**Missional Hermeneutics:**

**The Bible and God’s Christ-Shaped Mission**

Prof. Stephen S. Taylor (Missio Theological Seminary)

Introduction

I bring greetings from Missio Theological Seminary and from sister churches in the Philadelphia area and am eager to discover how all of us can benefit each other as we all seek to “attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13). May God give us all grace and a greater measure of his Spirit!

*The Missional Church Movement: Matrix of Missional Hermeneutics*

Missional interpretation of the Bible is associated with the larger movement of “missional theology.” Typically, this movement is traced – at least in its explicit form – to the publication in 1998 of the volume, *Missional Church:* A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America, edited by Darrell Guder.[[1]](#footnote-1) As the title suggests, the initial impetus for this movement was a concern for the state of the Church in North America in relationship to its ambient culture. In particular, the scholars and practitioners gathered by Guder, wanted to challenge the static and institution-centered thinking within the church which expressed itself either as isolated self-satisfaction and privilege or as an inward, defensive stance relative to the world. The North American church was fractured, riven by denominational distinctives and competing strategies for achieving divergent goals. The church’s mission, its very reason for being, had become, in many places, its own prosperity or survival.

Drawing [Slide]inspiration from missiological thinkers outside of North America, thinkers like Lesslie Newbigin (Britain, India) and David Bosch (South Africa),[[2]](#footnote-2) Guder’s group and the “missional church” movement it spawned reminded the church of a higher calling that came from outside itself and that, in fact, preceded it and called it into existence: the mission of God.

The Old Testament scholar, Christopher Wright, [Slide]has summarized the missional church insight well:

‘Mission belongs to our God.’ *Mission is not ours; mission is God’s.* Certainly, the mission of God is the prior reality out of which flows any mission that we get involved in. Or, as has been nicely put, **it is not so much the case that God has a mission for his church in the world but that God has a church for his mission in the world.  Mission was not made for the church; the church was made for mission—God’s mission**.”  (Italics original, other emphasis mine)[[3]](#footnote-3)

Now, before we move on to consider the obvious question this missional claim raises, we should insert a Hebrew poetry *Selah* here. Pause for a couple of seconds and consider what a prophetic insight this is for the church in our day and time not only in North America but in all the countries where Christianity has taken a firm root. Is the church of Christ pursuing God’s mission or is it pursuing her own? Given increasing criticism of the church within our developed cultures, shouldn’t we make sure that we “suffer for the Name” instead of for foolish and sometimes tragic indiscretions that arise from pride and self-concern? [Slide]As Peter reminded the church in Turkey,

But let none of you suffer as a murderer or thief or criminal or as a meddling troublemaker. But if you suffer as a “Christian,”do not be ashamed, but glorifyGod that you bear such a name. For it is time for judgment to begin, starting with the houseof God.(1 Peter 4:15-17)

Beloved brothers and sisters, we are the house of God; let us heed the call to judgement and self-examination.

*The Mission of God (Missio Dei)*

So if “the church was made for mission—God’s mission,” what precisely (we must ask) is that mission? A moment’s reflection should tell us that this is an extremely important question. Get the answer wrong, the church itself becomes misshaped and ineffectual.

As evangelicals, an answer tempting for us might be something like this: “God’s mission is the salvation of souls.” For missional thinkers, this formulation contains some truth but it is too narrow to encompass the biblical data. For his part, Guder, in that foundational volume mentioned earlier, put it this way: “We have come to see that mission is not primarily an activity of the church. Rather, mission is the result of God’s initiative, rooted in *God’s purposes to restore and heal creation*” (Guder, p. 4, emphasis added). This is better than the typical evangelical answer, because it takes into account the original vision of Genesis 1 and 2, as that vision is re-iterated in the prophets and enriched and guaranteed in passages like Romans 8.

But here missional thinking has pushed on to more searching and rigorous answers.[[4]](#footnote-4) Since most of us here are likely to have roots in the Reformation and specifically in the Reformed wing of the Reformation, let us briefly use the 18th-century American theologian, Jonathan Edwards, [Slide] as a guide through these critical issues. In his essay, *A DISSERTATION CONCERNING THE END FOR WHICH GOD CREATED THE WORLD,[[5]](#footnote-5)* Edwards sought to establish three foundational points that, to a certain extent, anticipate missional theology: [Slide]

1. God’s “chief end” or central, overarching mission must be rooted in God himself and not called forth from God by something external to God. God’s purpose or mission must stem from God’s very nature, not from some need or some lack. God’s mission is inherent in God’s being or character.
2. God’s “chief end,” rooted in and emerging from God’s very nature, determines in some way everything that God does subsequently--in the act of creation, in his general providence after creation, and in the acts of redemption. Though the “chief end” or central mission of God might generate subsequent and subordinate ends or missions as it unfolds, these will all contribute to or cohere with God’s chief end.
3. God’s “chief end” or central mission is the “emanation” or infinite expansion of his glory, i.e. the ever increasing enjoyment and praise of his excellences by the creatures whom he has created toward that end.

We will take some issue with the third point that Edwards makes very shortly, but the first two points seem to be sound. Given Christian reflection on God, God’s central mission cannot be called out by some being or reality outside of God for that would leave God in God’s-self “mission-less,” little more than a smiling Buddha lost in inward contemplation and self-satisfaction. Moreover it would leave that external being or reality that called forth a mission from God unexplained or a least disconnected from the divine intention. This, in fact, is where Guder’s formulation (quoted above) fails: God’s mission for the church is “rooted in *God’s purposes to restore and heal creation;*” but granted that, what was God’s “chief end” in forming a creation at all, much less a creation ever needing healing and restoration. Such a mission can only be subsidiary to a deeper more original one. In itself, it can only emerge from something prior.

No, as Edwards suggests, God’s mission must be an overflow of his being and character rather than a drive to correct a deficiency. And it only follows from the constancy of God and the plenitude of his being that God’s original mission would continue to be God’s chief end, shaping subsidiary or emergent missions and calling them forward to itself. These two points, alone, establish God as a missional God and call us to careful reflection on that mission and its implications for everything else, including our interpretation of the Bible.

*But what about Edwards’s attempt to define that mission?* Edwards, remember, argued that God seeks himself, or more properly, his own ever-expanding glory. In the end, according to Edwards, the creature will be progressively united with God in an ever stricter relationship of adoration, conformity, and praise. God’s chief and unwavering end or mission turns out to be himself as the focus of universal love and adoration. And indeed, within the second chapter of his essay, Edwards treats an impressive number of scriptures that mention the glory and praise of God as God’s purpose.

However it is not clear that “glory” is an adequate descriptive of God’s self, especially in the sense of the praise or acclamation offered by creatures. “Glory,” in the sense necessary for Edwards’s argument regarding God’s act of creation, is clearly something God lacks (even if in infinitesimal quantity) until he achieves it. In other words, point 3 of Edwards’s argument trades on an equivocation between two meanings of the word “glory”: glory as the brilliance of God’s excellences and glory as the praise and adoration ascribed to God because of it.

More fundamentally, however, Edwards does not do an adequate job in this particular essay of explaining *what the glory of God consists in* or *what, precisely, God wishes to be praised and glorified for*. How, for example, are other revealed desires of God, such as the loving of neighbor and enemy, related to this “chief end.” In what meaningful way will we know and love one another as we become lost in ceaseless and ever stricter praise and adoration of God? Has language itself betrayed Edwards here? Is “glory” the right word at this point? Does it have the breadth and depth of connotation that Christian revelation demands?

There are a couple of startling omissions within Edwards account. Edwards pursues his entire analysis without explicitly reckoning with the fundamental Trinitarian nature of God and how that tri-personal, interactive nature must fundamentally determine God’s “chief end” or mission. For the purpose of Edwards’s analysis, it is simply a logical necessity that a supreme being characterized by supreme excellences should have himself as his focus. This of course could be argued for Allah within the Islamic tradition as well. But Christians do not worship a monad but rather Father, Son and Holy Spirit! Connected here is another omission in the argument: the failure to deal pointedly and systematically with *love*. Yes, Edwards does discuss God’s love (or benevolence) for his creatures (largely in order to explain how that love cannot be God’s “chief end” in the antecedent creation of the world). But Edwards does not factor in the fact that God is ultimately revealed in Scripture in terms of *Love* (1 John 4:8, 16).

These are not lectures on the doctrine of God, and we do not have adequate time to explore all the implications of the Trinitarian nature of the God that we worship. (At Missio Seminary we start with the tri-personal being of God as foundational. The first question is “Who is God?” not “What is God?”) Suffice it to say here (and some of you may want to raise questions in discussions later) that the mission of God must stem from—be the overflow or “emanation” of—the eternal and loving interaction between the persons of the Godhead. John’s claim (in 1 John 4) that God is love is not merely a static idea to be reflected upon; it is also lays bare the reason God has created the cosmos and acted in history and in redemption in the way that he has, and what his goals are for his people. In other words, rather than formulating the “chief end” of God (the *missio dei*) in the way Edwards did, we feel compelled by the Scripture’s full witness to the character of God in Christ to say it this way: *The mission of God is the infinite expansion of God’s loving community throughout the universe by means of “image bearers”, i.e., moral creatures capable of receiving, celebrating, reflecting back, and extending God’s moral excellence (God’s love).*God does not simply seek *his own* glory; rather God seeks the mutual glory of the “others” in Trinitarian community; and God seeks, as the fundamental part of ***God’s mutual glory****,* the extension of that community throughout the created order by image bearers who are themselves characterized by love for each other and for God. God is not merely zealous for reputation; the tri-personal God is zealous for replication.

If this is a more adequate account of God’s “chief end” or mission, rooted, as it is, in the overflow of the Trinity’s perichoretic[[6]](#footnote-6) love, then this mission must frame, contain, and determine the Church’s mission. That mission will then include, as an essential part, not only Gospel *proclamation* but Gospel *transformation and embodiment*. Recall the note of emphasis in Jesus’ Farewell Discourse in John’s Gospel: “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, [not, ‘if you preach the gospel accurately’ but] if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). And this is the love that passes between Father and Son and is made possible by the Spirit (as emphasized in subsequent portions of the Discourse, e.g., John 15:1-14, 26).[[7]](#footnote-7)

**The Mission of God and the Purpose and Structure of Scripture**

The perceptive reader (or listener) at this point will have noticed that we have modified Edwards’s claim about God’s “chief end” and the nature of God’s mission (for which the church exists!) on the basis of the doctrine of the Trinity. But here is the problem: even if one grants that there are vague hints of the Trinity in divine revelation prior to Jesus Christ, it should be undeniable to thoughtful Christians that Trinitarian reflection is hardly conceivable apart from God’s self-revelation in Christ. The startling fact is that God’s tri-personal being and God’s ultimate purpose—grounded in that tri-Personal being—, the “chief end” that *precedes* and accounts for everything, is revealed ***late*** in the game! And when it is revealed, it is not revealed in explicit and systematic propositions, but in the life, death, and resurrection of a Spirit-filled Jewish man from Nazareth. Amazingly, the dominant note in the Gospel tradition is not “Jesus is God, i.e., the God already fully revealed in Scripture” but rather “God really is like Jesus” such that prior notions about God need to be modified and enriched. Even in the Gospel of John, the most theologically explicit of the gospels, comes to its revelatory climax with Jesus’ answer to Philip: “If you have seen me, you have seen the Father.” (By implication, not “If you have truly seen the Father you would recognize me.”)

This exchange in John 14:6 itself answers to the programmatic claim already made in John 1:18: “No one has ever seen God, but the unique one, himself God, who is in the bosom of the Father, he *has explained* Him.”[[8]](#footnote-8) This is the climactic claim of a Prologue almost certainly written later to introduce John’s whole gospel. And John takes great care to set the claim up, as indicated by the initial clause: “no one has ever seen God.” What a bold claim!— especially in the light of previous “divine sightings” clustered around the ministry of Moses (Ex. 24:9-10; 33:11, 33:18-34:8; compare Deut 34:10-12). John is acutely aware that it is in connection with these “divine sightings” four important events took place: [Slide]

1. God re-issued the 10 Commandments ***through Moses***, thereby re-establishing Israel’s ***Law***-covenant (Ex 34:1-4, 27-28, 35:1 ff.).
2. The design details of the ***Tabernacle*** were revealed (Ex 25:1-30:1) and then carried out (Ex 35:4-40:33).[[9]](#footnote-9)
3. Yahweh revealed himself as “Yahweh, Yahweh, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in covenant ***grace and*** ***truth*** . . .” (Ex 34:6).
4. And in the context of these events, both Moses’s face and the Tabernacle were imbued with God’s ***glory*** (Ex 34:29-35, 40:34-35).

Perhaps by highlighting the major points in this way, we can now hear the powerful echoes that reverberate around John’s claim that “no one has ever seen God” except the Son who explains him. John was fully aware of the pivotal nature of the final stories in the book of Exodus and he was deliberately underlining, *relative to them*, the climactic and ultimate nature of the Son’s revelation of the Father (read John 1:14-17 carefully). Jesus is the Word who became flesh, *tabernacling*  among humankind not in an inner sanctum shielded from people but in such a way that all might see his *glory,* a glory full of *grace and truth.* But for John, Jesus Messiah was not just a recent example of a pattern first established on Sinai; no, John’s claim is that Jesus fully embodied what the Exodus events could only gesture towards: “The law was given through Moses, [but] grace and truth *took on reality[[10]](#footnote-10)* through Jesus Christ” (Jn 1:17). The *covenant grace and truth* proclaimed by Yahweh to Moses as part of the very nature of his divinity was finally realized or actualized in human history in Jesus Christ. And so, for John, no matter what the prior claims of face-to-face encounter were (see Ex 33:11; Deut 34:10-12), no one had ever gazed in to the face of the Father and, locked in loving embraced, studied His every feature in this way! And, by implication, only this one can give a full and cohesive account of the one true God, the God of Israel (Jn 1:18).

So what have we just done? It may appear to be a lengthy tangent, poorly related to both the issue of the mission of God and the question of a missional hermeneutic. But in fact it exemplifies what is integral to both! The Christian attempt to derive God’s mission or “chief end” from Scripture, a mission stemming from the being of God correctly understood, must take on a Christotelic structure. However, God’s being and mission is not just one of many themes in Scripture; it is rather the reality that calls forth and shapes the Scriptures themselves and all the themes one might rightly discover from the Scriptures. Can we doubt that these, too, must likewise be discovered, explicated and applied in a Christotelic manner?

So now we have introduced this term, Christotelic, as a rubric for framework or stance that is essential to a properly missional approach to Scripture. This term will have to be defined and the concept it names explored in our two subsequent lectures.

Lecture Two: Ambiguous and Broken Covenants

In our first lecture we tried to explain how a missional interpretation of the Scriptures is rooted in the broader “Missional Conversation.” And even though that conversation began around the topic of the Church and its need to be centered on the mission of God, it soon turned to the question of theology proper, because the mission of God is determined by the being and purpose of God. Utilizing insights from Jonathan Edwards, we sought to anchor the mission of God in the intra-trinitarian, perichoretic[[11]](#footnote-11) love of God: the infinite expansion of God’s loving community throughout the universe by means of God’s image bearers. It should go without saying that such a “chief end” has powerful ethical implications, for if the goal is the infinite expansion of Divine love, then the means toward that goal have to be consistent with it. Dr. Jung Sungkook will help us begin to think about these practical ethical constraints in the context of the Korean situation. But, first, we have to pick up the thread of hermeneutics, specifically missional hermeneutics.

At the end of the lecture, I used the term “Christotelic” in connection with the observation that God’s revelation of himself as tri-personal only became clear and intelligible *with Christ*, deep into the story, “in the fullness of time,” as it were. Even so *central and foundational* topic as the doctrine of God – who God is eternally in himself – is utterly dependent on God’s decision to “lift the curtain slowly” and speak definitively only in the coming of his Son. (Note the contrast between prior revelation and God’s revelation in Christ in such iconic texts as John 1:14-18 and Hebrews 1:1-4.) In this lecture and the next we will be exploring some of the characteristics of *Christotelicly shaped* missional interpretation using several examples from the Scriptures.

But before doing so, we should probably clarify this fairly new but crucial term, “Christotelic.” Do not confuse this term with the more commonly used “Christocentric.” The term “Christocentric” was proposed for a good reason: it was intended as a rubric for an interpretive method that would avoid **both** the dry, objectivizing approach of grammatical-historical exegesis, so commonly taught in academic circles, **and** the moralistic interpretation so dominant in Church preaching. Drawing the believing reader and listener again and again to the decision of faith and the truth of personal salvation was certainly better than drowning them with exegetical and historical data or burdening them with the unending demands of Christian discipleship.

But Christocentricism had some real drawbacks as a hermeneutical strategy [Slide]:



Christocentric approaches proceeded under the assumption that Jesus Christ is the meaning of every biblical story and every biblical text. To be sure, Jesus may be well hidden in some passages, but the work of the Bible interpreter was not done until she or he has found Jesus, whether in Hagar’s water jug or under Elijah’s mantle. Exegetically this was problematic since frequently the demonstrable meaning of the human author of a text had to be over-ridden or ignored in order to affirm some literary reference to Christ in the text.

And, in actual practice, this way of reading the Bible rarely found Jesus himself (his life and work) in the biblical passage but rather some timeless soteriological doctrine. An historical example is Luther’s claim that the label of “Canon” should be reserved for the parts of the Bible that drive home Christ—*was Christum treibet*. In the practice of his followers, however, this brave dictum ended up making the doctrine of justification by faith the definition of a canon within the canon. Jesus was reduced to the doctrine of justification and every text worthy of the designation “Scripture” either demonstrated the need for or explained the content of that doctrine. This kind of approach, therefore, tended to flatten the rich contours of the Bible, making the *narrative* framework of the Bible (rooted as it is in a redemptive history) *epiphenomenal and secondary*. The long story told by the Bible was essentially a repetitive teaching device, because each episode of the story had the same payload: the truth about our wretchedness and our salvation. In principle—to the theologically astute--, that truth was deliverable in an instant, *synchronically*, however much human frailty needed multiple lessons. As a result, faithful readers of the Bible were always finding in the Bible the truth they already knew on the basis of their experience of salvation or their tradition’s theology. The challenging and surprising call of Scripture was muted. The *unity* of the Bible around this theme or some other theological distillation more and more took on the character of a *uniformity* and the parts of the Bible that were difficult and less fruitful in this endeavor become ignored or preemptively placed in different covenantal or dispensational categories.

There are, of course, passages in the Bible that are literally about Jesus Christ (much of the New Testament and a few prophecies in the OT); here, however, we hardly need a Christocentric interpretive theory to guide us; we simply need to honestly attend to the text. The question is: what is the Christian supposed to do with the numerous passages in the Bible that seem focused elsewhere? In these common situations, Christocentric reading ultimately asks us to read the Bible with a series of specialized and ad hoc hermeneutical and exegetical rules. The unintended consequence is that parts of the message of the Bible to the church simply cannot get through. The solution, then, is an approach to scripture that demands exegetical honesty but also quests after life-fostering, theological richness. With this, let us turn to our examples.

**A Charge against God’s Character—The Disillusioned Psalmist**

In the Bible, perhaps the most concentrated expression of praise for the faithfulness of God can be found in Psalm 89. The psalm begins with these couplets: [Slide]

I will sing of your steadfast love, O LORD, forever; with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations. 2 I declare that your steadfast love is established forever; your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens.

So powerful are these words, that my home church made the last five words of the first verse the theme of a year-long celebration of their 175th Anniversary!

But we are soon given to understand that the psalmist, though not himself of the royal line, is thinking primarily of God’s faithfulness to David and his descendants codified in the Davidic covenantal promises (vv. 3 ff.—cf. 2 Sam 7:12 ff.). The chorus of praise swells for some 34 verses before reaching its climax in vv. 35-37: [Slide]

35 Once and for all I have sworn by my holiness; I will not lie to David. 36 His line shall continue forever, and his throne endure before me like the sun. 37 It shall be established forever like the moon, an enduring witness in the skies."

And for good measure the psalmist adds [Slide] the instruction, “Selah,” urging the listener to ponder the glorious point while the musicians show their skill and modulate the key for the last verse.

***But then*** something goes *horribly wrong* and the true purpose of this post-exilic psalmist is revealed: [Slide]

38 But now you have spurned and rejected him; you are full of wrath against your anointed. 39 *You have renounced the covenant with your servant*; you have defiled his crown in the dust.

Say what?!? What happened to the unshakeable promises of the prior verses? So, Mr. Psalmist are you saying God isn’t faithful? And since the last verse of the psalm is simply the concluding benediction of the third book of the Psalter (compare the endings of the other books of the Psalter: 41:13, 76:18-20, 106:48, and all of Ps 150), the charge against God’s character goes unchallenged and unrebutted. [Slide] By the end of the psalm, if one reads it honestly and carefully (without atomizing the text), it becomes clear: **Psalm 89 was a meticulously crafted set-up all along.** The panegyric of praise at the beginning was meant to highlight the charge against God at the end!

But how could the psalmist have gotten things so wrong? Wasn’t he aware of the sinful rebellion of much of the Davidic line? Names like Rehoboam, Ahaziah, and Ahaz come readily to mind. Surely he should have been aware of passages like 1 Kings 2:1-4 where David warns Solomon of the conditionality of God’s covenant:

When David's time to die drew near, he commanded Solomon his son, saying, 2 "I am about to go the way of all the earth. Be strong, and show yourself a man, 3 and keep the charge of the LORD your God, walking in his ways and keeping his statutes, his commandments, his rules, and his testimonies, as it is written in the Law of Moses, that you may prosper in all that you do and wherever you turn, 4 *that the LORD may establish his word that he spoke concerning me, saying, 'If your sons pay close attention to their way, to walk before me in faithfulness with all their heart and with all their soul, you shall not lack a man on the throne of Israel.'* (1 Kings 2:1-4; see also 6:11-13, 9:1-10)

But our psalmist seems to be drawing on another equally dominant note in the biblical record:

12 When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. 13 He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. 14 I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. *When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men,* 15 *but my steadfast love will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. 16 And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever.*'" (2 Sam 7:12-15; compare 7:28-29,1 Chr 22:9-13, Jer 33:17-26)

These observations go so much against the grain that the average evangelical reader must strain not to lose faith in the Bible just to see them. What should we do with this psalm? We tend to pursue these options: [Slide—options on listed on slide]

While perceptive and honest, the first option is worthy of the heretic Marcion who happily assigned most of the Bible to the work of another god. The second is an example of what scholars call “atomistic reading” in which a text is chopped up into disconnected oracles, divine sound bites, which can then be used like aphorisms. This is what my church did. The third and fourth options seem to involve some capricious and preemptive appeals to external standards of propriety in an effort to shield the psalmist from erroneous attitudes. These two options seem to miss the fact that the psalmist is ***not voicing a personal disappointment*** but is rather struggling with God’s apparent failure to keep ***major covenantal promises***! The last option (5) contains some real wisdom but doesn’t explain why others psalms should have more authority than this one. Moreover, a Christian might ask, should we expect the answer to the psalmist’s bitter complaint to be found in the Psalter? Doesn’t God have to ***do*** something else, something further in order to fix this glaring problem?[Slide]

Here’s a sixth option: God specifically ordained this unrebutted charge to be here along with other similar ones (see Psalm 44 and 88, e.g., not to mention large segments of Lamentations and the entire book of Job), AND he allowed it to stand for hundreds of years! Why? So that he might, in the fullness of time, in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ, David’s greater son, prove the charge false.

This option is the *Christotelic* option. [Slide] This is the option that affirms with Paul: “all the promises of God are ‘YES and AMEN’----in Christ Jesus.” In the light of Christ—in the fullness of time and late in the story—we finally meet the Davidic son who will sit on the throne forever. God’s faithfulness is finally demonstrated!

But we also discover much more! We begin to understand why the Davidic covenant could be articulated in both an unconditional AND a conditional form—the great tension in the Davidic promises. In truth, if God is good, he can hardly bless evil. Blessing must be conditional! The Davidic covenant went wrong almost from the very beginning with David’s “sins of a high-hand” (Num 15:28-31). God’s promise not to withdraw his steadfast love from David could only mean that God would pay for the conditions! None of this occurred to the psalmist as he took his stand on 2 Sam 7:12-14: he ignored or minimized the sins of the Davidic line and underestimated what it costs the God of Israel to make and keep promises. But thanks to the psalm—Psalm 89--the story of David and his line ceases to be a smooth narrative of promise and fulfillment; it rather stands out as an agonizing story of the costly and creative faithfulness of the God of David as he pursues his mission.

We only come to see this when we listen carefully and honestly to the complaint of the human author of this psalm within his own time and place, refusing to read Christ back in to the conception and language of the human author (as we might do with a Christocentric reading). We must do careful and critical exegesis! But if we stop there, we are left with interesting but sad bits of historical data. The Christian reader will go on to ask: how does this psalm (read honestly and carefully) fit into the mission of God finally clarified in Christ? The result of this two-step, *Christotelic* reading is not only an understanding a great tension in the Bible’s narration of Redemptive History, but also an overwhelming impulse to praise the God of Israel and to eagerly join in His glorious mission.

 Yes, the psalm *really does* accuse God of unfaithfulness. But Jesus is the ultimate justification of God AND the redeemer of this psalm!

Is this reading strategy allowable? Does it impinge on the perfection of the Bible? Or does it help us see what God designed the Bible to be perfect for—God’s mission for the Bible? [Slide]

By the way, leaders of my church found out about their atomistic reading of verse one when a celebratory delegation to Turkey (where we have supported a lot of work) was asked by a missionary if they had read the rest of the psalm.

**A Dead-end Prophecy? Gasping with Ezekiel!**

My original intention was to consider at this point, another great covenantal theme in the Bible: God’s covenant with Abraham. But it proved too complex and lengthy to pair with our discussion of the Davidic covenant, so we will treat that in our final lecture tomorrow. Instead let us spend the last minutes today exploring Ezekiel’s hopes for the Temple and the Old Testament priesthood.

In chapters 40-48, Ezekiel, under the guidance of an angelic intermediary, gives an elaborate description of a future, eschatological temple: its layout and dimensions, its priestly and Levitical staff, and its sanctifying and healing role in a restored nation of Israel.

Chapter 47, in particular, seems to indicate that the eschatological Temple will serve as the agent—or at least the nexus—of “new creation”: the prophet envisions living waters cascading from below the temple entrance into the Dead Sea, making everything in its path alive. [Slide change—Ezek 47:12]

On the strength of this chapter, many Christian readers have spiritualized Ezekiel’s expectations: Ezekiel was ***knowingly*** using an elaborate national and institutional metaphor to talk about matters of the heart and of future individual salvation. Ezekiel was speaking about eternal Christian truths.

 But Ezekiel’s focus in the prior ***seven***chapters of his prophecy hardly allows for this kind of “vertical” or allegorical interpretation. In those chapters Ezekiel fixes his gaze—with obvious fascination! — on [SLIDE ]

* The exacting details of the new temple structure, including all the ancillary rooms necessary for executing worship not in some future spiritual way but in the way prescribed by Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy (Ezek 40-43). [SLIDE ]
* A number of purity laws and how they will regulate the conduct of priests, Levites, and worshipers in the new temple (the bulk of chapters 44-46). [SLIDE ]
* The exclusion from the perfect temple precincts of foreigners, namely, those who are “uncircumcised in heart ***and in flesh***” (44:6-9). This is obviously difficult in the light of Galatians—another great tension in the biblical story! [SLIDE ] [SLIDE ]
* Supremely, because it is reiterated four times (40:46, 43:18-19, 44:15-16, 48:11-12), the absolute requirement that, among all the clans of the sons of Levi and Aaron, ***only*** “the descendants of **Zadok**,” be allowed to minister in the renewed temple.

If we read all these chapters of Ezekiel honestly, it hardly seems likely that he was proposing an elaborate allegory of timeless Christian truths. Rather, it seems that Ezekiel, *himself a priest from the line of Zadok*, understood God’s future redemption of Israel in terms of the temple (Tabernacle) and priesthood laws spelled out in Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy. For Ezekiel, God’s renewal of the world could only happen when the framework and structures spelled out in the priestly sections of the Law finally became dominant realities.

In the face of these exegetical realities, other godly Christians have posited that one of the key events signaling the last day will be the building of Ezekiel’s temple in Israel so that all the practices and rites and persons so keenly anticipated by the prophet can have their God-ordained venue. Some people, evangelicals included, are actively raising money and drawing architectural plans for such a construction project! [SLIDE]

So how are we to understand and apply Ezekiel? This question gets at the heart of how Christians should read and apply the Old Testament generally, not just the visions of Ezekiel. Are we, for example, called to pray for the “accidental” destruction of the Dome of the Rock on the modern Temple Mount and to set aside funds for the prophesied construction of Ezekiel’s temple, supporting every policy of the Israeli government toward that end? Or are we to take Ezekiel as an allegorist speaking about eternal, internal and individualistic spiritual truths? Or was Ezekiel, perhaps, simply wrong? Are these the only options?

Not if we follow the New Testament writers. Let’s take, as a specific and manageable example, Ezekiel’s fixation on the line of Zadok. [Slide about the Zadokite geneology] Zadok, from the honored line of Phinehas, son of Aaron, became sole high priest when Solomon ascended to the throne (1 Chron 29:22). From that time on, down to the reign of the early Hasmoneans (160s B.C.E.), every high priest on record was a “Zadokite,” a member of this line. Ezekiel, himself a Zadokite priest, was clearly holding to an ancient tradition with strong biblical roots. Moreover, this tradition was still maintained by at least one community within Judaism in the time of Jesus, as evidenced by the Dead Sea Scrolls (*Rule of the Community* V, 1 -VI, 23). The Zadokite claim was well known and secure! And it finds affirmation in *Ecclesiasticus,* read by Roman Catholic Christians as part of Scripture for centuries:

Give thanks to him who makes a horn to sprout for the house of David, for his mercy endures forever; *Give thanks to him who has chosen the sons of Zadok to be priests*, for his mercy endures forever; Give thanks to the shield of Abraham, for his mercy endures forever; . . . (Ecclesiastes/Sirach 51:12)

The only New Testament writer to address the issue of the priesthood and temple service head-on is the author of Hebrews. What does this writer, who is consciously writing under the conviction that he is living in the time of eschatological fulfillment (Heb 1:1-2, 9:26), do with Ezekiel’s venerable Zadokite claim? Very simple: he *deliberately* sets it aside![[12]](#footnote-12) The perfect and final high-priesthood of Jesus simply makes the Zadokite claim passé (4:14, 5:4-10)!

The author of Hebrews is not ignorant of the tension this creates in the story. He doesn’t soft-pedal it. He confronts it head on: [Slide]

**Hebrews 7:13-14**  13 For the one of whom these things are spoken [Jesus as referenced in Psalm 110] belonged to another tribe [not to the tribe of Levi and of Zadok], from which no one has ever served at the altar. 14 For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, and in connection with that tribe Moses [not to mention Ezekiel!] said nothing about priests [Zadokite or otherwise].

The author of Hebrews is in essence jumping out of a dark corner [Slide—Surprise!] and shouting “surprise!” Yet he is not being flippant; he is being swept along by the flow of the redemptive story:

**Hebrews 1:1-3**  Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers via prophets, 2 but in these last days he has spoken to us via Son, . . . 3 who is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact imprint of his nature . . . .

**Jesus is climactic in the story, according to the author of Hebrews**; he is the goal of the story and of its major elements. The climax is breath-taking! For this writer, it is not enough that Jesus is the fulfillment or perhaps one of a couple fulfillments of Ezekiel’s prophecy (understood as a series of divinely inspired words), but rather that Jesus **fills up** t**he meaning of the social, linguistic, and religious realities that structured Ezekiel’s world**—realities that a contextualizing God, “at sundry times and in divers manners” used in his revelation to Ezekiel. Jesus finally explains the role of the Temple and its priesthood in the mission of God!

But look carefully at God as he pursues his mission: God formed the priest/prophet Ezekiel and his context. In that context, Ezekiel framed by perpetual promises concerning the Aaronic priesthood and the Temple (see Ex. 40: and yearned for God to once again dwell with his people. Using Ezekiel’s language and concepts, God assuaged Ezekiel’s ache with a vision of a final temple in which God’s glory would once again have a local address. From that sanctuary holiness would radiate to the surrounding tribes of Israel (chapter 48); Gentile impurity would no longer threaten the sanctuary (chapter 44). And the temple would be served and guarded by a perfect priesthood.

But God had in mind something much more intimate and costly, much more permanent and cosmic than Ezekiel could comprehend or appreciate without further realities falling into place. What God had in mind would even include those “uncircumcised in heart and in flesh” and in the process relativize the Aaronic/Zadokite priesthood altogether, by achieving its goal through an unanticipated means!

 In Christ, God proved faithful to Ezekiel’s vision, but not in an exacting, perfectly predictable and parsimonious way. The hallmark of God’s mission, as he faithfully pursues it in Christ, is creativity and extravagant surprise. He hyperfufills. He’s creatively faithful!

Ezekiel would have gasped at the fulfillment of his vision. Shouldn’t we be gasping with him? Will our doctrine of scripture and our hermeneutics allow it? Will it foster it? [Slide] If not, how will Scripture sustain us in pursuing the mission of God?

**An Ambiguous Covenant—Who’s in and who’s out?**

Have you ever wondered why the Apostolic Council in Acts 15 had to happen? Didn’t Jesus lecture on the issue 18 years before? And wasn’t the Old Testament pretty clear? [Slide]

Yet there were some **“believers** who belonged to the party of the Pharisees” who were demanding: "It is necessary to circumcise [Gentiles] and to order them to keep the law of Moses." (Acts 15:5)

How could they argue this? [Slide] Perhaps they had in mind texts like Ezekiel 44:6-9!

It is instructive to look at the Counciliar Debate. [Slide of Acts 15:7ff] I assume the “bad guys” made some argument from scripture, Luke doesn’t tell us. In any case the council is stuck until “Simeon” Peter, the great Apostle, stands up and gives his word of testimony about the “Cornelius Affair.” This quiets the council down enough for Paul and Barnabas (but here in Jerusalem it was still “Barnabas and Paul”) to give a missionary report on what God was now doing in heathen lands.

But what is going on? So far the guys in the white hats have only appealed to experience. Where is the well reasoned, biblical answer? (And of course there is no appeal to the *teaching*  of Jesus!)

It is not until James, the brother of Jesus, stands up that the “good guys” mount an authoritative, biblical-theological response. Or do they? Here is what James says: [Slide—of the following text]

**Acts 15:13-18**  "Brothers, listen to me. 14 Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name. 15 And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written, 16 "'After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, 17 that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who makes these things 18 known from of old.'

Please bear with me and note the following features James’s comments:

* The missionary report of Barnabas and Paul is passed over. Application point: ignore your missionaries and especially your missiologists. They cannot think theologically . . .
* James does **not** appeal to scripture (in this case, Amos 9:11-12) as the foundational authority upon which Peter’s experience must be judged, as if to say: “brothers, the question is: what does the Bible say and do we agree with it?” Rather James’s thinking goes the other direction, “and with this-- τούτῳ the experience just narrated by Peter – the words of the prophets agree.” This is correlation not proof!
* His choice of text is surprising and on closer inspection underwhelming!

Let’s look a little closer at this last point. James (or perhaps Luke in his report) quotes not from the Hebrew original of Amos 9 but rather from a Greek translation, probably made by Jews in Alexandria a couple of generations before. **[Slide with Acts 15 and Amos 9]** Compare the Amos 9 original with James’s quotation. Can you spot any ***semantically significant*** difference?

There are several *insignificant* differences; but the SIGNIFICANT difference **[Slide]** comes in Acts 15:17: 17: “that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name.” Amos in 9:12 apparently wrote, however: “that they may possess the remnant of Edom . . . .”

Now step back **[Slide]** and get a sense of each whole: while James’s Septuagintal version seems quite universalistic and even missional—that God is going to restore the throne of David precisely so that all of mankind can seek him—, the Hebrew original has a decidedly “imperialistic” cast: God will restore the throne of David for Israel’s sake so that the Davidic house can posses Edom and all the other nations God lays claim to. This is a meaning that the “believers from the Pharisees” could accept: The Messiah, Jesus, has come. By all means go to the Gentiles, let’s start the possession process! And what’s to be done as we absorb them? Make sure they are circumcised and come under Torah, as God commanded!

Please understand me. The Septuagint reading of Amos 9 does not contradict the original Hebrew of Amos 9. They both prophesy that the future blessing of Israel will come through David’s line and will have implications for the whole world. But both parties in the debate in Jerusalem ardently believed that! They disagreed however on what that would entail. **[Slide]** And each could appeal to a coherent reading the scriptures then available!

In essence, the believers from the party of the Pharisees understood Jesus as simply an important development in the story of the ***Torah and Israel defined by it***. For them that Torah-Israel complex was the *telos* or goal of the redemptive story narrated in the Old Testament. The Messiah had come to serve that story and to help accomplish that goal.

James, on the other hand, and apparently the majority of the Jerusalem conference had begun to see that, contrary to expectations, the story of Israel defined by Torah had somehow been swallowed up in a BIGGER story, that of her Messiah. No one at this Council could articulate how this surprising turn of events could be the proper conclusion to Israel’s story (remember, Paul was only allowed to give a missionary report), but they were driven by the undeniable AND surprising act of God in pouring out the Spirit previously promised Israel on the nations.

Now we might ask: why did James choose such a weak text? Surely there are better ones in the Old Testament. Where would you start?

[If someone suggests Genesis 12 etc.:] Ah, we have the benefit of a letter Paul wrote after the Council in Jerusalem! Paul is the one, as you undoubtedly know, who mines the story of Abraham in Genesis 12-25 for all of its universalistic truth. Paul finally is the one who provides the biblical justification for the doctrines of grace and the inclusion of the *Gentiles as gentiles* in Galatians 3 and in Romans 4.

**Or does he?** In Galatians 3 Paul makes various references to the story of Abraham. It is beyond the scope of this presentation to consider whether Paul’s references to Abraham are his own positive, “best shot” efforts at providing Biblical proof or whether Paul is actually trying to answer the effective use made of the Abraham narrative by the false teachers who came to Galatia. After all, consider that Abraham was the perfect paradigm for their demands: he was called as a pagan, a Gentile, and after he believed (in Genesis 15), he was required to be circumcised–he and every male in his household; on pain of being “cut off from the people." God even reminds him: “So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant” (Gen 17:13). Could you ask for a better sermon illustration for the Judaising message!?

 But in any case, it is important to our purpose to consider why no New Testament worthy, before or after Paul, makes any use of the Abraham story on the question of “who’s in and who’s out.” In Gal 3:8 Paul cites what may be termed, **“the Gentiles blessings formula”** repeated five times in the Abraham narrative:

**[Slide -Text on Slide]**

If you stop and think about it, this formula does not in itself defeat the Judaising position. “Yes,” they would argue, “God undoubtedly will include some Gentiles; but it will be by circumcision and conversion to Judaism with accompanying faith in Israel’s messiah”!

But there is even a further ambiguity. Hang with me; just a little more exegetical trivia. The supremacy of Christ in our hermeneutics is at stake!

The five uses of “the Gentiles blessing formula” in Genesis have a significant difference in the Hebrew (as opposed to the LXX and many English translations--I cannot speak for the Chinese ones). There is a significant variation in the form of the verb “to bless.”

[Slide]Three of the instances of the Gentile blessings formula contain the Niphal stem of the verb. Every first year Hebrew student should know that this is the primary way the Hebrew language expresses the ***passive*** voice. Hence the rendering “all the nations ***shall be blessed***.”

But A and perhaps B+ students in first year Hebrew will also know that the Niphal stem can also express reflexivity or reciprocity and mutuality. With this function of the Niphal stem the rendering would be something like this: “I will bless you, Abraham, in order that by you all the nations **shall bless themselves (or bless each other)**.” The effect of this may be subtle to our eyes but hardly so to Second Temple Jewish ones. God’s blessing on the nations is now seen as once removed and indirect. God’s direct purpose for blessing is directed to Abraham, in other words. Abraham then becomes a byword of blessing among the nations: “may you be blessed like Abraham.” The nations look on and watch and perhaps are drawn to worship the same God—via circumcision, etc. In these three instances, however, this is a mere possibility not a grammatical requirement.

Here is the complication: [Slide] in the other two instances of “the Gentiles blessing formula” in the book of Genesis, the verb “to bless” does not appear in the Niphal stem but rather in the less frequent ***Hitpael*** stem. This stem does not express the passive voice; it expresses the ***reflexive or reciprocal/mutual*** voice. Given even our own exegetical practices, how would you – if you were a believer from the party of the Pharisees – naturally understand “the Gentile blessings formula”? Remember, there are two very clear cases and three ambiguous ones.

Where does this leave Paul’s argument in Gal 3 (or less centrally, in Rom 4)? We might say that it would be in trouble, if (and this is a huge “if”) Paul were making the standard, probative, foundationalist arguments **from** Scripture. Now here you will have to take my word for it, we do not have the time to show this in detail: Paul’s **reasoning** reflected in Galatians does not have that structure. Paul’s reasoning in Galatians moves from what Paul and his readers both know without a shadow of the doubt to be true **on other grounds beside the Old Testament** towards a correlation with previously ambiguous texts in the Old Testament. In Galatians, in particular, Paul’s argument rests on two “recent” events: 1) the cursing of the Messiah and his exclusion from Israel defined by Torah by virtue of his death on the cross 2) and the gift of the Spirit that the Galatians themselves could not deny. (In fact the subtitle of the course I teach every year on Galatians is: How the Cross and the Spirit change everything.) These recent redemptive events, of course had far reaching hermeneutical implications! The death of Christ on the cross and the gift of the Spirit to Gentiles clarify a central ambiguity that God had placed in the story of Israel.

CUT MATERIAL between \*\*\*\*\*This “backward” hermeneutic from the end or “all encompassing meaning” of the story – the climax – back to the details and back again is actually a version of the hermeneutical circle/spiral. And it is actually characteristic of Paul argumentation, not an exception. For example, at the climax of an argument in the book of Romans filled with the use of Scripture, Paul pens these astounding words: [Slide]

**Romans 10:1-4**  ¶ Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them [my fellow Jews] is that they may be saved. 2 For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God***, but not according to knowledge.***  3 For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. 4 **For the Messiah is the goal [or purpose—*telos*] of the law** so there can be righteousness for everyone who believes.

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

Many questions are left unanswered here, no doubt, but let me summarize before moving to our last and least demanding movement. The church struggled with the Jew-Gentile question because there was a GOD-placed ambiguity in one of the most central strands of the biblical story. This ambiguity was necessary to make a point and to establish certain conditions. But, as the data from Acts and Genesis and the structure of Paul’s own *reasoning* indicates, the ambiguity could only be clarified by an eschatological and almost unimaginable Act of God: God’s self-giving in His Son. This is why Paul will go on to argue later with specific reference to the full blessing on the Gentiles, that the depth and scope of the Messiah’s work was “the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints” ([Slide]Col 1:26; cf. Eph 3:3-6, Rom 16:25). Apparently, Paul realized (having himself experienced two very different ways of making sense of the Old Testament) that the OT texts he had used to make the case for his Gentile-inclusive Gospel were capable of being read quite naturally another way. The ambiguity was resolved only with a full understanding of the meaning of Messiah (as crucified).

**Fourth Movement: The Majestic Mountain—The Shape of Christotelicty**

So what is Christotelic interpretation? Well, we just did it three times! So in this movement we can only repeat and develop the themes from the first three. Time is short!

Christotelic interpretation has these features (some of which are broadly shared, I’m sure): [Slide—the following will also be on a slide]

* Assumes foundationally that God’s plan for human history is the “summing up of all things in heaven and on earth in the Messiah” (Eph 1:10)—There is one story that transcends textuality; it is embedded in history itself, in the nature of things! [Slide]
* Takes the Bible as God’s written communication to us about that plan. It’s God’s written word arising out of the execution of God’s plan. [Slide]
* Recognizes the Bible is given in bits and pieces as God acts and interacts with his people over a millennium. The Bible’s revelation is this irreducibly diachronic and sequential, [Slide]
* Proceeds as if the bits and pieces are valuable to God in all their particularity. They form God’s story, the very story of which Christ is the climax. [Slide]
* Insists that the particulars deserve to be studied and honestly perceived. Ezekiel must have his own voice. The human actors and authors matter. [Slide]
* Remains sensitive to the God behind the particulars and to his plan only made clear and coherent in Christ. [Slide]
* Oh heavens! Am I repeating myself? [Slide] Yes! This is a version of the hermeneutical circle . . . . Normative meaning from the Bible for the church can only come from this circular reading—the conscious interaction between the parts and the Whole, the particular texts and the Christ-shaped meaning of the whole. One cannot gloss over the one for the safe of the other.

Let’s shorten the final movement by dropping the musical pretense and turning to the visual arts; after all a picture paints 1000 words (but again, don’t expect van Gogh!). Let us try to diagrammatically represent different models of Scripture reading in order to better grasp what a Christotelic one might look like. [Slide]

Many of us may have been brought up reading the Bible in **a very flat way**. We rightful use it in our devotional reading where our central question is “What is God saying to me?” This way of reading the Bible was dominant for over 1000 years and still has a hold wherever the Bible is read primarily as a source, or at least a symbolic representation of, logical and unchanging truths. In my own tradition, some “covenant theologians” use it. It is convenient and fast; it yields immediate “Christian food” but at a tremendous cost: Christ, his atonement and resurrection become just part of a logical body of equally important truths. Every node of truth requires the other to maintain a logical structure. Appplicability of these logical truths is handled by a series of ad hoc, externally imposed rules. And rarely are the details of the Bible—especially those that strain at the system--given much attention. [Slide]

In the United States, there was a revolt against this kind of reading that originally sprang from the same Reformed, Presbyterian roots. American Dispensationalism was, of course founded on an amalgam of the Reformed theology of folks like Lewis Sperry Chaffer and the eschatology of some British Brethren, but in my opinion, it offered a much needed corrective-- a corrective presaged in some forms of Lutheranism. According to this general point of view (and we are simplifying drastically), Scripture is structured according **to two or a series of episodes or dispensations**, within which God acts in specific and predictable ways. **There is an episodic flatness.** Nevertheless, the picture as a whole is one of movement and progression, if one “rightly divides the word of truth.”

There was and is a certain honesty about these interpreters. Ezekiel and Paul are NOT having the same conversation. Yet once again there was and is a heavy price. The story of redemption is bifurcated or episodic requiring different hermeneutical rules. But worst of all, the unifying supremacy of Christ is compromised. Christ is not longer the one who sums up Israel in himself but rather either the one who replaces Israel with something different or the means by which God’s higher goal of blessing the Jews is realized. [Slide]

Sensing the problem, Geerhardus Vos at Princeton developed a biblical-theological/redemptive historical approach. This approach maintained the unity of the story, and Christ was clearly the singular climax of it all. But this approach also had its problems. Vos and his disciples were not always able to deal honestly with the tensions and differences in the text. **The slope was smooth**; there was no place for a disillusioned psalmist. And many Vosians ended up in practice doing a kind of “Christocentric” reading of the Bible in which Christ had to be found in every passage, sometimes with great violence to what exegesis would demand.

So, what is the proper model? Drawing on the work of a host of people (Ray Dillard at Westminster, my former colleagues at the same institution, Doug Green, Dan McCartney and Pete Enns, and NT scholars like Richard Hays and N. T. Wright, etc.) let me suggest that the biblical data, as illustrated in the first three movements, drives us (as Christian readers) to [Slide] the Christotelic one that can be pictured as a Majestic Mountain.

This mountain is massive and complex, filled with ravines and smaller hills and crevices which impinge on pathways up the slope, sometimes cutting them off and rendering them dead ends. The mountain represents God’s accommodating communication with his people, his love of language and process and development and of the particular. But it also clearly tells us what God’s goal is and why everything along the way has been said and done. Yes, brother Ezekiel has his place on the slope. He happens to be sitting in one of the larger ravines. God deals with him graciously in his place and time speaking of his salvation in terms not only comprehensible but dear to his heart, given his tradition. Ezekiel looks up and sees a summit. On that summit he sees the temple with the sons of Zadok joyfully serving. Little does he know that what he sees is only the top of his ravine. The true summit is “farther up and further in.” That is not a slam on Ezekiel; it’s a function of the incredible height of the summit and the complexity of the mountain—the mountain that God built!

In the end, Ezekiel’s vision magnifies the summit by being a dead end. A better path has to be offered. But the majestic mountain has many slopes and ravines and pathways—the Davidic and Abrahamic just to name a couple. All of them lead through surprise because the summit is breathtaking, but some of them lead to the top.

But here is the key: Christ (or our correct apprehension of him) needs the mountain just as the mountain needs the summit. It’s the job of the biblical scholar, especially the OT scholar, to keep reminding us “There IS a mountain.” This can only be done by careful, hardnosed, honest, non-question-begging scholarship.

The New Testament scholars should heartily join in, but she also has the job of shouting, “There is a summit, and look at the view from it!” Again honest, hardnosed scholarship is of the essence.

But of course there are other observations to be made. The systematic theologian must always remind us, “Guys, there is ONE mountain, no matter how vast and varied it may appear from any vantage point.” And it is the job of the missiologist to figure out how we describe such a mountain to others who worship in the foothills or who dwell in swamps.

And it is the job of the preacher and worship leaders to take all this and make God’s people gasp at the creative faithfulness of our hyper-fulfilling, mountain-building God.

[Slide]

Finally, it is the job of the rest of us to romp on the mountain [Slide] and to bear a creatively faithful witness to him who reigns from the summit; the witness he wants! May it be so!

1. Darrell Guder, ed. Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Those wishing to enter the conversation with these two missional precursors, can do no better that to start with Newbigin’s *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (London, Grand Rapids, Geneva: SPCK, Eerdmans, WCC, 1989) and Bosch’s *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books. 1991). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Christopher Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006), p. 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. A prevalent misconception is that the missional enterprise – missional theology, missional ecclesiology, and missional hermeneutics – is characterized by a single-minded focus on the *practical*. According to this view, one does missional thinking in the practical theology department of seminaries, while the more intellectually demanding activities go on in the theology and biblical studies departments. And, of course, these intellectually demanding activities are the fundamentally important ones, logically preceding and structuring all the practical thinking and actions one engages in at the end.
 The truth of the matter is almost the reverse. The missional project – at least as we formulate it at Missio seminary – is an intellectually demanding one, requiring careful attention to both the theoretical and the practical, to both observation and logic, to both history and culture, to both communication and reception, and to both the things of God and the things of humanity. In other words, missional thinking is highly integrative and interdisciplinary, demanding high levels of careful and systematic thinking, intensive research, honest collaboration, humble listening, and bold action.
 I said “the truth of the matter is *almost* the reverse” because it is true that missional theology does give the practical a much more prominent place than traditional approaches to theological training and thinking do. [Slide]In more traditional theological education, practical concerns (and Practical Theology) come at the end of a one-way linear process: Exegesis🡪Biblical Theology🡪Systematic Theology🡪Church History🡪Practical Theology and Mission. Missional theology, by contrast, thinks, in terms of a circle in which the practical or “the mission” prompts all systematic thought and biblical interpretation. Then the mission, for its part, is itself better understood and sharpened in the light of careful, high-level reflection. And round and round the circle goes: mission prompting reflection and study; study and reflection enriching and sharpening mission.
 The elevation of ‘the mission” to the beginning of Christian reflection rather than to the end is deeply rooted in the missional outlook, not only because it is true to life (humans really do operate *on the basis of* our concerns and goals), but also because it is true to God, as we will shortly see! [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This essay can be found in Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards. With an Essay on His Genius and Writings,* (London, 1839). More recently this essay has been reproduced in John Piper, *God's Passion for His Glory* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1998) pp. 138–41. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This word come from the Greek word *perichoresis.* This is the term used by the ancient Greek fathers to describe the intimate relationship between the three persons of the Trinity. To cite Alister McGrath, “[it] allows the individuality of the persons to be maintained, while insisting that each person shares in the life of the other two. An image often used to express this idea is that of a 'community of being,' in which each person, while maintaining its distinctive identity, penetrates the others and is penetrated by them" (McGrath in his *C*hristian Theology: An Introduction, 3rd ed. [Blackwell, 2001], p. 325). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. So much more could and should be said about “the mission that God has the church for.” Suffice it to say here that the overwhelming emphasis of the New Testament (especially when read in the light of the Old Testament) is on the balance between proclamation and “incarnation,” speaking and being, communication and (new) creation. The most complete version of Jesus’ “great commission” highlights the “making of disciples” who will, in essence, “be perfect as [their] Heavenly Father is perfect” (reading Matthew 28:19-20 in light of all the teaching in Matthew gospel, e.g., Matt. 5:43-48). The church not only proclaims the one who is the Light of the World, it also is called to *be* the light of the world (juxtaposing John 8:12 and Matt 5:14). All this is perfectly consistent with Paul’s insistence that the church, in union with Christ, is the advance-guard of “new creation,” already, embodying, however imperfectly, the recovered and Spirit-driven dynamics of God’s ultimate goal (Gal 5:5-6:15). And of course the signature mark of the Spirit’s work, the fruit of the Spirit, is that fully orbed, variegated and blazing love that ultimately stems from the being and character of God. Without that, the church’s speech is but “a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal” (1 Cor 13:1). None of this is to denigrate or demote gospel preaching; it remains essential! It is rather to point out the inherent, but frequently forgotten, connection between word and deed and being in Christian witness. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Translation mine. Inexplicably, most modern English translations read “. . . he has made Him known.” But this rendering of the verb misses distinct overtones of the word evxhge,omai which shade more into the ideas of explaining, specifying, giving a full account. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Casual readers of Exodus frequently miss that the revelation and building of the Tabernacle is the goal and climax of the book, not the giving of the 10 Commandments. Most of the last 15 chapters of the book deal with that theme. The only break from the Tabernacle theme comes with Golden Calf incident and God’s reinstitution of the covenant (chapters 32-34—the passage we have briefly focused on above). Taken as a whole, the last 15 chapters explain how it is that God will dwell with his people and go with them into the Land: only by means of an elaborate containment system by which a sinful people are protected from the burning glory of God. The question beyond Exodus’s horizon is: when and how will all the people have Moses’ experience of reflecting the glory of the Lord with unveiled faces, being changed from one degree of glory to another (see 2 Cor 3:18, where Paul, like John, also reflects on the pivotal events of Ex 32-34). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Once again, the English translation tradition (typically “grace and truth *came* through Jesus Christ”) is tone-deaf here. The verb, evge,neto, connotes being, becoming, presence, or realization not motion. John’s nine other uses of the verb in the Prologue alone conform to this meaning as do the other 42 uses throughout the gospel, with one or two possible exceptions. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See footnote 6 in the first lecture. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Of course he does so by appealing to two minor texts in the Old Testament: Gen 16 and Psalm 110; he is not just “making things up.” Nevertheless, under the pressure of what God had done in Jesus, the author of Hebrews subsumes the dominant OT theme of priesthood and temple (including all of its “in perpetuity” language—see Exodus 40) under the minor and mysterious Melchizedek story. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)