way to alleviate the costs on these families.”

Kevin and I got together a few weeks after his experience where he shared with me his wondering, “Would it be possible for Pillar to set up a fund that anyone could support to cover the costs associated with infant death in West Michigan.” He said, “It wouldn’t have to just be a Pillar thing, and I’d connect with other funeral homes in the area to make them aware of the fund and invite them to use it too.” Other communities around the country have resources for situations like these, but West Michigan does not. Kevin saw an opportunity to meet a need and found a way to address it. In our conversations he did not say, “You once preached a sermon about caring for the hurting, so I set up this fund.” However, he did say the preaching life at Pillar “motivates you to become more like Christ.”

A Story from West Michigan to Nigeria

Jacob and Sue live in Grand Rapids but work in Holland and Zeeland respectively. They have been married for 5 years and have worshipped with the Pillar community for all of those years. Sue manages an insurance office and Jacob is an

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226 Or as Newbigin would say, “To meet the needs of people in the way that Jesus met them.” Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 151.
engineering technician. Jacob was recently made aware of a need in Nigeria. A friend of Pillar who lives there collects used devices such as laptops, iPads, ipods or old smart phones, refurbishes them and uses them to teach technology to her community in Nigeria. Teaching technology is an avenue for evangelism. Jacob was inspired by this idea. He was aware of the opportunity to buy devices at a low cost and was able to purchase dozens of them. A simple act of service from Jacob but a very meaningful one for the friend of Pillar living in Nigeria.

Jacob never mentioned to me a sermon preached at Pillar as he was sharing about sending devices to Nigeria. His imagination was influenced by Pillar’s preaching life. Referring specifically to Scripture indwelling and performance in the sermon, he said, “It’s different than a simple recitation or straight up reading of it. You can tell when someone is reading off a cue card, and this isn’t that. And it’s not just a regurgitation of the same words. It’s been thought about and, in some ways, applied and contextualized, and to me, at least, it makes all the difference.” Jacob gave witness to his experience and said, “it makes all the difference.” Scripture indwelling and performance opens a way for Jacob to hear the story of God, to enter its plausibility structure, and to act in the world in his sphere of influence.

A Story from the College Campus

Mikayla is single and a Hope College student. She came to Hope from Seattle, WA. She has been worshipping with the Pillar community for the three years that she has been on campus. She was asked to share her testimony of loss with the Pillar community on Easter Sunday morning, 2018. Her mom died of a rare autoimmune disease when
Mikayla was only 14 years old. She was thrown into the very sad reality of grieving her mother’s death and also having to help raise her younger sibling. She said,

   It still hurts. Sometimes I just want to call my mom on the phone and hear what she's up to. I want to ask her what I'm supposed to do. I want to hear her say that she's proud of me, that she loves me. I wanted her to be at my sister’s high school graduation. I wish she could worship with me in these pews. I wish that one day she would be there to teach me how to be a mom. And in the midst of that I know that I get to see her again and 70 years of waiting is nothing compared to eternity. Christ is right here with me as I miss her, and most of all Christ is the one raising us both up again into new life forever and ever.

Mikayla was demonstrating with her testimony what she had experienced in the preaching life at Pillar. Her grief is real and the loss is significant but she was able to locate her grief and loss in the wider story of God’s redeeming purposes for the world.

   When asked to reflect on the preaching life at Pillar, Mikayla had this to say, “Jon takes his preaching extremely seriously and wants to draw us into the Word and draw us closer to God and send us out with tangible things we can do during the week. It’s always done with a lean towards what God has already accomplished.” Mikayla was experiencing a kind of preaching that seeks to “draw us in” and “send us out.” In her own words she was giving voice to the indwelling of Scripture as access to a plausibility structure from which action is offered according to the circumstances of our own lives. That action is offered as participation in what “God has already accomplished.” Mikayla was able to view her mother’s death in the honesty of her grieving and in the assurance of Christ’s presence, and ultimate good for her and her mom because she had been drawn in to a story where resurrection is plausible and sent out to engage the circumstances of her life.

   Congregational Stories from the business sector
Matthew has been worshipping with the Pillar community for nearly 5 years. He is approximately 50 years old. He lives with his wife and their two children live in Hamilton, MI. His job sends him all over the world. By his own admission he likes for a sermon to tell him what to do. He put it this way, “Don’t speak in hypotheticals, tell me what I need to do.” After experiencing the preaching life at Pillar, he said, “It’s not hypotheticals, we are invited to be a part of this journey.” He is becoming more aware that the action he wants to mark his life is preceded by an invitation into a journey. His action in the world is influenced and even dictated by the story of faith revealed in Scripture. In other words, he has a growing awareness of the necessary indwelling of Scripture that authentic Christian thought and action require.

Jim manages the properties owned at a local hospital. He, with his wife and two sons, has been worshipping with the Pillar community for five years. He is in his mid-30s and has experienced significant renewal in life and faith in the last several years. He said to me a few years ago, “Pillar is the best thing that ever happened to our marriage.”

Jim grew up in a Roman Catholic parish and experienced it to be more about routine than a vibrant life with God for the world. His wife grew up in a non-denominational congregation and experienced it to be mostly about a personal relationship with God that devalued ritual and liturgy. They are finding Pillar to be a place where they are able to worship in a liturgical community in accessible ways.

Pillar celebrates communion on a weekly basis. Jim was very comfortable with the practice because of his childhood churchgoing experience but his wife was less sure. As he was reflecting on their experience of weekly communion he commented how it

227 Her initial skepticism was not realized. As Jim put it, “she worried its significance would be diminished but it’s done the opposite for her.”
situates the sermon in the larger presence and action of God in the world. He said, “There is something much greater than the sermon that Jon is saying.”

Stories from other preachers

The particular homiletical method of interiorizing Scripture and performing it in the sermon is being practiced on a regular basis by several preachers around the country. I interviewed several preachers and offer their stories as amplification for the impact of this homiletical method.

From A Preacher in Philadelphia, PA

Jared Ayers is the Lead Pastor of Liberti Church in downtown Philadelphia. He planted the church ten years ago, and it has grown to two campuses. The second site is on the campus of the University of Villanova. The stated mission of the church is, “Liberti seeks to live, speak and serve as the very presence of Christ for the neighborhoods of center city and main line Philadelphia.” Almost 18 months ago, Jared listened to Western Theological Seminary’s “Luxcast.” The podcast was my dad and me discussing indwelling. Jared listened while waiting for a train, found himself with an hour-long train ride during which he decided to practice interiorizing Scripture in the way that my dad and I were suggesting. That launched Jared into this homiletical method. He is 18 months into the practice.

228 Over the course of several weeks I conducted one on one interviews with 5 different pastors. The interviews were held in person when possible or over the phone when necessary. Each of these pastors has practiced the homiletical method outlined here of Scripture interiorization and performance in the sermon regularly for some or all of their pastoral preaching.

Since that train ride, Jared says the first step in the preaching process is to “memorize or interiorize the Scripture.” Jared describes the context for his preaching as “post-Christian” and “skeptical, particularly suspicious of text and authority and becoming more and more post-literate.” He has noticed the practice of interiorizing Scripture and performing it in the sermon is a way to “sneak past some of that suspicion.” He commented, “Listening and speaking are inherently personal acts while reading is impersonal.” Jared said the practice is, “true to the nature of Christian revelation.” He went on to say,

Memorization communicates the authority of Scripture. The critique of conservative Christianity and generations of evangelicals, as well as fundamentalists, is that they hold a high hypothetical view of the Bible, but in practice did not engage Scripture. A few generations later people who lived their whole life in the church lost any sense of the larger Scripture narrative, but believe stuff about the Bible.

Jared recognizes how this homiletical method did not represent “a change in the missional commitments of the church, but rather as a way of living them out.” He acknowledged that people hear the Scriptures differently in the sermon, but the greatest impact has been on his own life personally. The rigors of pastoral ministry can be difficult, and the pressures can be challenging. The practice of interiorizing Scripture coincided with a particularly difficult season for him personally. He referred to the practice as a “life line.” He said, “When I’m carrying all sorts of concerns about life; when I’m anxious or worried I have the Scriptures in me, I live under that. Interiorization gets the Scriptures inside of me to work on me when I’m not working on a sermon.”

While Jared celebrates the benefits of this homiletical method, he is willing to acknowledge the challenges of the practice, too. It requires a lot of work; “I don’t have a photographic memory; it takes real time and real energy in a finite amount of time.” He
also carries a concern that the practice draws unhelpful attention to the preacher. He has tried to subtly introduce the practice at Liberti. He added, “I wonder if the practice can be a little show off or draws attention to itself. A lot of times that’s more about the posture that you take rather than the actual act itself.” Acknowledging the challenges have not kept him from continuing the practice and seeing the benefit, both as an expression of the missional commitments the church holds and for his own life with God. The latter benefit other preachers have acknowledged as well.

From a Preacher in Orange City, IA

Brian Keepers has served three congregations as the Lead Pastor. He spent three years in Sheldon, Iowa serving Bethel Reformed Church, twelve years in Holland, Michigan as the Lead Pastor of Fellowship Reformed Church, and is currently serving Trinity Reformed Church in Orange City, Iowa. He has been the Lead Pastor there for one year. Brian describes the context in which he preaches as having, “a thick cultural Christianity.” Brian refers to the practice of interiorizing Scripture “not as the first step in writing a sermon, but a key practice that served as an incubator throughout the rest of the week as the sermon is gestating.” The practice allows for “Scripture to work on him when he is not working on a sermon.” He also adds that it allowed him to integrate many of the responsibilities of the pastoral life.

So, I’m in the hospital praying part of the text with my parishioner. Sitting in the consistory meeting, present to what is happening in the room through that Scripture, or meeting with a staff member. It becomes the lens through which I see. It is a hearing aid through which I hear. When we’re inside the story, as you’re acting, all these pastoral practices are being touched and it’s pulling it all in.
Brian has also noticed how the practice of interiorizing Scripture for performance in the sermon allows him to be more present to himself and to the congregation in the preaching moment. He said,

I feel most alive and I’m at my best when I’ve internalized the Scripture. There’s a difference in me in how I show up. There’s a freedom, I’m more fully present to the preaching moment, more present to the congregation when I’ve interiorized. When you can recite, I don’t always recite, when I perform it by memory, there is a level of engagement that is unique. Some resist it for various reasons, but most often people find themselves drawn in.

Brian also noticed how the work of interiorizing Scripture has helped the congregation interiorize the Word as well, "People find themselves drawn into it, they move from spectator to actor. Being drawn in, you’re more of an actor when we’re hearing Scripture recited than when its being read.” The congregation has given evidence to affirm Brian’s reflection. He hears people say, “I hadn’t notice that about the story before,” or, “I’d never heard the story like that before,” or, “I thought I knew that story, you opened up something I hadn’t noticed,” or, “you brought it to life. I found myself so engaged. I find myself so drawn in.”

Brian finds it difficult to correlate the homiletic with mission. He cannot say, “Because I preach like this the people act like that.” He wonders if the influence on missional engagement of the congregation is more in line with what Newbigin suggests.

Brian put it like this,

I’m giving you this plausibility structure and it becomes second nature. The seeing is the gift. If that wasn’t happening, if this kind of commitment wasn’t happening you don’t have the capacity to see. That’s harder than give me the five steps, here’s the bang. There’s the evidence. It works every time. If it's about getting into the character of Christ, until it becomes second nature, this becomes the script for us. It’s about who we are becoming rather than doing five activities or a verse that I’m going to recite. It becomes about improvisation. You don’t pull out the story and ask ‘What do I say now?’ You enter the story so fully that you
Brian is aware of the challenges of the practice both on a personal level and as it relates to the congregation. He says, “I’m too busy. I’m not creating space or taking time to linger in the Word. That’s the biggest obstacle.” He is also concerned that there is a level of “attention grabbing,” that the practice is about impressing people. He is sensitive to the concerns and tries to be aware of them but continues the practice on a regular basis.

As our conversation was concluded he said,

Part of what we’re doing requires an act of faith. I trust that inviting you into this story, this becomes the narrative that counters all the other stories you’re going to hear, you’re inundated with all these other false narratives. This story tells you who you are and why you’re here. It’s slow and patient work and you see over time the fruit of the Spirit. Over the long haul, people don’t even make the direct connection between their action and the sermon. Sunday after Sunday, we trust God to speak in the Son by the power of the Spirit, we trust when we say “hear the world of the Lord,” Christ’s presence is mediated such that we’re being formed into the person of Jesus and that takes faith.

From a Preacher in Des Moines, IA

Jill VerSteeg was one of the pastors at Meredith Drive in Des Moines, Iowa. Meredith Drive is a multi-site church. While the congregations of the two sites were different, Jill’s preparation was the same. She outlined her week like this:

Sunday night I spend an hour sitting with the text in a prayerful posture. Every morning I get up and spend an hour allowing me to join hands with the text. I print the passage out in large print and circle the key words that strike a chord. Thursday is sermon writing day, always in the morning. The phone and email are off, and unless a child is bleeding, don’t bother me. I try to take Friday off before beginning to work on the sermon again Saturday afternoon. I would go to church early Sunday morning and recite the passage in the dark on stage.

On Sundays, Meredith Drive posted the Scripture reading on screens for the congregation to follow along. However, Jill would not do that; “I never have Scripture on the screen
because I want people to have the gift of audibly receiving God’s Word, to receive revelation.”

Jill acknowledges that the missional impact of this homiletical method requires patience. She said, “Over time the practice helps to change a congregation.” She noticed the congregation engaging the refugee community that worshipped with them with more hospitably. She noticed the complaining about seemingly petty church trivialities to be diminished. She added,

We can’t cause it to happen, but we can prepare soil for the seed to take root. You want the Word to walk its way out on Tuesday afternoon and Thursday morning in the lives of the congregation. We’re giving people a vision of a future hope, the real story of the world. Let’s weave your story, my story, into the biblical story - that’s hope.

Jill had a particularly acute experience of the value of interiorizing Scripture for her own life with God. She left Meredith Drive and took a job with the RCA denominational office. This work transition moved her away from the weekly rhythm of preaching and interiorizing Scripture. She said,

When I came to work in the RCA, because I’m not steeped in the Scriptures like when I was preaching, I hit a dry barren land. I think it was both that I was no longer interiorizing or reciting in the sermon. I had to call “time out” and say, ’Where has Jesus gone?’ I have such a love relationship with the Word. In my humanness, the traveling, and work, and family dissipated the one hour every morning. I’m living the unintended consequence of not doing it every week.

From a preacher who changed his homiletical practices mid-career

Jon Opgenorth was a pastor with Fellowship Reformed Church in Muskegon, Michigan for six years before becoming the Lead Pastor and primary preacher of Trinity Reformed Church in Orange City, Iowa where Brian Keepers now serves. Jon was introduced to this homiletical method by Tim Brown at a pastors’ conference. He heard Dr. Brown recite the Sermon on the Mount and thought to himself, “I can do that. I’m
good at memorization.” So, he returned to Trinity and began to memorize and recite Scripture during the sermon. Initially, he considered it an “add on” to the preaching process. After he had done all of the other work preparing to preach, he would then memorize the passage for the sake of reciting it to the congregation. Though he was memorizing and reciting, he said, “I was not indwelling the Word.” This realization prompted him to change his practice. He now begins with the work of memorization for the sake of internalizing the Word to be enacted as a central act of preaching. He commented that the Trinity congregation began to comment, “This is the best preaching you have ever done.”

Beyond an assessment of the quality of the preaching, Jon recognized growth in the life of the congregation, "Over the long-haul people grow in their love of the Word. They become more open to listen to something that was difficult. They are more willing to engage in the work the text led them to.” Consistent with the testimony of other preachers borrowing this homiletical form, patience is required. It is difficult to make clear connections between any one sermon and the changing behavior of a congregation. However, over time, evidence emerges between this homiletical method and congregational missional engagement. He also recognized the value of the practice in his own life. He put it like this, “It makes you more in tune.” In addition to the impact it has on the congregation it has an impact on the preacher. There are challenges that Jon identified in the practice. The first, as he put it, is “vain glory.” Is the practice really about the preacher? Is it really about receiving attention from the hearer and affirmation from the congregation? He also noticed the challenge between memorization and
interiorization. Sometimes he finds himself so caught up in memorizing the passage getting the words right that the act of interiorizing the passage is slower.

From a Preacher in Wyckoff, NJ

Andy Kadzban has been serving Wyckoff Reformed Church (WRC) in Wyckoff, New Jersey for almost six years. He began his time as an associate pastor, though he preached weekly. Three years ago, he became the Senior Pastor and primary preacher. Wyckoff Reformed Church is a 212-year-old congregation in the New York City metro area. He refers to the context in which WRC is situated as predominately “post-Christian.”

Andy’s sermon preparation begins with the act of memorization. Andy will often perform the Scripture in the sermon, but keeps the Bible open and in his hand “as a life line” if he loses his place. More importantly he holds the Bible while preaching for the symbolic value of having the Bible seen by the congregation. The congregation often responds, “The sermon is soaked in the Scripture,” or “The sermon is so grounded in Scripture,” or, “I feel like I’m finally understanding Scripture. I’ve been in and around the church all my life, but now I’m understanding.”

Andy began as a preacher with a resistance to the idea of “missional church” or “missional preaching.” He said, “I had no intention of becoming a pastor in order to be on the missional bandwagon.” However, he also noticed the constant theme of sending as he continued to indwell the Word.

Sent is the constant theme of the Bible. It’s just the rhythm of God’s people, gathered in and sent out. Every time you’re getting into it you’re realizing ‘it’s happening again.’ Because it’s a central theme in Scripture, it’s become a central theme for the church, not because I set out to impose it, but you just can’t not see it.

The effect on the life of the church has become so profound.
Andy said.

A few years ago, we did a discovery process that ended with a church mission statement, ‘worship, discipleship and living missional.’ What that actually means has shifted from giving money to people somewhere else, to something larger for our own lives. We used to give 50% of our budget to global missions. Missions was reduced to evangelism or justice, but now it’s larger, God is at work in Wyckoff even. There might be things we’re being called to work on here. That level of consciousness has grown in me substantially, and in the congregation.

Even while seeing the value for the life of his congregation, Andy also acknowledged several challenges. First of all, during a season of extreme business in his own life, including the birth of their twin children, he found the practice difficult to maintain. Secondly, people will sometimes imply, “Well that’s great for you to have that gift, but I could never do that.” He added, “The step that hasn’t happened here is getting other people involved in memorizing Scripture as well and finding other ways of dwelling in it.” Third, he noted, “It is happening, but it’s all very slow work.” The patience required of the preacher to commit to the hard work of interiorizing Scripture and performing it in the sermon does not come with the immediacy of changed congregational behavior and action.

The Appreciative Impact

The witness of other preachers from around the country who share a similar homiletical method combined with the stories of the Pillar congregants highlights the value of the practice of indwelling the word and Scripture performance in a sermon. There are questions that deserve to be asked and criticisms to be made, yet before the limitations, there is also much to appreciate.

Congregational Listening
This homiletical practice places a high value on helping the congregation hear the story of God as it is revealed in Scripture. It is one thing for Scripture to be spoken aloud, it is another thing for it to be heard well. St. Augustine wrote, “A great orator [Cicero] has truly said that ‘an eloquent man must speak so as to teach, delight, and to persuade.’ Then he adds: ‘To teach is a necessity, to delight is a beauty, to persuade is a triumph.’ Now of these three, the one first mentioned, the teaching, which is a matter of necessity, depends upon what we say; the other two on the way we say it.”  

The way we say Scripture matters for the hearer. Most preachers work to make their sermons hearable. This homiletical method extends the common commitment of preachers have towards sermons to Scripture as well. It is not just the sermon about the Scripture that deserves to be heard but the Scripture story itself. The Pillar congregants gave witness to the hearability of Scripture through performance in a sermon when they said, “It’s like hearing anew.”

Sustaining the Call

One of the impacts that stood most clearly from engaging other preachers who share this homiletical practice is how its sustaining power for the preacher. People will ask on occasion, “How long does that take you?” Or, “How do you keep it up every week?” My response has been consistent from the beginning in pastoral ministry 15 years ago, “I do not know what I would do without it.” Jared said the same thing, “It has been a life line.” Jill suggested the same when sharing the story of “entering a barren wasteland” after leaving pastoral ministry and attributed it to no longer practicing Scripture interiorization. Similarly, I can remember my dad responding to a question of a student in a seminary class. The student asked, “How does a pastor have time for that?” My dad responded, “If

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230 Augustine, The City of God, 12.27 (emphasis added).
that pastor doesn’t have time for this, what does the pastor have time for?” I heard that as a way of saying, “This will sustain you.” One of the most significant learnings for me in engaging other pastors around this homiletic is how it nurtures and encourages the preacher.

Faithful Offering

Preaching is hard work. Preaching each week can be daunting. The time and energy required to prepare new content each week and offer it in creative and winsome ways every Sunday can be fatiguing. Every preacher I know moves in and out of seasons of fatigue to seasons of inspiration back to seasons of challenge. The Apostle Paul acknowledged this reality too when he wrote, “Proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable.”231 Every preacher knows the great joy of a favorable season in preaching and the real challenge of the unfavorable one. The practice of interiorizing Scripture and performing it in the sermon minimizes the effect the unfavorable season has on the preacher and the sermon. The Word is still heard. The Scripture is still told. The message is still proclaimed.

Leveling of the Playing Field

Often preachers will talk about feeling inadequate for the task. Most of us, in our honest moments, do not think of ourselves as wise enough, smart enough, experienced enough, or anything else enough to embrace the task of weekly preaching. Surely there is someone who could do this better than me. I experienced that most acutely as a young pastor in Oak Harbor. I was newly married and had only recently moved out of my hometown for the first time. I had undergraduate degrees in Chemistry, Biology and Spanish. All of which would have been great for work at Dow Chemical but did not seem

231 2 Timothy 4:2, NRSV
all that helpful to weekly preaching. I looked out at the congregation and nearly everyone was older than, had more experience than me, and had weathered more of life’s challenges than me. Seen in one light it was a very intimidating time. The practice of Scripture interiorization and performance in a sermon increased my confidence to stand up preach. I had something to proclaim. It was in me and needed to be announced. Even as it is a gift for a younger preacher so it is a gift for female preachers who for far too long have labored under the burden of suspicion as they stand to preach. The interiorized Word that has been performed in the sermon, literally speaks for itself, and cuts through the suspicion. It is also a gift to a preacher crossing cultural lines. Global missionaries do the extremely hard work of immersing themselves in a context, learning the language and customs of the people, establishing relationships and earning the right to be heard. That trust takes a long time to be established, and is a necessary work for the missionary and the pastor. There are some instances though when that time is not available and the preacher has to preach. Scripture interiorization and performance reduces the cultural barriers. Several years ago, I spent five days in Turkey with Iranian Christians who had travelled out of Iran where it is illegal to be Christian to join me and two others for a five-day discipleship conference. I performed multiple Scripture stories, and even through a translator, they listened with fixed attention. When I shifted and told stories from my own life or pastoral ministry, they laughed at moments that were not meant to be funny and looked confused as I spoke in too many colloquialisms. When I recited the Sermon on the Mount though they wept as they heard, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

An Integrating Homiletic for all of Ministry

232 Matthew 5:10, NRSV.
This project has attempted to explore Newbigin’s notion of indwelling the Word. In it I have offered a pattern that emerges from Newbigin but is not articulated as a pattern by him. The pattern is: revelation, plausibility structure, indwelling and action. This homiletical method demonstrates the same pattern. First, it takes Scripture as revelation. God acts. God speaks is a fundamental conviction of the Christian faith. God’s action is revealed supremely in Jesus Christ and offered to us in Scripture. The act of interiorizing Scripture is a demonstration and model to the congregation that it is revelation. Second, it establishes the plausibility structure for the preacher. With the word interiorized the preacher moves throughout the week with Scripture inside and is able to interpret peoples’ lives and world circumstances through the Word. Third, this interpretation of life is done because the Word has been indwelled. As several preachers noted as they were interviewed, “I’m sitting in the hospital praying part of the text with my parishioner. Sitting in the consistory meeting, present to what is happening in the room through that Scripture, or meeting with a staff member.” Fourth, it leads to action. The preacher is called to preach. The preacher stands up to speak and offers to the congregation in action what the preacher experienced throughout the week while interiorizing Scripture.

In this way it also resonates with what some missional theologians suggest is the necessary shift the church must make as it seeks to have a missionary encounter of the gospel with its context. In *Missional Church* Guder identifies leadership as a primary focus for the missional church. This homiletical practice demonstrates for the congregation a way of engaging Scripture and with Scripture to engage the world in unbroken continuity.
Questions

This project intends to be an appreciative inquiry of a homiletical method that involves interiorizing Scripture for performance as it is offered at Pillar Church leading to increased missional engagement within the congregation. Through conversations with members of the Pillar congregation, as well as reflections from other pastors who practice a similar homiletical method, there is evidence that this homiletical method influences congregational missional engagement. The process is long and requires patience, but the stories suggest there is a connection. There are also important questions to address. Each pastor identified some questions, and the conversation with Pillar members highlight other ones as well.

The Ego Question

First of all, the question of, as Jon Opgenorth put it, “vain glory,” needs to be addressed. He reported the Trinity congregation saying, “These are the best sermons you have ever preached.” He also identified “vain glory” as a challenge to this homiletical method. Does the preacher do this for the sake of the attention, affirmation and accolade? Furthermore, the Pillar conversation suggested a deep appreciation for me as a person and the quality of the preaching. The practice of interiorizing Scripture and preforming it in a sermon is regularly noted as “impressive.” It is referred to as a “gift.” People say things like, “How can you do that?” And, “I could never do that?” Jared Ayers was concerned that it draws attention to itself, too.

The impressiveness of the practice as such is because it is rarely experienced. The practice of the preacher at First Reformed Church in Oak Harbor was to walk to the back of the sanctuary to greet parishioners as they left the sanctuary. When I first arrived as the
pastor there, the conversations in the receiving line after the service regularly centered around the impressiveness of the practice. All of the statements previously mentioned, I heard in that line. “You have an amazing gift.” “How do you do that?” “You must have a photographic memory.” “I could never do what you do.” The congregation’s initial response gave credence to the concern. However, as the practice continued every week, the ego-centric statements became fewer and fewer. There may be an appreciation for the craft and the attention to the work of preaching, but it is less about the impressiveness of the practice or the preacher. As Kevin put it during the Pillar conversation, “I appreciate when I see people working hard.”

Additionally, the question of vanity is an important one for any preacher to ask, not just a preacher who is committed to interiorizing Scripture and performing it in a sermon. Preachers do not stand up on Sunday mornings with the intention of doing a poor job so to avoid affirmation and any vanity that may ensue. Furthermore, everyone who offers Scripture to a congregation in worship tries to read well so people can hear well. Sometimes that commitment to reading well finds a very different expression and practice than this homiletical method, the intention is still to offer Scripture to the congregation in a way deemed most helpful to the hearer.

Missional Impact Question: Correlation or Causation

Secondly, the question of predisposition needs to be addressed. The suggestion that this homiletical method leads to missional engagement needs to be made in light of the predisposition of the congregation that exists already. For instance, Jared was hesitant to say that the Liberti congregations experienced any change in their missional commitment, but this practice was a further living into a commitment they already shared. The practice
may participate or remind the people of missional engagement, but the church was originally planted for the sake of missional engagement in the neighborhood. Would any kind of preaching show similar evidence of missional engagement?

Similarly, Pillar re-established itself in 2012 as a dually affiliated congregation of the CRC and the RCA. The re-establishment itself was in large part an effort to re-engage the community that Pillar had isolated itself from for so long. There is evidence of missional engagement at Pillar, but is that more a result of the purpose of the re-establishment? Hector and Amy were willing to point to a particular series of sermons that prompted them to move from Indiana to Holland, to sell their lake home and move into the core city to love and serve the neighborhood. Is it possible that disposition was being formed in them long before they witnessed the interiorization and performance of Scripture at Pillar?

The question of predisposition is an important one to ask and difficult to answer. This project completely concedes that preaching is not the only influencing factor, but that there are many others as well. Pillar, shortly after re-establishing itself began to celebrate communion weekly. As the Pillar conversation occurred, there was significant response to the value of that practice and how it was communion, as much as the sermon, that reminded some that God was up to something in the world, that the church was a part of a much larger drama of salvation unfolding in the world. Newbigin, in the central thesis quote of this project writes, “As we share in the life of worship of the Church, through fellowship, Word and sacrament, we indwell the story and from within that story we seek to be the voice and the hands of Jesus for our time and place.”233

Personal Aversion Question

A third question that has been raised considers those for whom Scripture memory is simply a difficult task, even in some cases, an impossible one. Some people carry negative past experiences with Scripture memorization as a publicly shaming activity. A student in a local Christian school was graded on their ability to memorize Scripture. He carries childhood pain because of it. There is also the kid who never got a star in class because they were not able to memorize the weekly Bible verse. She now has a natural aversion to it. Or in other cases a person with a cognitive disability who is not able to memorize long passages of Scripture to be performed in a sermon.

Personal Limitations Question

There are a variety of reasons why a person may resist the practice or struggle with it. For instance, my dad initially introduced and practiced this homiletical method as a 40-year-old preacher. He has been offering this method of preaching for nearly 30 years. He will say more and more that it is increasingly difficult to memorize for the sake of interiorizing Scripture as he gets older. This homiletical method is going to be a difficult one to embrace for different reasons at different seasons of their life. Andy acknowledged the challenge it was to hold on to the practice of weekly interiorization following the birth of his twin children. All of these realities need to be considered gently. Jill noted in seasons that were especially busy she had to remember she is not a failure. As she put it, “I had to give myself permission, when for whatever reason it just didn’t happen, not forcing it. Allowing God to say to me, ‘you’re my child. Go to bed, child.’” There are many reasons a person might be averse to or struggle with any number of practices and methods. While the struggle needs to be named honestly and dealt with tenderly, the
struggle that some may experience does not warrant the complete dismissal of the whole practice.

The Question of Outcomes: how do you know its missional?

A fourth question to consider about this homiletical method has to do with the nature of “missional church.” It is easiest to assume “missional” has something to do with good acts for others, whether on a local scale or global one, whether by acts of mercy, justice, charity or evangelism. Part of the challenge in identifying the effectiveness of the method is not knowing what the outcome might look like. If it is an act of justice, mercy or charity it could be quantifiable. Certainly, those activities are included in the notion of a missional church, however, I am leaning into a broader understanding of the word missional. Newbigin refers to the church as “sign, instrument and foretaste” and most practical missional theologians borrow this description. He writes near the end of The Gospel in a Pluralist Society,

If the gospel is to challenge the public of our society…it will not be by forming a Christian political party, or by aggressive propaganda campaigns…. It will only be by movements that begin with the local congregation in which the reality of the new creation is present, known, and experienced, and from which men and women will go into every sector of public life to claim it for Christ, to unmask the illusions which have remained hidden and to expose all areas of public life to the illumination of the gospel. But that will only happen as and when local congregations renounce an introverted concern for their own life, and recognize that they exist for the sake of those who are not members, as sign, instrument, and foretaste of God’s redeeming grace for the whole life of society.

For Newbigin the church exists as sign, instrument and foretaste. A sign is something that points to a reality beyond itself. An instrument is a tool used to bring about something. A foretaste is something that embodies a thing that is still to be. It would

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234 This was demonstrated in chapter 2.

235 Newbigin, Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 232.
seem that most definitions of missional, specifically ones used by missional pragmatists, would fall in the category of instrument. The church is a tool used to bring something about. This is where acts of justice and mercy and charity so easily fit. However, the church as foretaste broadens that definition. Living together in such a way that gives witness to glimpses of the shalom of God for the world is a missional act of the church. Pursuing reconciliation in the church is a missional act. Caring well for the elderly population of a congregation is a missional act. Church as foretaste is not all there is to being missional, insofar as the foretaste reality of the church is recognized “for the sake of those who are not members” they remain missional in nature. When Pillar, by virtue of it being a foretaste community, welcomes many people with cognitive disabilities into the life of the community there is evidence of missionality. When Pillar, by virtue of it being a sign, advocates for immigration reform by supporting Immigrant Allies there is evidence of missionality. When Pillar, by virtue of it being an instrument community, establishes city serve days on Saturdays in the summer in collaboration with different neighborhood coordinators to serve identified needs in certain neighborhoods, there is evidence of missionality. No one of these three reigns supreme over the other two and all three are necessary for the missionary action of the local church. It would be too much to say that preaching is solely responsible for any of these activities, but it is a necessary and important influence.

The Question of Personality

A fifth question to consider has to do with personality. How much of this homiletical method is less about the actual method and more about the person employing it? The Pillar conversation demonstrated a high esteem for me as a person and for an ability to
preach well. Jim put it like this, “It is just his style… I think Jon specifically will tell a story and then do the pause and then take you there at the end.” Jim was not referring to Scripture indwelling but rhetoric. Kevin put it like this, “Jon’s style is pretty unique from what I have seen from other churches, and maybe I am favorable, because it’s more my style and there is nothing wrong with what other pastors are doing. I do see a difference with him and with the services from my point of view.” The same concern was given voice by Jon Opgenorth. Reflecting on his own experience he said, “It was just me up there reciting, and everybody was so amazed, ‘Look at Johnny go; he can memorize 118 verses.’ I started to feel like it was about me and not about the text.” Jill recognized the relationship between preaching and personality, albeit positively, “They got a window into me.”

Philips Brooks, the influential 19th century preacher, once said,

Preaching is the communication of truth by man to men [sic]. It has in it two essential elements, truth and personality. Neither of those can it spare and still be preaching. The truest truth, the most authoritative statement of God’s will, communicated in any other way than through the personality of brother man to men is to preached truth. Suppose it written on the sky, suppose it embodied in a book which has been so long held in reverence as the direct utterance of God that the vivid personality of the men who wrote its pages has well-nigh faded out of it; in neither of these cases is there any preaching. And on the other hand, if men speak to other men that which they do not claim for truth, if they use their powers of persuasion or of entertainment to make other men listen to their speculations, or do their will, or applaud their cleverness, that is not preaching either. The first lacks personality. The second lacks truth. And preaching is the bringing of truth through personality.236

Truth often comes through personality. There is no other way of communicating. Brooks acknowledges that the challenge of personality is when it is used for the wrong purpose, when it is for the sake of applause rather than the communication of truth. In this way, the challenge of personality may simply be a challenge of preaching and not a challenge

to a particular homiletical method. A case could be made that this homiletical method, while certainly requiring personality, is more accessible to a broader set of people than other homiletical methods.

**Connections**

The connection between the homiletical method and Newbigin’s notion of indwelling the Word have been demonstrated throughout this project. In summary, the Pillar conversation as well as the conversations with pastors from around the country gave voice to the same pattern that emerges both in Newbigin and in Peterson: revelation, plausibility structure, indwelling, action.

Jared put it most succinctly when he said, “Listening and speaking are inherently personal acts while reading is impersonal. The practice is true to Christian revelation itself and congruent with the nature of revelation.” Jill put it differently, “I never have Scripture on the screen because I want people to have the gift, to orally receive God’s Word, to receive revelation.” Pillar members were able to recognize the same, “Everything is focused on something that Christ did for us rather than what the pastor can tell us about Christ.”

The movement from revelation to plausibility structure was recognized too. People use the language of “being drawn in” or “opened up.” One person put it this way, “You are invited to be a part of it. You are invited in to live it.” Someone else said, “It’s like hearing anew for the first time.” Another person commented, "It opens you up to possibilities that you can do. It opens you up to things that I can do for the Kingdom that I hadn’t before.” Though the specific language of a plausibility structure was not
mentioned in the Pillar conversation there was an awareness of being caught up in something or being immersed in a new world.

The way to the plausibly structure is through indwelling the Word. The preacher very clearly does that work when the Scripture is interiorized and performed in the sermon. The sermon is an important moment for the congregation to indwell the Word too. One person commented during the Pillar conversation, “I feel like when you actually have Scripture memorized, and not like ‘I learned how to say it in sequence like I learned to say the alphabet in sequence,’ but actually have internalized the Scripture and can start at any point through the verses, it becomes something like, things happen in your life and a verse comes to mind, because it is so completely relevant to whatever has happened.”

The act of indwelling then prompts action, not just activity, but action that is consistent with the values, ethos, commitments and convictions of the plausibility structure. This was most clearly demonstrated in the Pillar conversation. One person put it like this, “I think knowing the Word informs how to live in all sorts of situations.” Someone else added, “How do we apply it to your life in a practical manner?” Another person said, “We get to do this. We are chosen to do this. To be in and share and to grow and to tell others about the whole pointing to Jesus.” The Pillar members were able to make the connection between the work of the sermon and the action of their lives. They were able to acknowledge that action flows not from a list of rules to follow, but from a story which they are a part.

**Conclusion**

Lesslie Newbigin writes,
Authentic Christian thought and action begin not by attending to the aspirations of the people, not by answering the questions they are asking in their terms, not by offering solutions to the problems as the world sees them. It must begin and continue by attending to what God has done in the story of Israel and supremely in the story of Jesus Christ. It must continue by indwelling that story so that it is our story, the way we understand the real story. And then, and this is the vital point, to attend with open hearts and minds to the real needs of people in the way that Jesus attended to them, knowing that the real need is that which can only be satisfied by everything that comes from the mouth of God (Matthew 4:4). As we share in the life of worship of the Church, through fellowship, Word and sacrament, we indwell the story and from within that story we seek to be the voice and the hands of Jesus for our time and place.

These words from Newbigin locate the particular homiletical method of interiorizing Scripture and performing it in the sermon in the missional church conversation. The missional church has been a profoundly necessary voice for the church in the United States, as well as in other parts of the world. Missional ecclesiologists, practical missional theologians and missional pragmatists each offer something valuable to the conversation. Unfortunately, preaching has not been given the attention it deserves in the missional church conversation. Those who do take up the preaching task do not engage Newbigin’s notion of indwelling the Word and how a sermon can nurture the Word in a congregation for mission. However, the homiletical method of interiorizing Scripture and performing it in a sermon does. There is evidence, not only at Pillar Church, but other congregations around the country, that interiorizing the Word for performance in a sermon enhances a congregation’s missional engagement. Thanks be to God.

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