

CAREY THEOLOGICAL COLLEGE

**REFORMING A REFORMED KINGDOM WITNESS:
DISCERNING A POST-CHRISTENDOM CONGREGATIONAL
HERMENEUTIC FOR FIRST CRC OF VANCOUVER**

BY

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This is dedicated to the people of First Christian Reformed Church of Vancouver. Our journey together of seeking to be faithful in this place and time while attending to our unique living tradition has taught me that participation in the *Missio Dei* is much more than mimicking the latest missional success stories. Together we have engaged in, and continue to engage, the deep work discovering why we do what we do. This project has culminated at a time of vulnerability for our family and we have experienced First CRC at its best for which we are deeply grateful.

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ABSTRACT:

Since 2007, First Christian Reformed Church of Vancouver has learned that a fuller participation in the *Missio Dei* requires more than adopting new techniques and strategies, but for a congregation deeply tied to its living tradition, deep shifts are necessary to unlock the missionary nature of God’s people. The goal of this project is to articulate a Congregational Kingdom Witness hermeneutic for First CRC of Vancouver which re-appropriates the Transformational (Neo-Calvinist) kingdom impulse to help us faithfully respond to God’s in-breaking shalom with God, each other, our neighbours and creation. Specifically, I use the lenses of identity, community, society and view of the future to identify the needs of our social and cultural context, and explore how the doctrines of election, covenant, kingdom participation and creation ordinances can be contextualized to First CRC of Vancouver’s postmodern and post-Christendom context. I conclude with correlating postures and communal practices to reinforce this learning.

	Context	Transformational Approach	Postures	Practices
Identity	Fragmentation	Vocation-infused Election	Humility	<i>Sustained in the rhythms of the gathered church and the sent church</i>
Community	Loneliness and Alienation	Centred-Set Covenant Community	Hospitality	
Society	Outsourced moral responsibility	Cross and Crown Kingdom work	Generosity	
Future	Nihilism & Despair	Living Shalom-order eschatology	Imaginative Hope	

Through theological reflection, congregational input, and attending to inherited gifts and challenges from our highly bounded confessional faith tradition, here is a description of how God has been leading us since and where he will continue to lead our church into the future.

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CHAPTER 1:

KINGDOM WITNESS, FIRST CRC'S CONTEXT, AND RESEARCH PLAN

In Vancouver, we are waiting for the Big One to hit, but if we are honest, we would much rather keep living the way that we want. Few have emergency kits unless their children are mandated by their local school to purchase one. Some likely don't want to expect the worst that could happen, many likely don't want to be paralyzed by fear and therefore continue living, and almost everyone would prefer the way things they have grown accustomed to, rather than imagining a whole new way to inhabit a new reality.

The problem with the Big One will not be the initial shock but the sustained shaking which will alter what currently is. Experts speculate that the elevated ridges of Point Grey could collapse, the island of Richmond would act like quicksand and swallow up structures that are there, and shorelines may change drastically. In the span of history, the Coast Salish people, the Squamish, Tseil-Watuth and the Musqueam remind us that our city's 150-year history is so small, and though we cannot quite imagine how, the geology and geography of this terrain will dictate our environment, not the other way around. Earthquakes mean the end to some things, and also the beginnings of something new.

For the church, the Big One which hit the church decades ago was actually a series of earthquakes and aftershocks. Its well-documented sustained shaking has altered the landscape irreversibly.¹ Postmodernity has deepened suspicion of society's core of which the church was once a part. A culture where Christianity once held the preferred position has now become post-Christendom where followers of Jesus have found this is acceptable by others if one's views are privately held and not influencing other people's decisions or behaviour. Whereas previously,

¹ William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2014), 1.

people believed that the spiritual forces caused the events around them, the link between the physical and spiritual worlds have now been severed from each other, and we are within what Charles Taylor calls the *Immanent Frame*.² Furthermore, for many outside the church who might have been called ‘pagans’ by followers of Jesus describing anyone who is not a Christian, many are now literally embracing *paganism* which looks for meaning and spirituality in nature within this Immanent Frame.

Following the Big One, the landmarks the church had known are gone, or they are no longer where we would expect them to be. The change might be grieved. The change might push some to triage and focus on what is most important to them first. It might also push others to patch up and repair what has been. However, an earthquake as dislocating as this one calls us to do something else--to imagine what else has been shaken loose and to "settle down, build houses, get married and seek the peace of the city in which we have been sent."³

William Willimon points out that in the garden of the Tomb that first Easter morning, there was an earthquake when Jesus ushered in the first taste of New Creation into the midst of the old creation. The Risen Jesus brought about an earthquake.⁴ Perhaps, like the bewildered first Easter witnesses, in order for us to witness to what God’s Spirit has shaken loose in our day and in our time and have the courage to follow our Lord into a world we have not known before, we can imagine that these events are not only losses, but glimpses of God’s resurrection power drawing God’s people into witnessing his in-breaking kingdom.

² Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 1st edition (Cambridge, Mass: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 539. The Immanent Frame is a *buffered identity* contrasted with the more porous pre-modern self. The understanding is that the world is disenchanted so that connecting with supernatural forces or beings seems virtually impossible.

³ Jeremiah 29:7

⁴ William Willimon, *Easter as an Earthquake* sermon, April 4, 1999, Duke University Chapel, <https://repository.duke.edu/dc/dukechapel/dcrau001596> (Accessed September 23, 2017).

For the last eleven years I have been called to sit with, pray with, discern with and experiment with a congregation who have recognized the changing times and have expressed the awareness of the need to adapt. Moreover, through times of growth and grief, the benedictions at life's end and the baptisms in their place, we have sought to discern together what Christ has shaken loose in our midst.

The dislocating shaking crumbled more foundational pillars than we have the capacity to articulate, but it is my conviction that many core foundations have remained. First and foremost, with the wider Church, Jesus Christ remains the central foundation. In what follows, I argue that some of the secondary foundations of our denomination's Transformationalist tradition remain. Being attentive to these, while also being cognizant of our current cultural context, will enable our congregation to continue to bear witness to God's mission as we learn to make right relationships between humanity and God, within human communities, and between humans and the physical world. We give thanks to God for the tangible expressions of his kingdom mission in our midst where the Holy Spirit has given us glimpses and tastes of his kingdom mission.

Yet, because God's sovereign work exceeds our imaginations and sin clouds our vision, much of God's mission around the globe and even in our particular context is not visible to us. So, for all that we cannot see, we believe that God is providentially guiding and expanding his mission until Christ returns to bring in his full shalom in the New Creation. And in that confidence, we carry on witnessing to his kingdom as a gathered congregation on East 11th Avenue and Victoria Drive in East Vancouver, and also to the specific work of God's mission in our own lives where we live, work and play.

I. Introduction to the Research Project:

This project aims to help First CRC of Vancouver find our voice again as God's people who have been sent as witnesses to his kingdom presence together in the Grandview-Woodlands neighbourhood, and personally in our homes, neighbourhoods, places of work and wherever else we might have influence. To find our voice, in Chapter One, I will attend to Scripture's call for Kingdom Witness and situate our congregation within that call. Here I will also provide preliminary considerations as well as outline the specifics of my methodology for my research project.

In Chapter Two, I will attend to our societal and local cultural contexts to better understand the social factors impacting how one understands oneself, how one relates to others, society and one's orientation towards the future. Specifically, on the individual level, I will explore variously fragmented spiritualities. On the interpersonal level, I will identify the forces of isolation and loneliness which undermine the experience of community. On the societal level, I will name where there is gospel continuity with our neighbours in the pursuit of justice, and also discontinuity particularly due to hedonism, narcissism, and consumerism. Regarding one's orientation towards the future, I will unpack the nihilism which results from living in the Immanent Frame.

In Chapter Three, I will attend to our tradition by first telling the Story of life and faith through a Reformed Transformationalist lens.⁵ I will then seek to *retell* the Neo-Calvinist story by re-appropriating this holistically Reformed living tradition to better suit our cultural context. I will offer innovations for our tradition in a way that will parallel the relational corollaries presented in Chapter Two. For personal identity, I will re-locate the doctrine of election to suit

⁵ I am using the term Transformationalist rather than Neo-Calvinist and Kuyperian for a variety of reasons. Rationale is included below.

Scripture's teleological call of being called to be a light to the nations. For our relationship with others, I will seek to recover a covenantal expression of community which carries a more generous posture towards the wider Church. Regarding our relationship with society, I will call for a new posture which emphasizes faith formation rather than ideation, is marked by a verbalized and an enacted faith rather than a private one. Regarding our orientation towards the future, I will argue that we need to move from being creation-order to shalom-order Transformationalists guided by an eschatological vision of a fully redeemed creation and marked by right relationships with God, ourselves, each other and the physical world.

In Chapter 4, I will describe and interpret my research data collected in the Spring of 2017 where I sought to understand what our congregation's teleological understanding was—that is, how well they could articulate why we do what we do as a congregation. The open-ended questions in the research provides a description of the participants' shared understanding of their own congregational identity, denominational Transformationalist identity, their perception of the social context our congregation finds itself in, as well as some of the called-for changes deemed necessary for our church to remain faithful to our call as kingdom witnesses. Alongside this, I also sought to measure how much “kingdom and mission” tangibly guide the priorities of First CRC.

In Chapter Five, I will conclude this project with giving attention to the ministry rhythms of First CRC. I will evaluate what is going well and identify the areas which need attention. In this, I will return to the corollaries of individual, community, society and future, giving special attention to the role of shared postures and faith practices which will nurture a desire for kingdom witness.

Introduction to Chapter One:

In this chapter, after offering preliminary considerations, I will explore the foundational framework *Kingdom Witness and Mission* followed by a section on the importance of a *Teleological* understanding of church. I will then shift attention to *Situating First CRC of Vancouver*, where I will note the local and denominational context of our congregation. Following that, I then add *Situating Ourselves in the Transformationalist Community* noting three distinct phases, distinction from the New Calvinist stream, and providing the reader with definitions for distinct terminology. Following this, I will conclude the chapter with a description of the methodology for the congregational praxis research which is foundational for this Doctor of Ministry project.

II. What's in a Name?

In the paragraphs above, I use the term *Transformationalist* to describe my particular historical stream of Calvinism started by Dutch thinker Groen van Prinsterer, popularized by Abraham Kuyper, and fleshed out further by Herman Bavinck. Although Transformational is a less common descriptor of the Kuyperian and neo-Calvinist hermeneutic, it is the term I will use in this project for a variety of reasons. First of all, considering there were other early Reformed innovators besides Abraham Kuyper, Kuyperianism is not comprehensive enough; also, because Kuyper was a polarizing figure and so using that term might create unnecessary barriers for readers.⁶ Second, although the term *neo-Calvinism* is technically the most commonly accepted term, particularly in academic circles, there is an unnecessary confusion of language with a

⁶ I will still address various polarizing aspects of Abraham Kuyper's life throughout and in Chapter Three, I will also address the ugly form this stream of thought had taken in Apartheid South Africa.

parallel group called New Calvinism, neo-Puritanism, and even Neo-Calvinism to describe the movement of North American Evangelicals seeking to adopt aspects of historic Calvinism.⁷

In addition, describing a branch within Calvinism reinforces division, and I would rather model a more positive term. It is 500 years since the Reformation, and there is now, I believe, a growing call to link arms with those in the broader church. Finally, and most significantly, whereas Kuyperianism and neo-Calvinism describe our stream historically, the term Transformational describes our stream more teleologically—emphasizing what we are called to be and do rather than who we have been in the past.

III. Kingdom Witness Hermeneutic

A. God’s Mission through Kingdom Witness

The thrust of this project is to attend to the social and local context in which we find ourselves through the unique lens of our denominational heritage, so that as a congregation we can articulate a shared vision of our Kingdom Witness in a way that is compelling and comprehensive, rooted in God’s mission which began with God’s calling of Abraham in Genesis 11.

Once again, terminology is important—I am using the term *Kingdom Witness Hermeneutic* rather than *Missional Hermeneutic*. Although the terms Mission and Missional are much more common than Kingdom Witness, I am not using the more popular term for various reasons: first, there is confusion within the missional community about the meaning of the term “missional” itself. Second, even if the motivation is similar to that of mission the language of kingdom witness is more Scriptural than that of mission; and finally, the concept of kingdom witness is more comprehensive in nature.

⁷ I will explore this distinction further in the chapter below under the section, situating ourselves in Calvinism.

To begin, as others have acknowledged, the term Missional has become so nebulous that it has proven to be unhelpful. Hastings recognizes the array of uses of the word missional⁸ and notes how many of the uses of the term are not descriptive of his approach:

It is to be freely admitted the renaissance of the notion that the church is ‘missional’ may have its accompanying imbalances and be prone to extremes, in response to cultural pressures.⁹

I view this project as part of the larger conversation of seeing our congregational and each of our own personal contexts as places of mission which necessarily calls us to be responsive to where we have been placed. As such, I will still draw on common resources promoting the participation in God’s mission, but I seek to avoid the confusion of unspoken definitions when various voices are describing something as being ‘missional.’

One of the unfortunate, non-verbalized understandings of a missional church I am particularly seeking to avoid is the idea that a missional community is an innovative community focused on God’s mission who have written off the established church. As many pastors of established congregations can attest, this is an all too common occurrence where parishioners who are passionate about God’s mission walked away from their established churches due to their congregation’s stubborn refusal to acknowledge the new post-Christendom reality they now find themselves. This loss has been repeated many times, and while I acknowledge and celebrate the leading edges of innovators in the wider church, it is regrettable that those who have been appropriately responsive to God’s Good News call have impatiently left behind countless other congregations who also need to see the urgency and adapt to the new reality.

I believe corrective to this loss is vital. The strategy presented in this project seeks to draw an established congregation along into this call, that each congregant would see themselves

⁸ Ross Hastings, *Missional God, Missional Church: Hope for Re-Evangelizing the West* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2012), 35.

⁹ Hastings, 35.

to be sent as God's missionaries in all the places where they have influence. Van Gelder observes that the concept of *Missio Dei* was given greater significance in 1952 where the whole of God's people were reminded how participating in God's mission became foundational to the church's identity and self-understanding. This describes a shift "to understand the church as being missionary by its very nature, and that this missionary nature is expressed as the church is sent by the Spirit into the world to participate in God's mission."¹⁰

The call Van Gelder describes is the conviction I have been operating with at First CRC for more than a decade. I strongly feel that even if innovators in the wider church might have written off 90-year old congregations like ours, I do not believe God has just yet. Rather, I believe he will continue to lead us forward if we are attentive and responsive to God's missionary call to participate in what he is doing around us.¹¹ That is, the call to participate in God's mission is not simply to be carried out by younger, more innovative expressions of the church, but is core to the identity for the whole church.

Second, more important than differentiating ourselves from the imbalances of some missional expressions, I argue that the language of *Kingdom Witness* draws on the Scriptural basis for mission.¹² Jesus did not talk about mission—rather he embodied and modeled God's mission as he talked about the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Heaven. He revealed the ethics of the Kingdom by restoring lives, so they could experience life in the Kingdom marked by God's shalom. In other words, Jesus' healing was as much a part of the kingdom as his verbal

¹⁰ Craig Van Gelder, *The Missional Church in Context: Helping Congregations Develop Contextual Ministry*, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 28.

¹¹ It must be stated that God has not promised that our particular worshipping community will never close, and in a context where so many established churches are closing their doors, I hesitate to sound presumptuous. Yet, each new year we continue to see places of renewal and new opportunities for ministry and if we remain attentive to the Holy Spirit's leading, I believe God still has a plan for this congregation.

¹² Some voices within Missional literature are attentive to the language of witnesses, namely Craig Van Gelder in *Confident Witness—Changing World*, and Darrell Guder's books *Be My Witness: The Churches Mission, Message and Messengers*; *Called to Witness: Doing Missional Theology*; and *The Incarnation and the Church's Witness*.

proclamation. And all of Jesus' teaching and healing ushered into the present the eschatological reality of God's future reign. It was the work of the Kingdom that Jesus set out to do, and it was the work of the Kingdom that Jesus sent his followers to continue to witness to and participate in through the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit.

Third, it follows then that *Kingdom Witness* re-emphasizes the holistic nature of Scripture's fullest sense of a missional response of Word and Deed. It is common that voices within the missional stream tend to focus more on proclamation, whereas kingdom witness is meant to denote God's sending his church into the world to witness to his reign through proclamation *and* social engagement. While our tradition has much to learn from the broader church on the urgency, clarity and passion of verbal proclamation, it is a long-held value in our tradition that kingdom witness ought not be limited to verbal proclamation but instead be expressed in a myriad of ways.

Of course, the Transformational stream is not alone in affirming the both/and nature of kingdom witness and God's Spirit is leading his global church into this deeper awareness that to have integrity, our words of faith must always be held alongside visible expressions of the kingdom we proclaim. In 1974, the *Lausanne I Conference* led by indigenous theologians Samuel Escobar and Rene Padilla, working alongside John Stott, resulted in the *Lausanne Covenant*. This covenant affirmed that proclamation and social action are to be held together, inseparable, as a witness to the world.¹³ The affirmation compliments our Transformational approach to Gospel Kingdom witness which seeks to integrate the Good News into the whole of life.

¹³ Ruth Padilla DeBorst, *What the Global South Can Teach the Western Church*, 2014 Evening Lecture Series, Regent College Audio.

B. What is Kingdom Witness Mission then?

How then do we properly understand kingdom witness, particularly as kingdom is another nebulous term? In short, kingdom witness is to have our imaginations shaped by the vision of the fullness of God's eschatological work of redemption and to witness to the many ways God's future is breaking into the present reality—both within the church and outside of it. It is to recognize God's sovereign guiding of his creation's history and participate in his kingdom as we bear witness to his tangible expressions breaking into our midst. Each expression becomes a glimpse into God's shalom. This began with Jesus' own ministry in his liberating teaching, his healings and his reordering of the world around him. It was carried forth by his apostles and remains a call for us today.

It might well be pointed out that the term 'kingdom' has associations with Christendom. In *Once and Future Church*, Loren Mead writes that Christianity has lived through two framing paradigms for understanding relationship between itself and the world. The first was the Apostolic paradigm where, "the church was a small minority surrounded by a very hostile world,"¹⁴ which was followed by Christendom, "where there was little perceivable barrier between the church and the surrounding culture."¹⁵ Our new reality is different than both of these contexts and one of the most significant shifts is that the mission field is not an unreached people group on the other side of the world. Rather, he argues, we need to "radically rethink our understanding of mission"¹⁶ to recognize that our mission field is where each of us is located. We are all called and sent as missionaries to the places where we live, work and play and as we seek

¹⁴ As cited in Jim Kitchens, *The Postmodern Parish: New Ministry for a New Era* (Bethesda: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 72.

¹⁵ Kitchens, 73.

¹⁶ Kitchens, 73.

to be kingdom witnesses we need to have a compelling vision of the future to shape what we say and what we do.

To offer compelling kingdom witness we must first navigate the particularity of the context we are situated in. We must also contend with the pre-existing barriers that have historically inhibited our participation in kingdom witness. Finally, we must come to recognize the ways where we are held culturally captive, which might be most helpfully articulated for us by those outside our own cultural context; from the voices of Christians in the Global South.

C. Navigating the Particularity of Kingdom Witness

God's people being sent into exile has become an analogy for followers living in a post-Christendom reality, and many have sung the words of the Psalm in which we hear the lament: "By the river of Babylon, we sat down and wept for you, Zion."¹⁷ It is in the context of God's people weeping for what was lost that God's word came to Jeremiah to "build houses, settle down, have your children marry their children, and seek the peace of the city to which God has sent you." This has become a rallying cry for those seeking to establish holistic kingdom ministry in a setting where the supports of faith have largely been replaced by increased opposition and a myriad of other options were available to them. Though not a perfect parallel to our context in which we still have religious freedom to worship God according to our consciences, the comparison is helpful insofar as it names clearly what has been lost and it focuses on the call to first come to terms with our new reality, and second to reimagine our faith finding expression in this new cultural setting.

As we continue to come to terms with our new reality within which we are called and sent as kingdom witnesses, many different models and movements have been proposed to help

¹⁷ See Walter Brueggemann. *Cadences of Home: Preaching to the Exiles*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 1997.

guide the North American church through to hope. The array of innovators over the last two decades has included *Saddleback* and *Willow Creek* models of large-scale, repeatable congregations, the spiritual-but-not-religious approach seen in a number of church plants, Emergent churches, Simple churches, parish churches, etc. A common theme undergirding each of these has been a conviction of needing to reach those who are lost. Alongside this have been the strategies of established churches and denominations, as well as the rise of new monastic communities, who have sought to find new ways of being faithful to who God is calling his church to be.

To varying degrees, each of these strategies have offered effective solutions and in the spirit of North American innovation, steps have been taken to franchise a successful experiment. The limitation of this strategy, of course, is the failure to recognize the uniqueness of each ministry context. The more easily the convictions can be applied to multiple contexts, the more successful the innovation. This has in turn given rise to a new movement of ecclesiastical innovators focusing on *context* as the primary lens within which to formulate ministry strategies.

I do not intend on evaluating each of these approaches, but it is instructive to recognize the appeal of wanting to replicate success from one context to another. While sharing best practices is indeed an important step in establishing our kingdom witness call, it lacks integrity and staying power when the focus on outcomes fails to account for the reason for the problems in the first place. An effective approach needs to begin in another place. As Mark Friedman has argued, “Thinking about causes should always precede thoughts about solutions.”¹⁸ This means that rather than chasing someone else who we believe has ‘figured it out,’ we do the patient work

¹⁸ Mark Friedman, *Trying is Not Good Enough: How to Produce Measurable Improvements for Customers and Communities*, (Santa Fe: Parse Publishing, 2009), 30.

of identifying problems before any attempt to paste someone else's solution onto our context.

Van Gelder helpfully offers this insight:

It is my conviction that we need to move beyond trying to find the "next" church that will help us be successful one more time. We need to rediscover something more basic about what it means to *be* the church."¹⁹

As I seek to articulate what it means for us to be the church in our context, I intend to draw on the insights and best practices of others who have been integrating kingdom witness in their own contexts. More importantly, I will seek to identify the root causes of some of our specific contextual challenges and explore how the Gospel's light will shine truth on them, which I will address more thoroughly in Chapter Two.

In his lesser known book, *The Other Side of 1984*, Lesslie Newbigin pointed to the necessity of this deep work of wanting to understand the root causes to our society's challenges. He wrote that the first task of the church is to address the fundamental question of what it means to be a human person. He contrasted the undergirding convictions between the Enlightenment and the biblical vision. Whereas the Enlightenment believed that each person has "the right to develop his or her own potential to the maximum, limited only by the parallel rights of other persons,"²⁰ The biblical understanding of humanity lies in our relational capacity, where, "there is no true humanity without relatedness, which means that mutual relatedness is intrinsic to true humanity."²¹

Understanding our inherent relationality is, of course, not enough. Newbigin also calls for an attentive reading of Scripture in order for us to know how we can respond to our situation today and to define what message we will carry with us. He first calls the church to "recover the

¹⁹ Craig Van Gelder. *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit*, 4th edition, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 24.

²⁰ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Other Side of 1984: Questions for the Churches-#18* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1983), 56.

²¹ Newbigin, *The Other Side of 1984*, 56.

role of faith in knowing and understanding... We must recover the attitude of listening and receiving—an action of faith—as a prerequisite of knowing.”²² That is, as part of our relationality knowing is not simply a list of theological convictions. Rather, knowing is learned in the relationality of listening to God’s guidance, as well as listening to those around us.

Newbigin adds that our beliefs must be holistic:

There is a need to recover an understanding of Christian dogma as that which can provide a framework for coming to grips with the totality of life, public as well as private. Such a faith framework should be acknowledged as having as much to do with economics and the ordering of social life as with prayer and sacraments... We should go back to the Bible. It is the scriptural testimony that provides perspectives for the private and public life of the Christian.²³

Incorporating one’s faith in both the private realm and the public sphere, I would argue reflects the long-standing convictions of a Transformationalist Kingdom Witness impulse. Of course, Newbigin is not the only one who calls to ‘go back to the Bible,’ but the context for his statement is instructive for his meaning—when we go to the Bible through the lens of the public and the private, this hermeneutic begins to illumine the Gospel’s call for Christ’s light to touch every aspect of life. And although this conviction is rooted very much in the present, I will argue that our vision of the future, guided by Scripture’s witness, is what will ultimately shape how we live publicly and privately as kingdom citizens today.

D. Barriers Preventing Kingdom Witness

During my denominational ordination examination, I shared that though I was raised in the Christian Reformed tradition it took some determination to remain in the CRC. The majority of my immediate family chose to join the *Christian and Missionary Alliance*, *Evangelical Free* and *Mennonite* churches, and my paternal grandparents had adult baptism in order to join a

²² Newbigin, *The Other Side of 1984*, 67.

²³ Newbigin, *The Other Side of 1984*, 68.

Baptist congregation before returning to the CRC later in their lives. The reasons were unique in each situation but the thread that stitched its way throughout was a discontent with the way things are done in the CRC. The emphasis on election and infant baptism seemed to minimize the importance of pursuing a personal, vibrant faith, as well as minimized the missionary urgency. The emphasis on covenant seemed to turn a congregation and tradition in on itself, ignoring the gifts of the wider church. The emphasis on orthodoxy seemed to undermine orthopraxy because issues were often put before people.

These descriptions are over-simplified, and somewhat caricatured, because it is also within this Living Tradition that I was raised by family, thoughtful and wise pastors, and congregations, to nurture a vibrant faith. While I share these concerns, I have sought instead to address them from within the CRC. This project therefore, stems from a deep commitment to the Reformed framework of faith, and particularly the Transformationalist kingdom vision, but with the view that we do need to learn new postures and practices.

I intend in this project to draw on the strength of our Transformational tradition of holistic witness, but also to address the significant liabilities that have inhibited this effort from becoming more fully realized. I believe there are four aspects within our living tradition that have worked *against* our participation in God's kingdom mission, which I deal with in greater depth in Chapter three, so I will simply identify them here: an emphasis on the doctrine of election; valuing truth above unity; defaulting to an intellectual or institutional posture towards society; and a limited scope of understanding the teleological intent of the redemption of all creation.

The intent in naming and addressing each of these challenges is to help enable us to witness God's kingdom presence always in an increasing way in our midst. Along with these

four concerns are other internal factors which also serve to limit our participation in God's kingdom mission. One sociological factor at work in many CRC congregations are that those who pursued change often did so by leaving their more traditional congregations. This led to an historical pattern of more innovators moving on from First CRC of Vancouver and many other First CRCs across Canada and the US, which in turn further strengthened a culture of "stabilized maintenance." Not that First CRC has been without changes, but the changes seeking to address these challenges have been more methodical and slower than some would want.

There are also external limitations, which every believing community is confronted with—how can we live faithfully to the call of the transformative gospel while still ensuring that the gospel is offered to our unbelieving neighbours in a compelling manner? Though each context will vary in posture and approach, a significant but obvious reality to name is that the pace of change continues to quickly transform not only the external context, but how each of us in this cultural context are ourselves being changed in the process.

Finally, alongside this are the legitimate and perceived limitations of resources; fatigue of holding things together in a 120-person congregation; un/healthy suspicion around new models after nine decades during which other methods and practices were employed, memories where trust was betrayed, as well as strained interpersonal relationships which kept people from wanting to work towards a common vision. I will not directly address these factors in this project, but I am cognizant of these influences playing a role.

E. Drawing on the Global South to Correct Our Kingdom Witness

Given that kingdom witness is rooted in specific contexts, we must be aware of how faith and culture are at work in the lives of those who witness to God's kingdom. What are we blind to? Where are we captives to our own culture? Kettle rightly asks:

Are [Western Christians] converted fully *from* Western culture, and is Western culture properly *converted within them*? Or is it rather the case that, unawares, their faith is domesticated to Western culture? Are they unable to see this culture, and their domestication to it, for what they are in the light of Christ?”²⁴

In order to resist cultural captivity Western Christians must first see where *we* need conversion before we call our culture to conversion. Kettle adds we have authentic mission when it “integrally embraces the conversion of culture, and this conversion begins within the church.”²⁵

While “Lausanne I” did not offer Transformationalists a change in emphasis between proclamation and social action, the conference, and the subsequent emergence of voices from the Global South, are helping us recognize where we have been culturally bound, and also deepening our awareness of the importance of contextualized theology. The positive contributions from the Global South are illustrated here with two Christian Reformed missionaries: Anne Zaki from Egypt and Latin American Ruth Padilla DeBorst who is based in Costa Rica.

Anne Zaki, on the anniversary of the ISIS beheadings of Egyptian Coptic Christians, spoke boldly to a group of North American Christians who had compassion about the tragedy but did not know what to do about it. She said, “Don’t simply ask how you can help us as if your strength could strengthen us. Pray that we would have the strength to remain faithful to Jesus in the face of terror, and pray too that in your context, you would also recognize the ways you are being called to be faithful in your context.”²⁶

Ruth Padilla DeBorst adds a further challenge in naming the unspoken prejudice that “those with power are *more right* than those without.”²⁷ In a Regent College lecture, she points

²⁴ David J. Kettle, *Western Culture in Gospel Context: Towards the Conversion of the West: Theological Bearings for Mission and Spirituality*, Kindle Edition, (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011), Loc. 198.

²⁵ Ibid., Loc. 205.

²⁶ Anne Zaki, *Calvin Institute of Christian Worship* “Worship Symposium 2016,” Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan, January 29, 2016.

²⁷ Ruth Padilla DeBorst, *What Can the West Learn Theologically From the Two Thirds World?* Regent Evening Lecture Series 2014.

out that the, “Can anything good come from Nazareth?” prejudice exists in the American and Canadian context. In a particularly theologically prolific tradition like the CRC, the challenge is apt because the posture of North American context, the spoken or unspoken assumption, is that we have the answers to solve “Third World” problems. The postmodern impulse to give a voice to those previously silenced helps us recognize that when we do listen to the previously silenced individuals we begin to learn from the Global South how damaging our North American consumeristic, narcissistic and hedonistic lifestyles cause significant inequities on a global scale.

As participants in this economy, we recognize also that we as Christians are complicit and the call to social action from the Global South includes challenging the very systems of which we are integrally a part. Even more, attending to these voices and assisting others in need have helped us recognize the problems of global inequity, namely creating dependency through charity, minimizing dignity, and upsetting local social dynamics with an individualistic approach. This conviction is why, for example, our denomination chooses not to participate in *Operation Christmas Child* shoeboxes but instead support *World Renew’s* Gift Catalogue which ensures culturally-sensitive, community-based and dignity-preserving approach to international justice, recognizing how much we need to learn from these other voices to recognize *our* places of poverty.

The second significant treasure we have gained from our church family in the Global South is the importance of contextualized theology—not simply in *those* places, but also the need to produce a contextualized theology in *our* specific context. Ruth Padilla DeBorst points out how this shift away from theology in the centre of power is bringing a greater diversity: “Drawing from the same Scripture and led by the same Spirit, there is a multiform variety

emerging today.”²⁸ In fact, she points out, this multiform variety was a mark of the early church. Within Christendom, the leadership and theology of the church became more standardized and the power more centralized, which lessened the diversity and variety of the church.²⁹

Through the gift of these voices Western Christians are being called out of our cultural captivity and into more authentic mission in presenting a holistic rather than simplistic Gospel message, in a compelling—but not coercive—manner first rooting in our own conversions.

Kettle again:

To be converted to Christ is to be turned from the world as one has known it and to see everything anew in the context of Christ...In Christ, God engages our familiar contexts comprised of our habitual practices and assumptions, worldviews, and personal commitments, and breaks them open, animating them as signs pointing to the deeper context of his approaching kingdom and liberating us for participation in it.”³⁰

IV. Situating First CRC of Vancouver Historically: A Living Tradition and the CRC:

Alasdair MacIntyre points out that what is handed down to us is not static, but is in fact a living tradition: “[it is] an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition.”³¹ Tradition in this sense is not static, but dynamic as it always takes what has historically been seen as important and appropriates to a new context. Belgian Catholic theologian Boeve adds:

[A Christian narrative] is not an autonomous and static entity; it never contains the truth itself but is an ever contextually anchored expression of the relationship of the believer to God who is truth...A Christian narrative, and theology as its reflexive moment, is the expression of the relationship between the word (our words) and the Word (the Logos), between articulation in tradition (traditions) and the inarticulateness of the original *Traditio*. To stand in this tension is to be prevented

²⁸ Padilla DeBorst.

²⁹ Padilla DeBorst.

³⁰ David J. Kettle, *Western Culture in Gospel Context*, Loc. 212.

³¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory, Third Edition*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 222.

from slipping into a hegemonic truth-story, with absolute truth claims...*Christian narratives can never afford to fossilize.*³²

As we appropriate the living tradition handed down to us from Christian Reformed people before us, we recognize that the ongoing dynamic of “reformed and always reforming” rings true once again. What has been handed down to us is, as Boeve writes, “recognized as an ongoing recontextualization process of this relationship.”³³ Therefore, part of stewarding what has been passed down to us is also the necessary work of adapting those beliefs to a new context. We will explore two aspects of how beliefs handed down to us are dealt with in our context, namely what motivates our kingdom witness activity and what impact the historical Reformed confessions have on us embodying this call more fully.

As immigrants from the Post-WWII Netherlands, Christian Reformed people in Canada have received two aspects of a Living Tradition which, when held side by side, shed perspective on how the living tradition can be lost or distorted. On the one hand, Christian Reformed immigrants by and large had a strong emphasis on right beliefs, right behaviour and a clear sense of kingdom activity. On the other hand, the stoic nature of Dutch at the time also meant that a great number of CRC believers received a non-verbalized faith—they learned and memorized doctrines, but their parents rarely spoke intimately about their personal faith in Christ. The truth, it was believed, was sufficiently handed down through the modelling and catechesis, not the verbalizing, of faith. Something notable has happened in this transmission of practice particularly as it was brought to the new cultural context of Canada.

The first generation of Dutch Transformational immigrants were primarily “Kuyperians,” who were excited and motivated to see all areas of life informed by the Lordship of Christ.

³² Lieven Boeve, “Christus Postmodernus: An Attempt at Apophatic Christology” in *The Myriad Christ: Plurality and the Quest for Unity in Contemporary Christology*, eds. Terrence Merrigan and Jacques Haers (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2000), 580, Emphasis mine.

³³ Boeve, 581.

Books by Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck were placed alongside the Bible in many of the immigrant's homes, even those who were 'uneducated' farmers.³⁴

The generation that followed were Canadians "with funny accents" who had heard from their parents the importance of setting up parallel Transformational institutions to the ones well established in the Netherlands. This loyalty drove them to establish Christian schools in nearly every town where a church had formed, and also started other organizations like the *Christian Labour Association of Canada*, *Citizens for Public Justice*, as well as Christian colleges. These children of immigrants swam in the embodied truth of their parents, and for them, to a greater or lesser degree, being Christian Reformed meant that one was to support (through verbal assent, financial contribution, and even employment) these Transformational initiatives. Here the Kuyperian motivation was largely institutionalized.

The living tradition was passed to the next generation who had witnessed what was modelled and also learned the institutions that were valued by their grandparents and parents, but the non-verbalized personal faith meant that for many in our denomination, the *how-to* of kingdom activity was clear, but the *why* was missing. Over three generations, the urgency faded because the new generation no longer knew why these activities were important. They were left with obligations but lacking the teleological justifications for the work.

Subsequently, the value of this aspect of the living tradition was slowly lost and ignored by many. Children growing up in this Reformed immigrant ethos have heard that kingdom engagement is important and have a high value on incorporating one's faith into every aspect of life but are not quite sure why. This project in part, seeks to recapture the old reasons of why the praxis and theology of kingdom engagement is valuable, while recognizing the importance of

³⁴ Due to the impact of World War II and the needs on the family farms, many young men stopped schooling at Grade 6 to work with their fathers. Many young women stayed home at the same age to help the families out.

adapting and contextualizing the living tradition into a manner that is suitable to our cultural context.

A second aspect of the living tradition for the CRC is how we understand ourselves as a confessional denomination. The three confessions: *Belgic Confession*, *Heidelberg Catechism* and *The Canons of Dort* have historically-situated theological arguments passed on through Reformed denominations. Our tradition has often taken the static nature of the confessions and have applied them statically, with little regard to the changing context. There is a fine balance to strike here in this call to recontextualize the confessions. On the one hand, we believe that the *Forms of Unity* ought to guide how we live and describe the lens through which we understand Scripture. But on the other hand, the words ring hollow if we do not adequately consider the context which we are now living in. Boeve's warning rings true in our denomination:

If one does not succeed in recontextualizing, the tension disappears and only dated meaningless language remains, which in the end alienates because it is unable to refer to that which is revealed in that tension."³⁵

Many within the CRC today, including those in leadership, engage little with the Confessions, in large part, I would argue because they view them as documents with “dated, meaningless language.” Interestingly, while the support for the Reformed Confessions is waning, the ecumenical aspect of our Living Tradition, expressed in *The Apostles*, *Athanasian* and the *Nicene Creeds*, continue to hold significant support.

One of the points of contention within the CRC Confessions are the “us and them” themes, either between Reformed believers and other believers, or between believers and unbelievers. It is into this struggle to recontextualize the confessions that two new documents have been written. *Our World Belongs to God* is a contemporary testimony emerging out of the

³⁵ Lieven Boeve, *Christus Postmodernus*, 584.

CRC which has great appeal because it names and applies the living tradition to various aspects of our current context. The document offers compelling convictions but does so in a more generous and respectful posture towards differing viewpoints. *The Belhar Confession* emerged out of the *Uniting Christian Reformed Church of South Africa* which came to recognize that the Three Forms of Unity were insufficient in restraining the racism and division which were the building blocks of the South African Apartheid.³⁶ Adopted by the CRC as an ecumenical confession, this document continues to call the church to celebrate cultural diversity and to continue the long, patient work of unity and reconciliation.

What are we to do with the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession and the Canons of Dort? While some might be tempted to ignore them or to remove them altogether, in order to distance ourselves from a time in our history marked by division and discord, I would offer that we still need these elements to be properly contextualized today. Positively, this means that we continue to incorporate the gift of a faith that emphasizes God's sovereignty and his ongoing transformation of the cosmos he created. We have inherited the gift of a well-articulated faith that has been affirmed throughout the centuries and that also unites us with hundreds of other Reformed denominations globally. Recognizing the breadth of the Confessions' use is a reminder that even though each of the three documents emerged out of very specific historical situations, there is a truth that resonates across the globe.

Contextualizing elements of the confessions also means that we recognize with humility and lament how poorly our forebears spoke of (and also treated) others who are also part of the larger body of Christ. As the Holy Spirit continues to sanctify us as a denomination (always reforming), we have collectively finally come to recognize how wrong the previous behavior was

³⁶ I address this more fully in Chapter Three.

towards our sisters and brothers in Christ—specifically the defamatory comments towards “the Papists” as well as the “detestable Anabaptists.” In the same way that Israel needed to contend with the sins of their fathers, these ruins in our tradition must continue to serve as a reminder to never again follow the same divisive path against the unity of the church.

To ensure that our Reformed documents do not “fossilize,” the elements handed down to us need to be re-storied so that we have clear teaching on prayer, the life of faith, on the Trinity, and what motivates us in our daily living as grateful followers of Christ. If they are not re-storied, we run the risk of missing critical elements of what it means to be church.

In 2013, I attended the *Inhabit* conference in Seattle which was hosted by *The Parish Collective*, which emerged out of a group of CRC church planters. I had long admired their creativity and innovative ways of leading churches to live out their faith in their specific neighbourhoods across the Greater Seattle area, and looked forward to seeing what best practices I could incorporate in our own congregational context. There were many inspiring practices of bringing the Gospel into neighbourhoods, but I left the conference disappointed; there was little mention of singing, praying and reading the Bible together, and almost no mention of confessing together, celebrating communion together or marking out one’s faith with baptism.

It is certainly possible that some of these elements were part of some of the parish congregations’ rhythms, but in my conversations and questions with the various leaders, I heard very little in that regard. It made me wonder if these elements were set aside more for pragmatic reasons because they did not help with what the church planters wanted to accomplish. While I certainly do not insist that the practices mentioned above need to always be done in the same format (a risk of fossilizing our faith), something significant is lost when these elements are not part of the conversation about what we do and why we do it. I do celebrate variety and

experimentation, such as the creative work emerging out of Seattle-based CRC's *parish collective* and *inhabit conference*, but for the long-term sustainability of our living tradition, we need to continue to emphasize the core identity markers of the church, even in radically new settings.

V. Situating the CRC in the Broader Faith Community

A. Is the CRC an Evangelical Church or a Mainline Church?

This question was posed recently at an ecumenical event that we hosted at First CRC.³⁷ As often happens, the reactions from CRC attendees were varied. Some bristled at the caricatures of mainline churches where personal faith seems to be undervalued for the sake of social action. Others reacted to the 'guilty by association' nature of generalizations of many Evangelical Christians, particularly South of the Border, where the emphasis of a "Jesus and me" theology and a tendency to vote politically on one or two moral issues seem to be the primary marks of what Christians are to look like. Citing the most extreme examples from both groups has led to an uncomfortable polarity that is not easily resolved for a Christian Reformed believer.

CRC congregants typically would answer the question in a guarded way, suggesting that we have a foot in both camps because we deeply value personal faith, as well as a public kingdom expression of that faith. But no answer to this question seems to be adequate as it has the potential to convey a collective smugness towards our sisters and brothers from other Christian faith expressions. Additionally, Christian Reformed believers tend to compare themselves to other faith traditions by describing who we are not, rather than who we actually

³⁷ Vancouver Sun Religion writer Douglas Todd posed the question at an event where he was invited to speak on the dynamics of faith in Cascadia and our quickly changing cultural climate in Vancouver. First CRC of Vancouver, April 1, 2017.

are. To state it positively, Christian Reformed believers value both a transformative personal faith and a transformative public faith.

John Yoder and Richard Mouw have very helpfully moved the conversation forward between Anabaptists and Reformed ecclesial families. Yoder points out a great many incorrect generalizations Reformed believers have carried about the Anabaptist tradition,³⁸ stemming from a confessional posture exemplified in the Belgic Confession: “We detest the error of the Anabaptists and other seditious people.”³⁹ Most notably, he challenges how Reformed believers tend to emphasize the differences between traditions rather than what we share in common “by dramatizing and making central the points at which they differ,”⁴⁰ and second, how often the Anabaptists are grouped into a composite amalgam which does not adequately recognize the many variations between the various Anabaptist parties.⁴¹ In his helpful summary, Yoder notes finally that though Reformed and Anabaptist camps certainly went in different directions theologically, historically and sociologically, he notes that both theological innovations essentially come down to the degree of radicalization which emerged within the Protestant family.⁴²

Mouw affirms Yoder’s observation of the vigour in which Reformed believers have often dismissed the theological approaches of Anabaptists, naming that Christian Reformed Church leaders have and continue to struggle with such harsh words directed towards our Anabaptists sisters and brothers to the point where our Synod removed the words from the main body of the

³⁸ John Howard Yoder, “Reformed Versus Anabaptist Social Strategies: An Inadequate Typology,” in *TSF Bulletin*, (May-June 1985): 2-7.

³⁹ As cited in Yoder, 2.

⁴⁰ Yoder, 2.

⁴¹ Yoder, 3.

⁴² Yoder, 3.

CRC translation of the *Belgic Confession*.⁴³ The words of the confession and the persecution which followed are time-bound and capture one side of an intense debate, often in response to Anabaptist accusations that Reformed believers were, “thinly disguised papists”...or, given the parlance of the day, “tools of Satan himself.”⁴⁴ The salient point here is that these words directed towards the Anabaptists were set into CRC confessions, words designed to be remembered, which have continued to shape the preconceptions of subsequent generations of Reformed believers.

By way of explanation, Mouw observes that the vitriol Reformed believers have historically directed towards Anabaptists has also been expressed between Reformed believers themselves. For Mouw, recognizing the theological range between Reformed believers and noting how we have traditionally treated each other in this manner is a recognition of the familial connection Reformed and Anabaptist camps in fact *share* with each other: “something *like* the so-called ‘Reformed/Anabaptist tensions’ actually occur *within* the Reformed community.”⁴⁵ Mouw adds, “The Anabaptist position is not one that Calvinists denounce because it is so alien to their own views, but rather because it represents very real tendencies that they have within themselves.”⁴⁶ For instance, with the conviction of

God’s absolute sovereign control over the process of salvation...any teaching which seems to modify that assessment, by attributing, say, some sort of positive noetic or ethical or volitional ability to human beings, will need special explaining. And the fact is that Calvinists have regularly gone out of their way to provide such explanations.⁴⁷

In an effort to recognize the commonalities, Mouw notes the shared commitment between Reformed and Anabaptist communities towards transformation, noting the point of departure

⁴³ Richard Mouw, “Abandoning the Typology: A Reformed Assist,” in *TSF Bulletin*, (May-June 1985): 7-10. The offensive words are now footnoted and remain a reminder of a dark aspect of our tradition’s history.

⁴⁴ Mouw, *Abandoning the Typology*, 8.

⁴⁵ Mouw, *Abandoning the Typology*, 7-8.

⁴⁶ Mouw, *Abandoning the Typology*, 8.

⁴⁷ Mouw, *Abandoning the Typology*, 8.

rests on the *mode* of what that transformation entails.⁴⁸ Yoder and Mouw model a much-needed posture towards healing and deepening trust, rooted in the recognition of the two communities' commonalities:

The main dispute between the two positions is not a conflict between radically different types. It is a family argument between Christians who claim to take human depravity and the riches of the Gospel seriously—not only in relation to very personal belief and behavior, but to the full range of human, social, political and economic activities.⁴⁹

B. What's in a Name? Revisited

Popularized a decade ago, a new group of Calvinists have emerged in North America. They have been referred to as Neo-Calvinists, New Calvinists and Neo-Puritans. While there is certainly overlap in a particular commitment to God-glorifying preaching, they are distinct from the Kuyperian-Dutch-neo-Calvinist Transformationalism which I am engaging in this project. The reasons for the overlapping of terms between the two groups are described below, but for simplicity's sake, I will use the term New Calvinist to describe the newly emergent group of adherents and will continue to use the term Transformational to describe the stream with which I identify most.

New Calvinists are those who come from broader evangelicalism and to bring clarity to the disorientation brought about by postmodernity, have embraced the five points of Calvinism. "Young, Restless, and Reformed" is a common descriptor of this new Calvinist group and in the book by that name, Collin Hansen describes how a wide range of evangelicals across many denominations are incorporating Calvinism into their grid of beliefs. He points out by example

⁴⁸ Mouw, *Abandoning the Typology*, 9.

⁴⁹ Mouw, *Abandoning the Typology*, 10.

John Piper's writing: "You will find no explanation and no index entry for Calvinism in *Desiring God*. But it's all there, if you know what to look for."⁵⁰

Noting the impact of New Calvinism, *Time* magazine ran an article to note the widespread leadership of this movement, championed by *Gospel Coalition* founders John Piper, Mark Driscoll, and Albert Mohler.⁵¹ Hansen notes that part of the appeal of Calvinism to those in the wider Protestant tradition is the theological clarity in a confusing world: "A lot of young people grew up in a culture of brokenness, divorce, drugs or sexual temptation. They have plenty of friends: what they need is a God."⁵² And Mohler, a Southern Baptist notes, "The moment someone begins to define God's [being or actions] biblically, that person is drawn to conclusions that are traditionally classified as Calvinist."⁵³ New Calvinism takes God's sovereignty and applies it to relationships, worship and evangelism.

What is confusing, however, is the overlap of terms described above. David Van Beima of *The Gospel Coalition*, in the *Time* magazine article unhelpfully describes this group as Neo-Calvinists. The problem is, Transformational neo-Calvinists are not the same as Evangelical Neo-Calvinists because Evangelical Calvinism has adopted aspects of Calvinism, particularly Puritanism, into their existing theological frameworks but have left out other foundational elements such as being confessional. Coming to Calvinism from another theological stream has meant they have not been aware of the century-old established system of neo-Calvinism.

There are a few distinct differences. First, New Calvinism is known for the 'picking and choosing when convenient' approach which has 'cut and pasted' elements of Calvinist thought

⁵⁰ Collin Hansen, *Young, Restless, Reformed: A Journalist's Journey with the New Calvinists* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2008), 15.

⁵¹ David Van Biema, "10 Ideas Changing the World Right Now," *Time Magazine*, March 12, 2009 http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1884779_1884782_1884760,00.html (Accessed October 24, 2017).

⁵² Van Biema.

⁵³ Van Biema.

without the theological attention given to how incorporating the idea into another faith expression might be theologically inconsistent. While I fully celebrate any movement towards Catholicity (something I will argue for in Chapter Three), it is crucial that each expression within the wider church maintains its own coherence rather than fragmentation. However, a deeper concern lies in what is lost in borrowing the term Neo-Calvinism which extracts it from a tradition committed also to societal engagement and transformation for the sake of the kingdom. This is foundational to the thought of Groen van Prinsterer, Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck.

Responses from within the Transformational stream have included a suggestion from Ray Pennings that the Calvinist/Evangelical group be called Neo-Puritan.⁵⁴ James K.A. Smith has written *Letters to a Young Calvinist* to reach those within New Calvinism. In it, Smith seeks to draw attention to the Calvinism before Puritans like Jonathan Edwards. He draws in Calvin's Geneva,⁵⁵ and points even further back into church history by pointing to Augustine.⁵⁶ Smith reminds the New Calvinist of how central being confessional is,⁵⁷ notes how important stewarding creation is,⁵⁸ and also draws in what he describes as "Wide-Angle Calvinism" seeking the redemption of the world "far as the curse is found."⁵⁹ It is this 'wide-angle, transformational Calvinism that I will attend to from this point forward.

⁵⁴ Ray Pennings, "Can We Hope for a Neo-Calvinist-Neo-Puritan Dialogue? Forging a Public Theology Relevant for Our Times" in *Comment Magazine*, Winter 2008, <https://www.cardus.ca/comment/article/1559/can-we-hope-for-a-neocalvinist-neopuritan-dialogue/> (Accessed October 23, 2017).

⁵⁵ James K. A. Smith, *Letters to a Young Calvinist: An Invitation to the Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2010), 31–37.

⁵⁶ Smith, *Letters to a Young Calvinist*, 38–41.

⁵⁷ Smith, *Letters to a Young Calvinist*, 49–64.

⁵⁸ Smith, *Letters to a Young Calvinist*, 117–24.

⁵⁹ Smith, *Letters to a Young Calvinist*, 96–111.

C. Noting Three Phases Within Transformational Calvinism

In this project, I did not prepare a separate Literature Review. This overview is instead included throughout the project, particularly in Chapter 3, *Attending to and Reappropriating our History* where I draw on significant voices within our tradition. I note phases of Transformationalists: the first phase was marked by a reimaged expression of the Continental Calvinism in order that it could engage a post-Enlightenment modernism where atheism was permeating Dutch society. The second phase was a translation into the North American, most notably Canadian, modern context, while the third phase is a reworking of this hermeneutical kingdom approach into the postmodern context.

Phase 1:

In response to the impact of modernism on the churches in the Netherlands, Groen van Prinsterer was the first innovator who fleshed out John Calvin's theology of societal responsibility and engagement and translated it to his context. It was Pastor and Statesmen Abraham Kuyper who became the dominant force in spreading these innovations to every sphere of Dutch society. Of this first wave of innovating Calvinists however, I draw mostly on Kuyper's contemporary Herman Bavinck whose focus was to theologially systematize what Kuyper made popular. He was not a mere mouthpiece for Kuyper however as he ushered in his own unique ideas—most notable to me is Bavinck's relational understanding of the image of God. Bavinck's theological arguments were balanced and his generous and gentle posture translates into our current context much more easily than Kuyper's aggressive, 'bulldog' approach evident in his writings and his life.⁶⁰ Kuyper's forceful approach was more effective in

⁶⁰ James D. Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper: Modern Calvinist, Christian Democrat* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2013), preface.

an age of territorialism between various branches of Christ's church, but for the sake of unity, the post-Christendom context calls for a kinder approach.

Phase 2:

The second wave of Transformationalists I engage with are the Dutch-North-American immigrants—particularly Canadians—who carried a passionate vision to a new land seeking to replicate what had been already well-established in the Netherlands. Each group of immigrants spread from Coast to Coast, raced to start churches, and Christian Schools to disciple children, with a large kingdom vision for life and faith. Dominant voices in this wave came out of a voluntary Transformationalist undergraduate group at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, called the *Groen Club* and led by Dr. Evan Runner.

Runner inspired activists, again, mostly Dutch-Canadians, who complimented grassroots movements across Canada which soon established institutions mirrored after the Dutch innovative Calvinist model. There were Canadianized equivalents of Christian Schools, Christian higher education institutions (which resulted in *The King's University* in Edmonton, *Redeemer University* in Hamilton, and the *Institute of Christian Studies* to carry on the focus of the *Free University of Amsterdam*), newspapers seeking to be the Canadian version of periodicals that had formed the faith of the immigrants' parents, and various organizations such as *Christian Labour Association of Canada* seeking fair labour rights, and *Citizens for Public Justice*.

Of the significant philosophical and theological voices spurred on in this wave, I lean most heavily on the writing of Al Wolters who published a cultural engagement framework called *Creation Regained*. I also refer to John Bolt and James Bratt who seek to translate and communicate the Transformational framework with little change, and Nicholas Wolterstorff who

is nearly a lone voice in shifting the motive for cultural engagement from the doctrine of creation to a teleologically eschatological one framed with a vision of Shalom. I will address this question at the end of Chapter Three where I describe Wolterstorff's positive vision of shalom which gives greater attention to connecting our work to our eschatological future. Currently, the staying power of the phase of the list of authors in this paragraph exists in predominantly in academia.

Phase 3:

There is a new wave of Transformationalists who have been leading the way into our post-Christendom reality. As one of the primary authors of *Our World Belongs to God: A Contemporary Testimony* held by the Christian Reformed Church, Richard Mouw has long been held as an example of thoughtful engagement in a quickly changing culture by modeling a positive posture to the wider Church in the North American context. His call for a Kuyperian *aggiornamanto* is in part what has prompted this project.⁶¹ Mouw has mentored theological practitioner Matthew Kaemingk who thoughtfully connects the Transformational vision to the workplace and the arts and has also applied the framework to reframe the question of Muslim Immigration in this American Context. James K.A. Smith has been the most vocal and productive voice whose writing is operating like a compass in the disorienting cultural context through his books *How (Not) to be Secular*, *Who's Afraid of Relativism*, and his vital Cultural Liturgies works *Desiring the Kingdom*, *Imagining the Kingdom*, and *Awaiting the King*. Alongside these voices, I also draw on Pastor Tim Keller, a voice among New Calvinists who has incorporated and innovated many Transformationalist convictions to work in this post-Truth world.

⁶¹ Richard J. Mouw, *Abraham Kuyper: A Short and Personal Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2011), 75.

D. Distinctive Emphases Within Transformational Calvinism:

Throughout this project, I will draw on various Transformational emphases. I will provide these themes here in order to help the reader recognize the lens from which I am writing. Throughout this project, and particularly in Chapter Three, I will interact with some of these themes specifically and offer a renewed re-appropriated vision which I hope will animate the church's task. Here are the ten most common interrelated themes:

1. Creation, Fall, Redemption: God has revealed himself in Scripture first as the Creator and Sustainer of life. In speaking with anyone from our stream, one will likely notice them going to great lengths to ensure that the whole story of Scripture is told because if, for example, one's starting point of the Gospel message is that we have fallen and are in need of rescue, the message presented is incomplete as it does not communicate the scope of our human experience, it does not recognize the fullness of God's sustaining presence over creation, and it does not recognize that Christ's redemption will reach every aspect of life that was impacted by the Fall, including God's creation. The Word of God, therefore, has authority over every aspect of human life, society and culture.

2. Worldview: Embedded in the affirmation of the "Creation, Fall, Redemption" arch is the importance of having a clear and compelling worldview. Worldview frames how we interpret our human experience, how we understand what is going on, and what we believe will happen in the future. An effective worldview will give equal attention to embodying the story it affirms and is rooted in an understanding of Scripture where God's word is more than revealing truth. Van Til wrote: "For Luther the Bible was indeed the source of saving truth, but for Calvin Scripture was

the norm for the whole existence.”⁶² Richard Mouw offers a helpful corrective term *worldviewing* as a way to acknowledge the multiple perspectives people can have.

3. *Cultural Mandate*: In the Garden of Eden, God gives a mandate for humans to *avod* and *shamar*. Though these words have been interpreted as the right to overrule creation, the intended meaning points to a very different posture—to serve and protect.⁶³ In other words, the individual and collective call of humanity is to tend and keep the world which has been entrusted to them. This is the creation mandate which calls God’s followers not only for their own life and faith, and not even to the people in their community, but to the whole of the world around them. This responsibility rests on the shoulders of God’s people and Transformationalists would hold this alongside the Great Commission as the twin tasks of the church under the Lordship of Christ—in whatever areas we have influence, to steward the world as God’s representatives, and to witness to his redemption through Gospel proclamation. Even when the church is in crisis, a pietistic withdrawal such as the *Benedict Option* which argues that in order for us to be faithful as God’s people, we need to isolate ourselves from the corrupt world in the surrounding culture.⁶⁴ Transformational Christians would argue this approach to pursue moral faithfulness denies the call to be faithful in the cultural calling as well. A better way forward is to understand that we’ve been given the mandate from the “great Architect...[we become] co-workers with God in bringing creation into its fulfillment.”⁶⁵ As Mouw writes, “This cultural mandate is an expression

⁶² Henry R. Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2001), 20.

⁶³ For a thorough application for this definition, see Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001).

⁶⁴ See Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation*. Penguin, 2017.

⁶⁵ Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture*, 34.

of God's own investment in cultural formation, and it had in no way been canceled by the introduction of sin into the creation."⁶⁶

4. Sphere Sovereignty: God's Law is revealed in his creation ordinance where each aspect of life has an internal coherence to it, a specific responsibility to its jurisdiction, and limits to prevent it from encroaching on other spheres of life. Mouw writes, "God has programmed the creation to display a marvellously complex diversity, including a complex array of spheres of human interaction."⁶⁷ Bavinck illustrates this concept with the sphere of the State:

Family, church, culture, all the various spheres of rich human living do not owe their origin and existence to the state—they possess a "sphere sovereignty"—but they do nonetheless owe to the state the possibility of their development. The state secures the full unfolding of human personality. The state, however, is not the highest good but finds its purpose and goal in the Kingdom of heaven. Anyone who misunderstands this will eventually end up denying the church her noblest calling and instead value the state itself, viewed as the creator of culture and caretaker of freedom and equality, as the initial realization of the Kingdom of God.⁶⁸

5. Structure and Direction: Embedded within each God-ordained sphere of life is the God-given freedom to be aligned to God's ordained will or to resist it. Due to the effect of the Fall, there is in each sphere now a tendency to resist and work against the God-ordained plan, despite the fact that we were created to glorify God in and through each of these areas. The follower of Christ recognizes that no sphere of life, such as politics for instance, can be dismissed as wholly evil because of its God-given potential to glorify him. This concept of Structure and Direction therefore, challenges the concept of dualism which has been prevalent in many expressions in

⁶⁶ Richard J. Mouw, *The Challenges of Cultural Discipleship: Essays in the Line of Abraham Kuyper* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 41.

⁶⁷ Mouw, *Challenges of Cultural Discipleship*, 23.

⁶⁸ Herman Bavinck, "The Kingdom of God, The Highest Good," Trans. Klaas Kloostermann, *The Bavinck Review*, vol. 2, 2011 <https://www.scribd.com/document/158971596/Herman-Bavinck-The-Kingdom-of-God-The-Highest-Good> (Accessed October 11, 2017), 159.

North America and in North American Missions.⁶⁹ Because God created everything as good, sin has permeated every aspect of creation, and Christ's redemption will reach every place "far as the curse is found," we do not find ourselves working in contexts that are wholly good or wholly evil, and we need therefore Spirit-led discernment in order to be faithful.

6. *Common Grace*: Embedded in the call to engage in the social and cultural structures is the concept of Common Grace. Here a distinction is made between God's salvific grace and his common grace. Salvific grace is where Christ's redemption draws people into experience the transformative life with the Triune God. Common grace recognizes that even individuals who are outside of Christ's redemptive work, and even those who directly oppose it, still receive a grace from God through his sustaining of the world, through his endowing them with gifts of mind, creativity and passion in order to enhance God's purposes over his world. Because of Common Grace, Transformationalists are not threatened by working alongside those who carry a different faith. There are some voices from within Reformed circles including Lewis Smedes, who argue that the distinction between common and salvific grace is unnecessary and unhelpful and "designed to make the doctrine of reprobation a mite less horrible than it is. If we stop insulting God by ascribing such a dark doctrine to him, we will have no need of any 'common grace.'"⁷⁰ This discussion is beyond the scope of this project and the majority of the authors I quote follow the majority view held by Transformational Christians.

7. *Antithesis*: The Fall ushered in sin which has impacted every aspect of life—from the personal to the cosmic. The result is the battle between good and evil that is at work in each of our own hearts, but permeates cultural and social structures and also is expressed in distortions within

⁶⁹ See chapter 1 in Jan H. Boer, *Nigeria's Decades of Blood 1980-2002: Studies in Christian-Muslim Relations* (Belleville, Ont.: Essence Publishing, 2003).

⁷⁰ Lewis Smedes, *My God and I: A Spiritual Memoir* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 118.

God's creation. The task of follower of God is to discern how we are each being impacted by the antithesis and also to read culture in the same light. Antithesis ensures that the Common Grace we affirm is not lax and accommodating—in fact, there is as Jonathan Chaplin argues, “a powerful aversion to accommodation.”⁷¹ The antithesis, in Kuyper's view, is a reminder of the on-going battle going on in the spiritual realm between the Spirit of God and the spirit of darkness which cuts through every aspect of creation.⁷² Grace ensures that the force of evil does not take over. This gives the believer confidence that the original God-endowed value of the cosmos continues, and therefore the Christian does not simply divide life into that which is ‘sacred’ being in the church and that which is ‘secular’ outside of the church.

8. Rejection of Dualism:

Kuyper recognized that modernism began shrinking worshippers awareness of the sacred to be limited to the church, and therefore his concern was that the sacred world would not be constrained to the ecclesial realm, but would still be seen to reach every aspect of creation. That which is holy, therefore, is not constrained to the ecclesial world, but continues to permeate the whole of creation. All of life emerged out of God's very good creative action and therefore the Gospel's light ought to shine in every part. A danger of dualism is that it leads Christians to be escapist and neglect their God-given creation mandate because faith ought to reach and give shape to every aspect of our lives. Bavinck writes,

Formerly, people placed earthly and heavenly goods alongside each other and

⁷¹ See Jonathan Chaplin, “Suspended Communities or Covenanted Communities” in *Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition: Creation, Covenant, and Participation*, eds. James K. A. Smith and James H. Olthuis (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 174.

⁷² Dylan Pahman, “F.W.J Schilling: A Philosophical Influence on Kuyper's Social Thought,” in *The Kuyper Center Review, Vol. Five: Church and Academy*, ed. Gordon Graham (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 35. Here the concept of antithesis between the natural and spiritual realm is influenced by Hegel and von Hartmann, though Kuyper did not embrace Hegel's triad of thesis-synthesis-antithesis. See *Lectures in Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1931), 147-149.

failed adequately to plumb the depths of their interrelationship, which is one of the most difficult problems that exists. People usually hesitated to include earthly goods in the realm of the moral, thereby running the risk of viewing the moral good only spiritualistically.⁷³

9. *Pluralism*: The concept of pluralism is not unique to the Transformationalist approach, however there is a longstanding legacy of having a unique and positive view of pluralism, or multiformity,⁷⁴ which translates well in our postmodern, post-Christendom context. Abraham Kuyper argued that Christians in society ought not to look for privilege, but parity alongside other options in society⁷⁵ as each representative group:

could assert their claims in public affairs without apology, but also without aiming to take over the whole and subordinate the rest...[where] religious pluralism had to be respected, but the individualization and privatization of faith had to be avoided...Let a dozen flowers bloom...let their relative beauty compete for attention, and let the Lord at the last day take care of the tares sown among the wheat.”⁷⁶

10. *Christ's Lordship over all Creation*: Drawing on passages such as Colossians 1 and Ephesians 1, the scope of Christ's redemption reaches every aspect of the cosmos. Christ establishing the Kingdom of God was a reclaiming of God's authority which was rejected in the Fall. As Abraham Kuyper famously said, “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of human existence over which Christ does not cry, ‘Mine!’”⁷⁷

⁷³ Bavinck, *The Kingdom of God, The Highest Good*, 134.

⁷⁴ Richard J. Mouw, *The Challenges of Cultural Discipleship*, 11.

⁷⁵ Jonathan Chaplin, “The Full Weight of Our Convictions: The Point of Kuyperian Pluralism,” *Comment Magazine*, November 1, 2013. <https://www.cardus.ca/comment/article/4069/the-point-of-kuyperian-pluralism/> (Accessed October 14, 2017).

⁷⁶ Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper: Modern Calvinist, Christian Democrat*, xvi-xvii.

⁷⁷ Abraham Kuyper, “Sphere Sovereignty” in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James Bratt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 488. In “Many Sons had Father Abraham,” Daniel Meeter takes issue with Kuyper's popular phrase because Jesus never did actually say, “Mine”—if anything he said it was the Father's, or it is ours. In *Perspectives: A Journal of Reformed Thought*, January 10, 2015. <https://perspectivesjournal.org/blog/2015/01/10/many-sons-had-father-abraham/> accessed on October 22, 2017.

VI. Situating First CRC of Vancouver Denominationally and Locally: A Living Tradition, Locally Expressed

A. The Christian Reformed Church of North America (CRCNA) as a Denomination Today

For six of the past eleven years of pastoring at First CRC Vancouver, I served on the Board of Trustees for the CRCNA.⁷⁸ In this time, the thirty members of the board were inundated with reports and metrics and they were consistently describing the same reality year over year: the median age of our denomination is getting older too quickly because we do not have enough young children and many of our young people are walking away from church. The cost of ministry continues to increase, but the level of giving is beginning to diminish as many of the foundational, generous tithers are dying. The format of discipleship which seemed to be effective one generation previous, now seems to ring like an empty gong. Our denominational publishing agency, *Faith Alive*, once on the front lines of children’s Sunday School materials, dissolved. If this sounds depressing and alarming, it is. To navigate these changing realities, primary attention was given to structures—“the agencies are doing ministry in silos and it’s time we get them working together”, “we need better metrics to identify the precise areas of concern”, “we need to adopt a more creative marketing campaign to increase the engagement and giving for our ministry shares...what we need is a Board that is more representative of our denomination.”⁷⁹

Many of the decisions focused on technical and structural changes and not on the radical call for reordering from consultants Craig Van Gelder and Alan Roxburgh.⁸⁰ But some positive fruit came out of this structural approach. Ministries did begin to work together to the point

⁷⁸ I served on the CRCNA Board of Trustees from 2009-2015.

⁷⁹ The most thorough aspect of this evaluation was *SPACT: Strategic Planning and Cultural Taskforce* from 2011-2014.

⁸⁰ In a recent conversation with Alan Roxburgh on October 23, 2017 in Vancouver, he expressed frustration and exasperation that the consultant’s calls for cultural change were addressed through a primarily technical and structural approach.

where *CRC World Missions* and *CRC Home Missions* have now become *Resonate Global Mission* to address inefficiencies and to capitalize on the synergy between those on the front lines of the mission field, both here and abroad. We also started a *Faith Formation* agency which, it was assumed, had previously fit under our publishing arm. We raised the profile of the ‘prophets’ of our denomination including binational ministries *Office of Social Justice, Safe Church, Office of Race Relations*, and on the Canadian side, *Centre for Public Dialogue* in Ottawa and *Aboriginal Ministries*.

Yet technical decisions addressing cultural challenges can only be so effective. Despite all the hiring of new directors for each of these agencies, now led by leaders with a common vision, the Board recognized that this was only tinkering unless the Holy Spirit brought about transformation at the grassroots level. On one level, much of our function as a Board sought to faithfully discern and maintain the continuity from the Boards before us. But on a deeper, more fundamental level, the snapshot gave us the realization that we were in a significantly different context than our denomination had previously known.

My purpose has been to describe the reality that our denomination faces today. On the congregational level, structural decisions to hire a youth pastor to prevent the church from “losing their youth.” On the classical level, we are refining our covenant commitments to shared ministries as we evaluate the threshold for ministry shares before we ask too much. On the synodical level, while affirming the vast majority of Board of Trustee decisions, Synod also has made some significant theological decisions including now inviting children to the Lord’s Supper—a privilege previously extended only to those who had first made profession of faith.

Sociologist Peter Berger’s observation of two parallel movements present in the wider church shed some light on how the CRC is seeking to find its voice in today’s context. This age

of pluralism, Berger writes, “has engendered not only the ‘age of ecumenicity’ but also, apparently in contradiction to it, the ‘age of the rediscovery of confessional heritages.’”⁸¹ This rediscovery of confessional heritages is, he argues, a form of “the rationalization of competition...brought about by the need for marginal differentiation in an overall situation of standardization.”⁸²

Whether or not Berger is correct in his assessment of competition, he points out the importance of making ‘just enough’ adjustments to try to keep one’s head above water. Approaching challenges through technical improvements has often been the preferred approach, even though some of the emerging challenges call for substantive and systemic change. This strategy may be temporarily effective in resisting standardization, but it is likely beholden to ecclesiastical consumerism. Berger writes:

It may also happen (probably more frequently) that the differentiation is one of ‘packaging’ only—inside the package there may still be the same old standard product. In either case, it is likely that marginal differentiation will go only as far as is necessitated by the dynamics of consumer demand in any particular market. This will vary, then, not so much in accordance with specific confessional traditions but rather with the variations of consumer ‘needs’ in terms of general social stratification.⁸³

B. Description of First CRC of Vancouver

These larger challenges situate the CRC community in the current social and theological complexities of today. But on a smaller scale, they also have a direct impact on those in our own specific congregation. To understand how we specifically will respond to these broader challenges it is important to begin by being aware of who we are as a community.

⁸¹ Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Doubleday, 1967), 149.

⁸² Berger, 149.

⁸³ Berger, 149.

First CRC is a 90 year old, 120 member congregation. It is majority Caucasian, though it celebrates the diversity it does have and is very intergenerational with near equal populations of children (0-10), young adults (25-45), and more established members (55+). The structured service is fairly traditional, although both women and men of various ages lead and preach. It is evident from Sunday to Sunday that the most engaged and committed leaders are our young adults and middle-aged members.

In his book *The Missional Church in Context*, Van Gelder describes various categories of churches including *Ethnic-Village Congregations* where the church serves as an “organizational link for numerous congregations transplanted from European countries that shared a common church tradition and ethnic identity.”⁸⁴ This is an accurate description of how First CRC of Vancouver was established and what has been the defining characteristic of most of our congregation’s history.

Our congregational roots have been primarily shaped by Dutch immigrants to Canada. Similar to most other Christian Reformed Churches across Canada, the worshipping community was formed by three Reformed denominations in the Netherlands: the Dutch Reformed Church (which as the State church overlapped faith and public life): the more conservative *Afscheiding* secession of 1834 led by Hendrik de Cock (which emphasized piety over cultural engagement): and the *Doleante* church led by Abraham Kuyper in 1886 (who innovated a new way to incorporate faith in kingdom work).⁸⁵ First CRC of Vancouver is an amalgam of these three traditions, but first among equals is the Transformational vision which propelled former

⁸⁴ Van Gelder, *The Missional Church in Context*, 64.

⁸⁵ In 1944, a subsequent split took place in the Netherlands and places of Dutch immigration where Rev. Klaas Schilder led what became Reformed Churches (Liberated) over the widely accepted issue of Kuyper’s Presumptive Regeneration. This has shaped the Canadian Reformed Church and the Protestant Reformed Church in Canada.

congregants to be instrumental in establishing *Vancouver Christian School*,⁸⁶ *Federation of Independent Schools* across BC, a Canada-wide union alternative *Christian Labour Association of Canada*, and indirectly a variety of other Kingdom-based institutions reflective of Abraham Kuyper's conviction that "there is not one square in the whole of creation which Christ does not cry, 'Mine!'"⁸⁷

C. Description of First CRC's Local Context

Our current congregational and cultural context has made this Kingdom impulse much more muted. In some respects, entropy has replaced the initial fervour of motivated immigrants, which coupled with the greater diversity of non-Dutch congregants, has meant that loyalty and duty to these Reformational institutions wane. The shift, however, works on a more seismic level—today's Postmodern context is suspicious of institutions which have been the *modus operandi* for Transformationalists, the tightly interconnected immigrant communities have shifted to more broad-based Christian networks in the city, and a post-Christendom world no longer recognizes faith as relevant to one's daily living.

Yet in the midst of these massive challenges there still remains a compelling kingdom vision among the congregants of First CRC, a vision which resists a sacred/secular compartmentalized faith and which propels many to recognize their jobs as vocations, as calling to participate in God's kingdom work under the Lordship of Christ. This vision also continues to shape our shared ministry as we continue to operate (i) Community Night Dinners to respond to poverty and food security issues, to model sustainable food consumption, and to reach out to those who experience loneliness in Vancouver, (ii) the *Garden of Eatin'* Community Garden which promotes stewardship of God's creation as we tend the plants and deepen relationships

⁸⁶ Initially called *Calvin Christian School*.

⁸⁷ Kuyper, *Sphere Sovereignty*, 488.

with our neighbours, and most recently, (iii) championing a partnership ministry to government-assisted and refugee claimants with a position *Chaplain and Refugee Support Mobilizing*, which publicly aligns our congregation with Christ's call to welcome the stranger within our gates through welcome baskets, shared meals, English conversation groups and Arts Nights.

D. Goal—Not Reiteration, but Re-appropriation

Despite the significant difference between our present context and that in which van Prinsterer, Kuyper and Bavinck first fleshed out the Transformational priorities, I continue to hold fast to their fundamental assumption, “*semper reformandi, semper reformanda,*” or reformed and always reforming. In our cultural context this means that there needs to be some necessary adjustments and shifts in what we emphasize. Just as the first transformationalists innovated Calvinism for their cultural context in order for the tradition to be heard and bear witness in a compelling manner, so the adjustments are offered here with the same intentions and goals.

Some of the adjustments I will recommend are theological—particularly in how the call for kingdom witness and mission relates to the doctrine of election. Here I draw on the insight of Michael Goheen, as well as voices from the wider church. Regarding the need for a shift of emphasis on the doctrine of election, I will lean on Reformed, but not Transformational voices, to draw this often-ignored doctrine into a kingdom and mission teleology. In recognition of the wider church, I also acknowledge the significant contributions from the wider church on philosophical, theological and practical matters. Undergirding all of these re-appropriations is the conviction that the transformationalist framework is comprehensive enough to adequately navigate these disorienting cultural shifts.

VII. Research Methodology

In May and June 2017, I conducted my Congregational Engagement research. I wanted to determine to what degree our congregation shared a common conviction for who we are both as a unique part of the body of Christ and in our understanding of what that means for us as God's people being sent as witnesses to God's kingdom work. My goal in doing this was to specifically identify the degree to which the congregation of First CRC of Vancouver understands the importance of shared faith formation, as well as a shared kingdom witness hermeneutic. While I did not ask this directly, I wanted to see how clearly the Transformational kingdom impulse continues, despite our significant membership turnover, and whether a call to participate in kingdom mission is understood differently depending on the length of membership within our congregation.

More specifically, this project aimed at exploring and answering the question of how integrated our congregation's ministries are in the *telos* of First CRC and whether people can articulate the intention and purpose of why we do what we do. In order to do this, I sought to ask questions in various ways: (1) To understand how our ministries are viewed I asked if people saw them merely as busy activities for our church members, or if they flowed out of our shared purpose as a congregation, (2) To understand how well our gathered congregational practices of worship and discipleship connect to these activities I asked how integrated this same kingdom impulse was in each congregant's everyday life at home, in their places or work, in their neighbourhoods and other activities.

I surveyed congregants primarily through our small groups, providing each group with a questionnaire designed to evaluate the level of theological and teleological integration within the context of a ten-week series articulating a congregational hermeneutic of an encompassing kingdom witness. I sought the input from those who viewed themselves as a part of First CRC.

Although I anticipated a range of adherence within the respondent groups, the majority of the participants were members of our congregation.

Although each person in our congregation was invited to participate in this study, and the primary mode of participation was through existing small groups, I also hosted a luncheon after a regular Sunday morning service. During this time we divided people into three temporary groups. I also adapted my questionnaire for our Sunday School-aged children aged 7-11.

As pastor within this congregation, my role as researcher could not be as a neutral observer. Rather, I am an invested member who wants to see if these steps of research can reveal how this shared journey over the past ten years of discerning God's call to join in kingdom witness. It is my hope that where we share theological and teleological clarity, we will be able to affirm and deepen our commitment to forge ahead. Similarly, where there are places of disconnect and incongruence, our leadership will be able to evaluate and make necessary adjustments to our shared practices as necessary.

Even further, in this process I have come to learn the importance of my own experience and long-standing questions to this research. Reflecting on my own family journey and the rich discernment that has been part of countless conversations plays a role. Alongside this, I recognize that I share our congregation's existential question: as a congregation who deeply cares about what has been stewarded to us, and in light of the overwhelming changes to our world, does our congregation really matter in the expansive kingdom work in Vancouver? Does the soil we have been grown in make a difference in the context of our lives and our shared context as a congregation? If yes, then how? If we truly believe in *reformed and always reforming*, where and how does our tradition speak in this place?

A risk in this type of research is that my path of inquiry leads me to serve the tradition in an unhealthy way, rather than recognizing the uniqueness of our tradition in God's kingdom and for the purpose of his glory. The goal undergirding this research is not the preservation of our congregation, but to be a community of faith in service to Christ's church and this world he loves, and to do this work for his glory.

A. Methodology

My primary approach in this study was by means of a focused group study. I prepared a five question Engagement Activity, where each question included two or three sub-questions. The areas explored in the equations touch on the nature of the church as a gathered and sent entity, how the church is seen to equip our members, our personal calling as part of God's mission, and our shared calling as part of God's mission.⁸⁸

Depending on the level of engagement from each group, the time commitment from each group was intended to be completed in one meeting, ranging from 30-60 minutes. As previously stated, I also formed one-time opt-in groups after a particular Sunday worship service for those, primarily seniors, who are not currently in small groups. I also worked with our Children's Ministries Director to adapt the questions in order that an age-appropriate and age-specific responses which were offered for our older Sunday Class of seven to eleven year olds. Each form asked the number of respondents and the number of years each had been part of First CRC. I did this to determine who the primary carriers of this kingdom vision are and how well we are collectively adapting to our new cultural context.

⁸⁸ See Appendix 1. On March 9, 2017 First CRC's council approved the concept of this congregational engagement. Based on their feedback, there is a possibility that the questionnaire will be shortened to more easily facilitate small group discussion and engagement.

Various research approaches were considered in this study. I decided to not use a quantitative evaluation of a survey because of recently conducted surveys in the past two years—one sought to measure approaches during understanding towards leadership, and the other was a congregational ministry volunteer audit. Additionally, we have also recently solicited qualitative input from key leaders in each of our ministry areas which was informative for our church Council to measure how well we are attending to our relationship with God, with each other, with our neighbours and with our resources. The questionnaire for this project is an extension of those previous modes of research. Because I am seeking qualitative input, I decided not to use closed scalable Likert-style continuums but instead opted for a more open-ended format.

My motivation in this research project is to understand subjective responses of our congregants. Because I am not a neutral observer, the ethnographic paradigm of describing the behaviour of a group from a neutral vantage point will not be possible. Rather, I will approach this study through a proactive research paradigm in that I will not simply describe what is happening in the congregation, but will stand as one who is directly involved in this experience.⁸⁹ Beyond the questionnaire, when presenting my research project in its final form, I also intend to make use of Found Documents which may include, but not be limited to what art is hanging around the church, the contents of our kitchen fridge and the weekly schedule which will determine if our Sanctuary or our Annex Hall are used more frequently.

B. Background

I am aware that my research will have its limits. An inherent challenge for me was to decide whether to provide a working definition of kingdom witness, or let each group use their

⁸⁹ William Myers, *Research in Ministry: A Primer for the Doctor of Ministry Program*, Studies in Ministry and Parish Life, (Chicago: Exploration Press, 1993), 28.

own working definitions of mission and kingdom witness. Although the advantage to the former might have produced for more consistent data, I opted for the latter because I felt it would better help me as the researcher determine how consistent the understanding of kingdom witness is. Given that the questionnaire took place during a sermon series entitled *Called as Witnesses*,⁹⁰ some level of a working definition was provided.

Because I explored the *telos* of Sunday mornings as being a place where God is glorified and where worshippers are sent to glorify God in their daily living, I anticipated that I would encounter varying expectations people have for why they come to worship. Alongside these externalized expectations for what worship ought to accomplish and what it should focus on, there is also the range of internal motivations when it comes to worship: Some come on a Sunday to get away from pressures of life, while others long to name each of those pressures through the lens of faith. To the degree that these convictions are held closely for each person, I anticipated that the answers would vary accordingly.

My research is also limited because the process itself is built upon voluntary participation. Even more, small groups themselves are compiled through voluntary participation. It may be, therefore, that some individuals who are not interested in joining a small group might be equally uninterested in answering questions of living out one's faith from Monday to Saturday. Additionally, it may also be true that groups who already share a compelling kingdom witness might speak to these questions, while others who are less interested might simply opt out of the study.

Finally, I recognize that there are cultural and interpersonal dynamics at play which influence and inform my research. Some respondents will carry with them the examples of

⁹⁰ Appendix 2.

parents and grandparents who laboured to make the Transformational Kuyperian vision a reality in their own contexts. Some respondents may perceive these old ideas as tired and ineffective. Others will be coming from other Christian traditions and non-Christian contexts where the context of faith impacting every area of life will be seen as novel, compelling or curious. Finally, some attentive visual minorities may bear the residue of how a Kuyperian triumphalism under the Lordship of Christ, or another form of Christendom-based control, have caused them hurt and mistrust.

Those who would benefit from this research will primarily be the congregation of First CRC, specifically those who are joining our worshipping community, our leadership of elders, deacons and staff, as well as each congregant as they will be invited to consider how their faith and our shared congregational practices inform their daily living in every area of life. That said, because this research is rooted within the context of specific teleological adjustments within the Reformed Transformational stream, I believe this research also carries some potential benefit for other congregations within our denomination. There are a great many “First CRCs” across North America—particularly in Canada—who at some level wrestle with how the Transformational kingdom impulse might influence their congregations and communities in this changing world. This perhaps is most applicable to other urban contexts whose members carry an acute awareness how a postmodern, post-Christendom reality is changing their experience and expectations of daily living out their faith. By extension, the realities felt acutely in the urban context also radiate out to suburban and rural contexts and some of the content in this project might also describe their experience as well.

Beyond the other “First CRCs” across Canada who might share a similar question on relevancy and seeking to bridge our common tradition to their contexts, there are also other

pastors and congregations from highly-bounded confessional faith traditions within the Church who also draw on the deep, theological history and also ask the question of transferability of their traditions in their own contexts. I hope that this project might be a beneficial tool in encouraging them in this process.

CHAPTER 2:

ATTENDING TO OUR SOCIETAL AND LOCAL CULTURAL CONTEXTS

In former times there were many things that reminded people of the sanctities of life, which of themselves provoked thought of higher interests and called eternity to mind.

All this is different now.

In common life there is almost nothing that helps to retain the memory in the soul of the high, the holy and the eternal. In public life, every reflection of heaven is extinguished. No more days of fasting and prayer are appointed. No one may speak any more of God. No 'memento mori' now reminds you of your death. Cemeteries are turned into parks. Sacred things are held up to ridicule. In conversation and in writing the dominant note is that heaven reaches no farther than the stars that death ends all, and that life without God thrives as well, if not better, than life in the fear of the Lord.

Abraham Kuyper⁹¹

I. Incarnation and Importance of Contextual Ministry

*The Word became flesh and blood,
and moved into the neighborhood.
We saw the glory with our own eyes,
the one-of-a-kind glory,
like Father, like Son,
Generous inside and out,
true from start to finish.
John 1:14, The Message*

As we attend to the specificity of context, we begin with the Incarnation. In God becoming a human, not only are we drawn into the mystery of God loving his creation enough by joining it to rescue it from within but we remember that he took on humanity fraught with all the associated risks. We are also confronted with the profound truth of the *particularity* of the Incarnation. In the scope of God's plan with salvation, Philippians 2 describes the sacrifice of

⁹¹ Abraham Kuyper, *To Be Near Unto God* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2005), 25.

Jesus taking on the limits of our humanity, but he was born a male, into the Jewish people, of Palestine, in 1st Century A.D., during the Roman occupation.

Each of these details have significance on their own, and as a composite they reveal to those who follow in Jesus' footsteps, that particularity is at the heart of the Gospel. That is, in the mystery of the Incarnation we discover the fullest extent of God's love for his cosmos alongside his plan to express this plan by limiting himself to particularity within his creation: a particular place in the cosmos, in a particular place in history, and to a particular people with all of their joys, fears and expectations. The Gospel is revealed, not in general principles, but in the details of who Jesus spoke with, those he taught and those he challenged, as well as the people with whom he shared meals and lived his life. Jesus' ministry was personal and embodied, and because the wideness of God's mercy was revealed within the unique setting Jesus lived, this becomes a template for how we are to live into Jesus' sending us out as his witnesses.

It is because of the Incarnation that I love East Vancouver—the people and the place—and the reason why we have journeyed and begun raising our family here over these last eleven years. In the chapter that follows, after offering some preliminary considerations (Section 1), I describe the shift in the Western world (Section 2), and then I consider the wider societal context. Then I will turn to the specifics of our context (Section 3), giving particular attention to four areas. By paying attention to these, I will explore the unique particularities of our social and cultural context.

First, I will begin with identity, where I will explore how personalized spirituality has become fragmented. Second, I will explore the interaction between individual and community particularly addressing the loneliness resulting from hyper-individualism and cultural forces which form crowds instead of communities. Third, I will explore our context's sense of social

responsibility, particularly under the forces of consumerism and hedonism. Fourth and finally, I will explore how the future is viewed, addressing specifically nihilism and despair by pointing to a more hope-filled outlook.

II. Preliminary Considerations

The first consideration to name is the value and importance of committing to a specific context. To be clear, loving a place does not mean blanket acceptance of what our particular context stands for and how it is known. The life and ministry of Jesus reveals the opposite reality—that loving a particular people in a particular place means to long on their behalf for wholeness in every aspect of their lives. As a witness to Christ’s kingdom therefore, it means that we search for, long for and pray for ways the gospel shines the light of God’s grace into the particularities of life here.

The Triune God’s call to be faithful therefore, means one’s approach to ministry will always be incarnational—a faith that moves into the neighbourhood in the way of Jesus. In focusing on the Incarnation, I do not mean to undermine the truth that Jesus is now the Resurrected and Ascended Lord who reigns with the Father. Rather, the focus on being incarnational is to embody this ministry contextually. By contextual ministry, I mean that we attend to the culture shaped by varied and significant historical, geographical and cultural influences. As Darrell Guder has written,

A missional ecclesiology challenges the church to be intentional about its unique social potential. Congregations should reflect the full social mix of the communities they serve, if they are truly contextual.⁹²

⁹² Darrell L. Guder, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1998), 70.

In this chapter, I will focus on both the more general societal context, as well as the specific context of the neighbours who live on the streets surrounding our church⁹³ to “get at the roots of culture.”⁹⁴ The purpose of attending to this specific context is integral to understanding how we as a church understand our shared mission as kingdom witnesses where God has called us. As Van Gelder writes:

The missional church invites a different conception: it sees the church as being missionary in its very nature. It is also a perception that views every context as a missional context, and every congregation as a missional congregation that is responsible to participate in God’s mission in that context.⁹⁵

However, despite the significant shift in urbanization over the last century, our tradition has focused much more on rural and suburban, historically connected to housing affordability and land availability for farming. This rural and suburban reality has meant however that churches located in cities have experienced a different challenge which has prompted “deep questions about the core identity [alongside an] unwillingness or inability to engage in God’s mission in this context.”⁹⁶ In the face of this crisis, a focused missiology is required to revitalize the CRC’s urban congregations.

Vital for each congregation is attending to the specific context in which it has been placed. Context means more than physical location, rather understanding, attending to and speaking into the cultural location is necessary. Forty years ago, Newbigin asked what it means for the church to anticipate Christ’s fullness in every place. He responded, the ‘place’ the church is located, “is not just the latitude and longitude of the spot where the church happens to be...[it]

⁹³ Terri Martinson Elton, “Corps of Discovery” in *The Missional Church in Context: Helping Congregations Develop Contextual Ministry*, ed. Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 149.

⁹⁴ Louis Luzbetak, *The Church and Cultures: New Perspectives in Missiological Anthropology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989), 75.

⁹⁵ Van Gelder, *The Missional Church in Context*, 27.

⁹⁶ Van Gelder, *The Missional Church in Context*, 24.

is not thus its situation on the surface on the globe, but its place in the fabric of human society.”⁹⁷

Therefore, I will attend to the specific context of the neighbourhood within which our congregation’s worship space has been placed, not the geographical boundaries as much as seeking to get to the roots of culture in this local context.

Second, it is critical to acknowledge that there is not only one, but multiple contexts within our neighbourhood. As I move from the general to the specific context of Vancouver, I will do so with an East Vancouver / Trout Lake North neighbourhood accent, within which First CRC's worship space is located. In order to not be paralyzed by particularity, I will work with generalizations within which I will still seek to be accurate. To attend to context well, we will first understand the particularity of an individual’s and a community’s joys, concerns, and questions. Through this, we will then allow the Gospel’s light to shine on these specific joys, concerns and questions, which will then root the kingdom witness of God’s people by making it possible to be rooted in a specific community when we seek to embody the life God calls us to. This final aspect connects with the more broadly cultural value of authenticity of those who believe they have something to offer the wider world:

In this new era of transparency, your target audience is putting greater value on character. To increase your trustworthiness and credibility, take responsibility for your actions, and make sure that the things you do and the things you espouse and believe in are the same.⁹⁸

Properly understanding context means that the congregation will be able to speak to the specific questions, but will also be willing to be changed, provided the change aligns with Scripture’s call. Newbigin again:

It is not enough in this situation for the Church to say ‘Come-all are welcome.’
A few may accept the invitation, but only to become assimilated to the language,

⁹⁷ Newbigin, “A Local Church Truly United,” *Ecumenical Review* 29, 1977, 118.

⁹⁸ Katie Delahaye Paine, *Measure What Matters: Online Tools For Understanding Customers, Social Media, Engagement, and Key Relationships* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2011), 174.

culture, style of the already existing congregation. This is not to take seriously the full reality of the ‘place.’ Those who are let outside have their treasures to bring into the Holy City—their own treasures, not borrowings of others. The existing congregation must be willing to go—to go outside the walls of the Church in order to become part of that other reality—in language, culture, style of life. Only so does there appear in the midst of that reality the sign and first-fruit of God all-embracing purpose.⁹⁹

A third consideration is the premise of David Kettle’s book *Western Culture in Gospel Context*. As we attend to society’s context or the specific context East Vancouver, we recognize that these contexts are time-bound—they are substantively different from the church in this place even fifty years previous. Because of the “scope and speed [of these changes]...congregations need to rely on the leading of the Spirit in order to be prepared to address both kinds of change.”¹⁰⁰ As we lean on the Spirit’s guidance, we discover the constant context which defines the other contexts is our teleological context of our loving and self-revealing God:

Our tacit knowledge is vitally part of our personal responsiveness or otherwise to God; in it we live integrally in relation to God, to other people, and to our culture. God is properly to be understood not as standing apart from our cultural and other contexts, but as our deeper, ultimate context, relative to which our other contexts are provisional.¹⁰¹

Fourth, as we attend to context we are also confronted with the reality and scope of sin. By sin here, I mean anything that distorts and gets in the way of God’s work of shalom in his world. Moreover, in the way of Scripture, by naming the sin, it is to be reminded of God’s purposes, but also to correct those in this context “who have the ears to hear” in order to draw them deeper into God’s story. Sin, as expressed around us is personal but it has woven “itself into systems and structures *beyond* individual choices and decisions.”¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Newbigin, *A Local Church Truly United*, 123.

¹⁰⁰ Van Gelder, *The Missional Church in Context*, 35.

¹⁰¹ Kettle, *Western Culture in Gospel Context*, Loc. 545.

¹⁰² Smith in J. Brian Benestad et al., *Five Views on the Church and Politics*, ed. Amy E. Black and Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 144-145.

Fifth, because sin embeds the very structures of the society we inhabit, we are part of sin's expression in our context. The Reformed emphasis on Total Depravity illuminates this reality—not that we are wholly evil to the point where no goodness can dwell, but rather, that every aspect of our lives is impacted by sin. Therefore, if our society struggles with excesses of narcissism, of consumerism, then we too, as those who live *in the world*, must confess that although we are called to not be controlled by the world (Romans 12:1-2), these forces are at work within us as well as we participate in these distortions of God's good gifts. Al Wolters describes this conflict for God's followers. Transformationalists have called *antithesis* the:

spiritual opposition between obedience to God and disobedience to God, between the Spirit of God and the spirits of This World. In practical terms this means a great divide between those who acknowledge the kingship of Jesus and seek to honor it in every sector of life and those who deny that kingship. The antithesis, therefore, divides believers from unbelievers, although at a deeper level it also divides the hearts of believers since sin is also still found in those who have been born again by the Spirit."¹⁰³

Acknowledging the division in our own hearts and confessing the ways we have been complicit in these cultural impulses are the first steps toward wholeness. However, we also cannot neglect that the ultimate call on our lives from God is to “live converted to community under God...to witness to such community, and to seek the conversion of others to this through their Christian practice and thinking.”¹⁰⁴

III. Living in a Post-Everything world

Those in the Western world have witnessed significant change enfolding at a disorienting pace. Forty years ago, Lesslie Newbigin noted the shift away from a time when modern science seemed to “provide a corpus of universal truth that would be the possession of all human beings,

¹⁰³ Wolters, “The Intellectual Milieu of Herman Dooyeweerd”, in *The Legacy of Herman Dooyeweerd*, ed. C. T. McIntire (ed), (Lanham: UPA, 1985), 9.

¹⁰⁴ Kettle, *Western Culture in Gospel Context*, Loc. 3658.

whatever their cultural differences.”¹⁰⁵ This shift away from science being the cohesive reality-making social imaginary was preceded by the shift away from the church which once provided another corpus of universal truth. Where modernity gave people security in status, credentials and bureaucracy, post-modernity now finds meaning in “vision, values, trust, meaning and innovation.”¹⁰⁶ This shift has been thorough—it has transformed not only the way we interact with each other, but how we think, make decisions, and how we connect to a transcendent reality, if at all. As David Kettle points out, it “implies a change in our understanding of knowledge itself and, second, it requires a deep ongoing conversation of ourselves and of our culture in all its aspects.”¹⁰⁷

We find ourselves in a new context as followers of Jesus and as the church as a whole. Stanley Grenz acknowledged the significant challenge of disorientation.: “The shift from the familiar territory of modernity to the uncharted terrain of postmodernity has grave implications for those who seek to live as Christ’s disciples in the new context.”¹⁰⁸ These implications are many, but they include how we believe and embody the reality of the kingdom in our daily living, but also, in the same way that the Jews were disoriented in taking the good news of Jesus Christ to Gentile nations, we too need re-learn the language of faith in order to understand and communicate it to a new context. It is not enough, Kettle argues, to name the broken places of our culture, but rather to identify the places of brokenness in our culture in light of the Gospel’s truth, and then recognize that we as God’s people need to experience conversion as well. Before

¹⁰⁵ Lesslie Newbigin, *Truth and Authority in Modernity* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1977), 36.

¹⁰⁶ George Cladis as cited in Terri Martinson Elton, “Corps of Discovery” in *The Missional Church in Context*, ed. Craig Van Gelder, 150.

¹⁰⁷ Kettle, *Western Culture in Gospel Context*, Loc. 66.

¹⁰⁸ Stanley J. Grenz, *Primer on Postmodernism, A* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1996), 162.

we can ask, “Can the West be converted?”, we need to first ask, “Can the church be converted?”¹⁰⁹

In the following section, I will explore notable shifts as they impact the church. I will look at the result on the church of living in a post-Christendom, secular, pluralistic post-truth world with externalized consciences. In this current Western context, those who continue to seek out meaning through faith do so in either a fact-based approach or a value-based approach. It is important to note that it could be argued that much of the current state of society is the result of the Reformation’s unintended impact. Due to the fact that our Reformed tradition is confessionally rooted and deeply embedded in the Reformation, it is important to keep this in mind.

A. From Transcendence to Immanence:

In post-modernity, God or the Transcendent, no longer defines reality and absolute truth claims are suspect. This shift viewing life ‘from-below’, rather than ‘from-above’ has implications on how Jesus is understood and communicated. Lieven Boeve contrasts this mindset with how the church in an earlier age understood who Jesus was. In articulating who Jesus was The Council of Chalcedon acknowledged his two natures by first focusing on the transcendent.¹¹⁰ Boeve asks, “If this is where dogma and doctrine were worked out, how do we remain faithful in the way that Jesus’ two natures are revealed and acknowledge a very different context in which the old ways of relating are set aside?”¹¹¹

Boeve also acknowledges we face an even greater stumbling block in presenting the life of Jesus as *the* central narrative in a cultural context of a plurality, a plurality suspicious of

¹⁰⁹ Kettle, *Western Culture in Gospel Context*, Loc. 242.

¹¹⁰ Boeve, *Christius Postmodernus*, 585.

¹¹¹ Boeve, *Christius Postmodernus*, 585.

religion altogether.¹¹² The only way forward, he suggests, is to approach our witness with an *open narrative approach* where truth is uncovered in relationality and where doctrine and beliefs are not “fixed in stone, but living and active.”¹¹³ Boeve states, “As a particular life story, Jesus’ narrative, entangled by particularity, bears witness to the universality of grace, which as such can never be articulated.”¹¹⁴

Not only are the Christian claims problematic, Zygmunt Bauman points out that modernity sought to live life without God, taking the meaning and urgency away from death thereby making the church appear obsolete and preoccupied with matters irrelevant to most people. As modernity’s impulse of life without God has matured, the attention has shifted so significantly that a religious expert’s words about life beyond death fails to address our culture’s existential questions. Instead counsellors and coaches are stepping in and *are* speaking to the questions of the Western context, as people continue to seek the “reassurance that they can do it—and a brief as to *how* to do it (counsellors and coaches); [it is] a ‘this-worldly transcendence...’¹¹⁵

B. From Christendom to Post-Christendom:

The twentieth century marked a drastic change in the way the church is viewed, particularly after two world wars and the horrors of the holocaust. After these large-scale disorienting horrors, God was sidelined and along with him, the church. The church remains in society but has been demoted to a corner of society where her power and influence have been

¹¹² Boeve, *Christius Postmodernus*, 588-589.

¹¹³ Boeve, *Christius Postmodernus*, 589.

¹¹⁴ Boeve, *Christius Postmodernus*, 589.

¹¹⁵ Bauman, in Paul Heelas, David Martin, and Paul Morris, *Religion, Modernity and Postmodernity*, (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 1998), 66.

eroded, so Western society now looks elsewhere for moral guidance.¹¹⁶ As James K.A. Smith writes, “In the name of securing our freedom, we swap submission to the priest for submission to the therapist.”¹¹⁷

Kettle describes that as society drifts further and further away from Christianity and its values, there is an increased disinterest, ignorance and prejudice against it. The challenge for the church then is not simply to adapt to a new context, it is to adapt to an increasingly hostile climate. However, this distance also clarifies the Church’s task:

The gap so evident between church and culture today merely brings into the open what has often been concealed and confused in our Christendom past: faith is a distinct personal choice bringing distinctive commitments in belief, action, and social allegiance.”¹¹⁸

Secularization will not be complete, however, until the vestiges of Christendom are done away with. Boeve, who writes from an even more severe cultural expression of secularization in Europe, describes this new reality as being identified by a general anti-traditional and pluralistic attitude, absent of “Christian vocabulary, practices and concepts because of their [being perceived as being] alienating and authoritarian, or dividing and conflicting, impulses.”¹¹⁹

Western culture seeks to sweep out anything that is perceived as a barrier to fulfilling identity, as well as whatever might bring conflict and division instead of peace.¹²⁰

¹¹⁶ Colin Greene and Martin Robinson, *Metavista: Bible, Church and Mission in an Age of Imagination* (Milton Keynes; Colorado Springs: Paternoster, 2008), 69-70. Bryan Wilson describes this diminishing significance as secularization: "the process by which religious thinking, practices, and institutions lose their significance for the operating of the social system." *The Secularization Thesis: Criticisms and Rebuttals*, in Laermans Rudi, Bryan Wilson & Jaak Billiet, *Secularization and Social Integration* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1998), 49.

¹¹⁷ James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), Kindle Edition, Loc. 2311.

¹¹⁸ Kettle, *Western Culture in Gospel Context*, Loc. 421.

¹¹⁹ Lieven Boeve, "Religion after Detraditionalization" in Graham Ward and Michael Hoelzl, eds., *The New Visibility of Religion: Studies in Religion and Cultural Hermeneutics*, (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2008), 200.

¹²⁰ Boeve, *Religion after Detraditionalization*, 200.

This process of secularization is somewhat tempered by non-secularized immigrants moving into the West from the Majority World. This resurgence buoys the religious statistics in a globalized city such as Vancouver. While it is important for us to acknowledge that this dynamic is unfolding, there are four reasons this does not remove the urgency of our discussion: (i) Immigrants will tend to find enclave communities which, by their very nature, are more isolated from mainstream culture and therefore have little influence on getting to the root of the cultural shift we are describing; (ii) Immigrants quickly learn the importance of acclimatizing and adapting to a Western version of pluralism, which includes discovering that religion and faith are topics neighbours and co-workers will rarely talk about. Once encountering this jarring realization, the newcomer may adapt to the new context; and (iii) even if an immigrant population increases or maintains the Church's presence in the city,¹²¹ to be a compelling kingdom witness will still require newcomers to learn the spiritual climate and language of their new context in order to communicate effectively with their secularized neighbours.

Finally, (iv) this discussion seeks to address how we engage our neighbours *missionally* in a drastically disorienting social context, where our former words and strategies are no longer effective. That said, the Majority world is bringing with them perspectives where the Transcendent permeates the Immanent which can assist the established church in North America. This results in a double influence—the presence of believers from elsewhere in the world can encourage believers in the established congregations, and established Canadian Christians can

¹²¹ Douglas Todd, "Young Immigrants to Canada Passionate About Religion" in *Vancouver Sun*, August 8, 2016 <http://vancouversun.com/opinion/columnists/young-immigrants-to-canada-passionate-about-religion> (Accessed March 15, 2018).

support immigrant believers who learn how to understand the disorienting cultural setting they find themselves in.¹²²

C. Moving towards Pluralism

With the central message of Judeo-Christianity set aside, new possibilities opened up for people to embrace other perspectives. Greene and Robinson describe this pluralism as “being and living in an increasingly global urban village that just happens to be the way we do things around here and we are glad you do it differently!”¹²³

Peter Berger suggests that the fractured Protestant church indirectly led to this pluralism because as the multitude of denominations were present in North America, people began to see that they had *options* for their beliefs. He writes, “Here lies the great historical irony in the relation between religion and secularization, an irony that can be graphically put by saying that, historically speaking, Christianity has been its own gravedigger.”¹²⁴

He also notes that along with pluralism, secularism impacts us more than we realize:

Subjectively, the man [sic] in the street tends to be uncertain about religious matters. Objectively, the man in the street is confronted with a wide variety of religious and other reality-defining agencies that compete for his allegiance or at least attention, and none of which is in a position to coerce him into allegiance. In other words, the phenomenon called ‘pluralism’ is a social-structural correlate of the secularization of consciousness.¹²⁵

Charles Taylor adds that there is an aspect of secularism that impacts everyone, including those who believe in God and worship Jesus Christ as God’s Son. In what he describes as *Secular 3*, the transcendent which had previously been the beginning point of our faith has

¹²² Members of first CRC are discovering anew the importance of these conversations with Refugee Newcomers in the *ISS of BC* Welcome Centre next to our church. In conversations with predominantly Christians and Muslims, it is refreshing for our congregants to speak with strangers about faith, and it has also been necessary to explain to them these conversations are unique because Canada’s version of pluralism does not often allow for religious dialogue.

¹²³ Greene and Robinson, *Metavista.*, xxxi.

¹²⁴ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 128-129.

¹²⁵ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 127.

become unhitched from our immediate reality where we all find ourselves stuck within an *Immanent Frame*. James K.A. Smith invites the reader to imagine moving from a Christian town in the American Heartland to be a missionary in one of the bigger, more secular cities. It does not take long to realize that the answers you have been prepared to speak about are deemed useless because they are asking a whole different set of questions.

Instead of nagging questions about God or the afterlife, your neighbours are oriented by all sorts of longings and ‘projects’ and quests for significance... They don’t have any sense that the ‘secular’ lives they’ve constructed are missing a second floor... You thought you were moving to a world like yours, just minus God; but in fact, you’ve moved to a different world.¹²⁶

Charles Taylor describes this different world:

Life in the Immanent Frame emphasizing a this-worldly approach left us with a disenchanted world, devoid of the Transcendent. The grandest plan is made by humans for human benefit. Each person has the quest of finding their own meaning and spiritual path, but anything pointing to a transcendent world is either inaccessible or would not even cross one’s mind.¹²⁷

D. Post-Truth and Emotivism

As we continue to explore the current reality the West now faces, we also note how we find ourselves in a post-truth age. In his book, *After Virtue*, MacIntyre notes how the movement away from the dominant moral framework has not been replaced by alternative moral framework common between all people. He bemoans, “there seems to be no rational way of securing moral agreement in our culture.”¹²⁸ The problem is, even if a certain moral decision has coherent and consistent premises, it is possible that someone else will come to different conclusion, also supported by their own coherent and consistent rationale but rooted in a differing premise.

¹²⁶ Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, Loc. 36.

¹²⁷ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 539-542. He writes, “So the buffered identity of the disciplined individual moves in a constructed social space, where instrumental rationality is a key value, and time is pervasively secular. All of this makes up what I want to call ‘the immanent frame.’ There remains to add just one background idea: that this frame constitutes a ‘natural’ order, to be contrasted with a supernatural one, an ‘immanent’ world over against a possible ‘transcendent’ one.” 542.

¹²⁸ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 6.

Competing viewpoints weigh their claims against each other and there is no “established way of deciding between these claims that moral argument appears to be necessarily interminable.”¹²⁹

This is because not only do we have rival conclusions, we also have rival premises which simply creates a volley match between assertion and counter-assertion.¹³⁰

Undergirding these rival conclusions is a deep chasm as it relates to *telos*. Many in our permissive culture argue that *telos* itself is restrictive and that even if there is an idea of what it means to be human, there is further disagreement whether *telos* ought to be the basis for morality. Without a shared *telos* for morality, and no rational way to navigate conflicting viewpoints, we are faced with a stalemate, which can often only be overcome with superior rational powers and expressive assertion.¹³¹ MacIntyre calls this result Emotivism which “rests upon a claim that every attempt, whether past or present, to provide a rational justification for an objective morality has in fact failed.”¹³² Expressive assertion, without appealing to an objective moral standard, is the way much moral discourse takes place today. The disorienting reality in this is the loss of an objective moral standard, or truth, which erodes the basis of trust that we have for each other in society. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks puts it starkly:

A free society depends on trust. Trust depends on honesty in public life. And honesty in public life depends on truth as a norm... We’ve forgotten that without a shared moral code to which we are all accountable, into which we are all educated, and which we have all internalized, we will lose the trust in public life on which our very freedom depends.¹³³

¹²⁹ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 8-9.

¹³⁰ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 8-9.

¹³¹ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 10.

¹³² MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 19.

¹³³ “Post-Truth and the Erosion of Trust,” *Rabbi Sacks* (blog), June 12, 2017 <http://rabbisacks.org/post-truth-erosion-trust/> (Accessed on June 13, 2017).

Without a common morality, members of society may feel ‘free’ to creatively self-define, but at the cost of social cohesion, which in turn can result in an ominous future. Sacks quotes Bertrand Russell’s alarm for our society’s trajectory:

What had happened in the great age of Greece happened again in Renaissance Italy: traditional moral restraints disappeared, because they were seen to be associated with superstition; the liberation from fetters made individuals energetic and creative, producing a rare fluorescence of genius; but the anarchy and treachery which inevitably resulted from the decay of morals made Italians collectively impotent, and they fell, like the Greeks, under the domination of nations less civilized than themselves but not so destitute of social cohesion.¹³⁴

Rejecting a common basis for morality may have significant implications as Sacks and Russell warn, but it also drastically transforms how one lives day to day in society where personal consequences are minimized and responsibility is shifted on to the shoulders of society in general. Jordan Peterson, known for his brash but truth-telling manner, argues that in our social context, one’s problems are attributable more to irresponsibility than oppression:

The fervent hope of every undisciplined person (even an undisciplined genius) is that his [sic] current worthlessness and stupidity is someone else’s fault. If in the best of cases—it is *society’s* fault, then society can be made to pay. This slight-of-hand maneuver transforms the undisciplined into the admirable rebel, at least in his own eyes, and allows him to seek unjustified revenge in the disguise of the revolutionary hero. A more absurd parody of heroic behaviour can hardly be imagined.¹³⁵

Undergirding this abdication of responsibility is deeply connected to our internal basis for morality. Not only are there a myriad of opinions on every potential moral question, but without an *internalized* objective moral standard, one’s sense of responsibility has become externalized. In his address at his recent Templeton Prize award, Sacks describes the societal implications. I quote him at length:

We have outsourced our memory and thereby confused history with identity,

¹³⁴ Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*, new edition (New York: Touchstone, 2004), Preface and Introduction.

¹³⁵ Jordan Peterson, *Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief*, (New York: Routledge, 1999), 220.

outsourced our morality to the State, but we cannot expect the State to hold things in check. We have outsourced the inner conscience with the external and therefore we are losing what made the West so strong. We have outsourced moral responsibility to the State and now no-fault divorce, the fallout of poverty and depression become the responsibility of the State. We have lost a vision for virtues and confused liberty (the freedom to do what we ought) with license (freedom to do what we want).

[The problem is] you can't outsource conscience. You can't delegate moral responsibility away. When you do, you raise expectations that cannot be met. And when, inevitably, they are not met, society becomes freighted with disappointment, anger, fear, resentment and blame. People start to take refuge in magical thinking, which today takes one of four forms: the far right, the far left, religious extremism and aggressive secularism. The far right seeks a return to a golden past that never was. The far left seeks a utopian future that will never be. Religious extremists believe you can bring salvation by terror. Aggressive secularists believe that if you get rid of religion there will be peace. These are all fantasies, and pursuing them will endanger the very foundations of freedom. Yet we have seen, even in mainstream British and American politics, forms of ugliness and irrationality I never thought I would see in my lifetime. We have seen on university campuses in Britain and America the abandonment of academic freedom in the name of the right not to be offended by being confronted by views with which I disagree. This is *le trahison des clercs*, the intellectual betrayal, of our time, and it is very dangerous indeed. So is there another way?¹³⁶

E. Religion's Two Forms:

i. Fact-Based Approach

Where does this all leave the church? We cannot return to a fictitious golden past, nor can we go the religious extremist route of bringing 'salvation by terror.' In this final section on the general postmodern and post-Christendom Western Context, I will seek to outline two expressions of religion today—fact-based and the value-based approaches¹³⁷—in order to better understand the varied societal contexts the church finds itself in today.

Kettle describes how religion has been undermined by a rational focus on questioning and a default posture of provability. The pursuit of truth here has been separated from the

¹³⁶ Jonathan Sacks, *The Danger of Outsourcing Morality: Templeton Prize Acceptance Speech*, Rabbi Sacks (blog), May 27, 2016, <http://rabbisacks.org/danger-outsourcing-morality-read-rabbi-sacks-speech-accepting-templeton-prize/> (Accessed November 13, 2017).

¹³⁷ Kettle, *Western Culture in Gospel Context*, Loc. 3692.

Christian faith and even more, there is suspicion whether one can validate their truth claims at all. This has, by extension, impacted the morality once rooted in the Judeo-Christian ethic—rationalism has undermined the provability of truth claims while still affirming values of goodness, beauty and desire but leaving them orphaned from their source. “The first dislocation has given rise to narrow forms of rationalism; the second has given rise to an understanding of value as a merely subjective affair.”¹³⁸

Kettle points out that rationalism, a mark of the Enlightenment, questioned the claims of Christianity, and because Christian claims also encounter mystery, Christianity was seen unable to validate its faith claims. Rationalism then dismisses Christianity altogether.¹³⁹ As Peter Berger notes, the decline of Christianity’s plausibility “has been accompanied by a steady devaluation of the Christian theodicy.”¹⁴⁰ Modern thought, one is taught to believe, “inhabits wider horizons rather than deferring to the possibility that it is Christian faith that [does so].”¹⁴¹ Christianity and other traditions are undermined and dismissed when the testing and veracity of ideas become paramount.¹⁴² Interestingly, as Berger points out, this posture that equates proofs with veracity actually finds its source in the Protestant Reformation, which unintentionally took the mystery out of religion. Not weighing in on the justification for the Protestant Reformation, he contrasts Protestantism from Catholicism where Protestants—particularly Calvinists—have *disenchanted* the world by removing the sources of mystery of Faith: “Protestantism divested itself as much as possible from the three most ancient and most powerful concomitants of the sacred-mystery,

¹³⁸ Kettle, *Western Culture in Gospel Context*, Loc. 3685.

¹³⁹ Kettle, *Western Culture in Gospel Context*, Loc. 3726.

¹⁴⁰ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 78.

¹⁴¹ Kettle, *Western Culture in Gospel Context*, Loc. 3733.

¹⁴² Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 111.

miracle, and magic.”¹⁴³ He argues, the Protestant world has isolated itself from being consistently permeated by the spiritual realm of sacred beings and forces:

Reality is polarized between a radically transcendent divinity and a radically ‘fallen’ humanity that, *ipso facto*, is devoid of sacred qualities. Between them lies an altogether ‘natural’ universe, God’s creation to be sure, but in itself bereft of numinosity. In other words, the radical transcendence of God confronts a universe of radical immanence, of ‘closeness’ to the sacred. Religiously speaking, the world becomes very lonely indeed.¹⁴⁴

The Protestant reformers and those who have followed did not, of course, set out to “cut the umbilical cord between heaven and earth”¹⁴⁵ but by emphasizing God’s sovereignty and the fallenness of humanity they “narrowed man’s [sic] relationship to the sacred to the one exceedingly narrow channel that it called God’s word.”¹⁴⁶ This approach was effective when it was still seen as plausible that Scripture was sufficient to the task, but secularization rushed in *en force* when Scripture itself was seen as implausible, resulting in the claim that ‘God is dead.’ In Scripture’s place, the systematic, rational approach of science became the source of meaning in our world. Berger writes, “A sky empty of angels becomes open to the intervention of the astronomer and, eventually, of the astronaut.”¹⁴⁷

Whatever the historic factors at work in Protestantism’s influence into our current social reality, the premise of the rational, irreligious approach is more than simply “dismissing certain religious ideas; it is about the subversion of that imaginative activity in which we give ourselves practically, in a deep personal way, to the discovery of God.”¹⁴⁸

¹⁴³ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 111–12.

¹⁴⁴ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 111–12.

¹⁴⁵ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 112.

¹⁴⁶ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 112.

¹⁴⁷ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 112.

¹⁴⁸ Kettle, *Western Culture in Gospel Context*, Loc. 3747.

As a congregation seeking to hold on to the imaginative activity of recognizing God's presence at work in the world, this social setting is deeply disorienting. Each day we are confronted with contrary perspectives regarding the relevance of our faith. Our congregation is experiencing this in a significant way. Some of us choose to hold on to the faith as received, choosing to filter out aspects of a changing world that do not fit within this rubric. While for others the starting point means holding on to a faith which is relevant to the world around, but in so doing, risking the loss of their moorings of faith.

The daily lived challenge for our community, along with every other gathering of believers, is to find this balance of drawing on our inherited faith and re-appropriating it in our context.

ii. Value-Based Approach

A second stream has emerged alongside the fact-based, rational approach which is more focused on pursuing the human good. Goodness, beauty and desire have become increasingly significant as an expression of the previously mentioned Emotivism. Goodness in a post-Christendom society, it is argued, identifies with more universal, 'self-evident' moral principles:¹⁴⁹

Morality is unhinged from attending to God, beauty is disconnected from attending to God, and desire is seen as independent from God. Goodness, beauty, and pleasure as—each in their own terms—an end in themselves.¹⁵⁰

Kettle argues that the premise of secular modern thought carries an assumption "that it pursues greater moral freedom than do people with Christian 'values,' rather than deferring to the possibility that these values, rooted in the worship of God, open upon greater freedom."¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁹ Kettle, *Western Culture in Gospel Context*, Loc. 3760.

¹⁵⁰ Kettle, *Western Culture in Gospel Context*, Loc. 3767.

At work here is a shift in how values themselves function. Removed from their source, values have become abstracted because they are now based on one's subjective feelings which has resulted in various sets of values in conflict between individuals and even competing values within each individual. Ted A. Smith summarizes Alasdair MacIntyre's position:

We live among the ruins of once coherent moral traditions. We have little fragments from multiple traditions—a block of New Testament *agape* here, a brick of Homer's *arete* there—but we no longer have any idea how to fit those pieces together. Moral philosophy...is reduced to individual taste. Disagreements about the nature of the good life can no longer be resolved by rational discourse. If we come to consensus at all, it is through some kind of seduction or coercion.¹⁵²

The challenges of a world of competing values find their root in removing these values from their original moral sources. Traditional culture, which seeks to hold morality and values together is “patronized in a romantic way as colorful acts of self-expression by historical communities.”¹⁵³ Historical cultures are viewed as ‘interesting’ or ‘quaint,’ and in so doing, are subverted because they are not seen to have any bearing on how to live today. Kettle pushes back against the values-based, religionless approach:

Valuing at its most lively, and above all in the worship of God, is an enquiry into the real. It fails to understand that such lively valuing is intrinsic precisely to that enquiry into the world in which the realm of ‘objective’ things come to light for us.”¹⁵⁴

As people seek to discern right from wrong based on their non-teleological values has led to deep confusion which has crept into each person's daily living. James K.A. Smith points out how abstracted values and removing them from their teleological source make “values” a category as much an internal threat to faith as external. Not only do we have the wider society

¹⁵¹ Kettle, *Western Culture in Gospel Context*, Loc. 3767.

¹⁵² Ted A. Smith, “Accounts of Practice,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology* ed. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2012), 246.

¹⁵³ Kettle, *Western Culture in Gospel Context*, Loc. 3782.

¹⁵⁴ Kettle, *Western Culture in Gospel Context*, Loc. 3789.

self-assured that their values are supposedly purer because they have been removed from the confines of religion, but our own values of goodness, delight, and beauty have often been separated from our worship. Even though these values do find their fullness and more beneficial expression in worship directed to God, the Church has too quickly capitulated our value framework to society.

Response from within the church has sought to curb the impact of values being treated in this manner, and that is the growing attentiveness to *practice*. I will explore this more fully in Chapter 5, but at this point, it is helpful to note how a response towards practice has arisen in various circles. Ted A. Smith names three sources: “the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer, the moral philosophy of Alasdair MacIntyre, and the social theory of Pierre Bourdieu.”¹⁵⁵ These three sources, though differing in their approach and application, are in fact, complementary: “They do not offer rival definitions of a single phenomenon. Each uses the language of ‘practice’ on the way to solving a different problem. Moreover, while some of the deep roots of their sources overlap, their works engage different contemporary interlocutors.”¹⁵⁶

In the vein of MacIntyre’s approach, James K.A. Smith has noted how practices are able to re-orient our desires teleologically. As a starting point, he observes that particularly for the Protestant rational approach, our desires have rarely found full expression in the context of worship which has allowed the broader culture to hijack our desires as we begin thirsting after that which does not fully satisfy. Smith writes that we are “affective, desiring, liturgical animals”¹⁵⁷ where our desires have a deeper hold on us than our rational beliefs. Civic liturgies of the shopping mall, for example, do not seek to convince us through the mind, but the heart. It is

¹⁵⁵ Ted A. Smith, *Accounts of Practice*, 246.

¹⁵⁶ Ted A. Smith, *Accounts of Practice*, 246.

¹⁵⁷ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, 2011), 333.

in our heart, or *kardia*, where our desires get a hold of us and so the battle for our worship rests in our affective living:

The description is meant to shift our attention and perspective in order for us to recognize the charged, *religious* nature of cultural institutions that we all tend to inhabit as if they were neutral sites. Looking at the mall through the eyes of worship and liturgy, with attention to the concrete material practices that are part of the experience, give us an angle on this cultural institution such that we can see that the mall has its own pedagogy, an interested in the education of desire...Our ultimate love/desire is shaped by practices, not ideas that are merely communicated to us.¹⁵⁸

As Christians in this social context, we need to discern well how values are understood and how desire is harnessed in our day to day lives. We need not be tentative to share with our neighbours how the values of goodness, delight, and beauty find a fuller expression when held in their telos which finds their source in our Creator God. We also need to be discerning, particularly the more cerebral amongst us, that if our desires become latent in a rational approach to faith, our desires will be misdirected. There is much to be lost if we do not get it right because our desires ultimately set our trajectory for living. As Smith warns in his follow-up book, *You Are What You Love*, “Be careful what you worship; it will shape what you want, and therefore what you make and how you work.”¹⁵⁹

F. Conclusion:

Where does this leave the church in this new reality of a post-everything world? To quote Sacks yet again, we need to do “the precise opposite of outsourcing: namely the internalization of what had once been external.”¹⁶⁰ As God’s people in a changing world, we need to find new language and new postures, but we still steward a cohesive story in the face of fragmentation, as

¹⁵⁸ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 303, 333.

¹⁵⁹ James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016), Kindle Edition, Loc. 178.

¹⁶⁰ Jonathan Sacks, *The Danger of Outsourcing Morality*.

we seek to be faithful followers of Jesus living out our faith into every area of life. We also need to recover our telos, deepen our memory, re-internalize morality and invite others to do the same. Finally, within the Immanent Frame, we also need to shift our attention off of the present and onto a more hope-filled future for the sake of future generations.

In the third section of this chapter, we will focus on how the gospel's light shines on four areas of our social and local context: (1) how we understand and relate to ourselves, particularly in how a personalized spirituality has led to fractured identities, (2) how we relate to each other, particularly in light of loneliness and social isolation resulting from hyper-individualism, (3) how we relate to society and the world, particularly in how social responsibility is understood in an age of consumerism and hedonism, and (4) how we relate to our future in a context where social forecasts are weighed down by nihilism and despair.

IV. Shining the Gospel Light on our Context

Shift 1: Understanding and Relating to Ourselves: Shining the Gospel light on Fragmented spiritual identities

The first shift we will address pertains to one's fragmented spiritual identity. I will describe this post-Christendom fragmentation which has led to a de-institutionalized and individualized approach to spirituality which had led to a loss of communal understanding as well as a loss of coherence in the construct of one's beliefs. In the fragmentation which has brought about the *spiritual but not religious* phenomenon, I will attend to my local context where the dominant spiritual expressions are Self-Mastery, Moral Therapeutic Deism and Paganism. Throughout this section, I will explore how the Gospel's light illuminates the topics of fragmentation, spirituality and identity.

A. Post-Christendom Fragmentation

The Post-Christendom world as described above has deeply impacted individual and social constructs of identity. Boeve points out that because Christianity is no longer the accepted framework for individual and social identity, the source of meaning and social perspectives no longer follows “the pre-given ideological patterns...[therefore], because of the absence of such unquestioned and quasi-automatic transmission of tradition, identity is no longer given but has to be constructed.”¹⁶¹ The liberty afforded to a people free from the constraints of religion means identity is shaped by individualist terms rather than an external convention. This has resulted in a creating a fragmented society that lacks internal social coherence because it is comprised by fragmented individuals lacking internal coherence in their stories.

In his book *Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World*, Wilson points out that the big shift in our societal context is not merely pluralism, but fragmentation:

We have not moved from a monolithic world into a pluralistic world; rather, we have moved from a time when our communities were relatively coherent and clear, to a time when our communities and traditions have become fragmented— incoherent and fuzzy. Certainly, some coherent communities still exist, but these are communities that for various reasons have not been a part of our cultural change.¹⁶²

Wilson draws on MacIntyre’s *After Virtue*, whose central premise is our need to continue to hold on to our *telos*—when our end flows out of our specific nature and is sustained by practices and traditions.¹⁶³ This telos has been lost and we are now left with fragments of knowledge.¹⁶⁴ This leaves our social context with a loss of meaning and an increased fragmentation.

¹⁶¹ Lieven Boeve, *Religion After Detraditionalization*, 191.

¹⁶² Jonathan R. Wilson, *Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World: From “After Virtue” to a New Monasticism*, 2nd edition (Eugene: Wipf & Stock; 2nd ed., 2010), Kindle Edition, Loc. 720.

¹⁶³ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, Prologue, Loc. 86.

¹⁶⁴ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 1–2.

Where MacIntyre describes this loss teleologically, Berger outlines it historically. Beginning when the church and empire shared the same purpose, though each approaching it uniquely. There was a worldview monopoly: “*two* institutions, namely church and empire, struggled for the honor of being its principle embodiment. Both institutions represented the *same* religious world.”¹⁶⁵ When the relationship between church and state severed, and between Protestants and Catholics, Christendom’s unity was also fractured. Berger argues, much of this had more to do for practicalities than ideology but it paved the way for increased fracturing to follow.¹⁶⁶

B. De-Institutionalized Spirituality

In the Western Church there has been a gradual but noticeable shift away from institutionalized religion. Citing Peter Berger’s and Harvey Cox’s descriptions of North America, Boeve notes that in Europe, and by extension North America, there has been a significant drop in institutionalized religion. While the institutional church is not completely absent, there is a growing Christian spirituality which is finding expression outside of it. He writes, “modernization in Europe has caused *a transformation of religion*, not its disappearance.”¹⁶⁷

Religion has mutated. Though faith affiliation has not dropped as drastically as church attendance rates have, there is a lowered sense of confidence in organized religion. There is an increasingly large segment of the population who are now growing up without ever having belonged to a religion. There is, as Boeve describes, “a significant increase in *believing without*

¹⁶⁵ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 136.

¹⁶⁶ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 137.

¹⁶⁷ Boeve in Ward and Hoelzl, *The New Visibility of Religion*, 189.

belonging.¹⁶⁸ This term, coined by Grace Davie is described by Yves Lambert as an autonomous and diffused religiosity which expresses practices which are not typical to Christianity. These practices, he writes, include:

The importance of meditation and contemplation; belief in a higher power, spirit or force, rather than a personal God; belief in life after death (including reincarnation); an interest in different religious traditions rather than in one particular tradition. In general, this group claims to be in search of spirituality (rather than 'religion').¹⁶⁹

We draw on the example of Europe because of the secularization that has taken place there helps us recognize how the same is taking place in our context.¹⁷⁰ While the word transformation might be read neutrally, a Christian “spiritual but not religious” phenomenon is turning our faith back on itself. Walter Liefeld terms this spiritual eclecticism as:

A way of looking at religion and beliefs in which one is not committed to any one religious organization or belief system, but instead chooses aspects of these at will. Any teaching or ethical yardstick that is personally appealing is considered valid.¹⁷¹

In his article, *You Have Died of Dysentery*, Pastor A.J. Swoboda notes how this eclecticism plays out in the Cascadian region spanning Northern Oregon to Southwest British Columbia:

Cascadians are quick to choose, eclectically, from the religious buffet the truths that fit their worldview. This is the sloppiest form of religion imaginable. Why? Because eclecticism—while gathering lots of good quotes and bumper sticker fodder—doesn't take seriously the actual *intent* of the religious teachers who spoke those truths. Eclecticism seeks to draw ideas from people and disconnect them from the intent of those people themselves.

If Jesus knew—as a good, temple-going, circumcised, Sabbath-keeping, Jew—

¹⁶⁸ Boeve in Ward and Hoelzl, *The New Visibility of Religion*, 189. Boeve notes how European young people were actually more religious in 1999 than 1990-91 but that did not result in a more active Christian engagement.

¹⁶⁹ Boeve, in Ward and Hoelzl, *The New Visibility of Religion*, 189.

¹⁷⁰ One example of how this transformation of religion has unfolded in Canada are the many church plants, such as *The Meeting House* in Hamilton, Ontario whose Pastor Bruxy Cavey marketed his approach as “a church for people who don't like church.” In seeking to establish a new energy around faith, pitting Christian spirituality against the institutional church has undermined the internal coherence of the Gospel. A more subtle expression, though still significant, *within* the CRC has been the significant number of CRC *Home Missions*-funded church plants following the *Willow Creek* model and now more recently, the largely CRC, Seattle-based innovation *Inhabit*.

¹⁷¹ As cited in A.J. Swoboda, A.J. *You Have Died of Dysentery*, April 5, 2016 <http://www.journal.christandcascadia.com/2016/04/05/you-have-died-of-dysentery/> (Accessed October 5, 2017).

that his teachings would be used to create a kind of eclectic religious soup that undermined the love of Yahweh, he would be [very angry]. To disconnect the ideas of Jesus from his religious identity as a faithful Jew is absurd.

A de-institutionalized or de-traditionalized approach to Christianity has also changed how Christians understand and relate to tradition. In a post-Christendom reality no one needs to be a Christian, they can now live their faith how they deem fit. This individualized approach to faith is only amplified in our pluralistic context.¹⁷² In response to this new approach, two trajectories have emerged. Boeve notes:

The pluralization of religion only reinforces this reflexive potential. On the one hand, this structural change leads some to seriously relativize their bonds to the Christian tradition (especially its claim to anteriority), leading them to marginally Christian and even post-Christian positions. On the other hand, some feel extremely uncomfortable with this reflexivity, and turn to more traditionalist and fundamentalist positions, stringently reinforcing the bond between social and individual identity and the tradition transmitted from the past.¹⁷³

The first is clearly problematic for the call on God's people to remain faithful. The second, however, is also problematic because the fundamentalist approach appeals "to a 'pure' tradition, a construction from the past which never historically existed...[it, in fact] also jeopardizes the very concept of tradition, both in its active and passive meaning."¹⁷⁴

Must we default to one extreme or the other? How do we navigate the question of how we live as Christians today in a transformed religious climate? A third option will not be possible if we allow society's fragmentation to dictate our reality. Boeve suggests a way forward can be found in our approach to truth. Rather than presenting it as a propositional, objective claim, he offers an *open narrative* approach. Here, he is stepping away from the highly rationalistic

¹⁷² Ward and Hoelzl, *The New Visibility of Religion*, 195.

¹⁷³ Ward and Hoelzl, *The New Visibility of Religion*, 195.

¹⁷⁴ Ward and Hoelzl, *The New Visibility of Religion*, 195.

approach of modernity, and re-focusing not on spiritual versus religious, but on the person of Christ:

In our so-called postmodern condition, theology seems in need of new patterns of thought, a new approach to address the challenges of Christianity's self-perception and the centrality of Jesus Christ... Truth can no longer be regarded in terms of appropriation but as relational—no longer as something one can acquire.¹⁷⁵

C. Individualized Spirituality within the Church

Closely related to a de-institutionalized spirituality is an individualized spirituality. Here we note the shift not from structure to free form, but from a communal sense of faith to an individual one. Michael Moynagh states that “individualism has undermined the communal basis of religious life”¹⁷⁶ because as more non-Christian beliefs have been accepted, they have challenged the established norms. With an increasing number of alternative opinions, faith becomes more subjective and one's own choice dictates a solitary religious viewpoint. What had once been a shared vision of faith has now become “one lifestyle option among many.”¹⁷⁷

In our religious context, Berger argues, religion is voluntary, uncoerced and therefore is a choice which fits within the private realm of our lives. The private preference remains with an individual or family unit.¹⁷⁸ As common as this description is, it is also problematic because enclave religion is treated as an end in itself and is devoid of broader call to ensure the religion seeks to stabilize and enhance the world around it. This expression of faith might seem ‘real’ to the one holding this perspective, but it “cannot any longer fulfill the classical task of religion, that of constructing a common world within which all of social life receives ultimate meaning

¹⁷⁵ Ward and Hoelzl, *The New Visibility of Religion*, 578-9.

¹⁷⁶ Michael Moynagh and Philip Harrold, *Church for Every Context: An Introduction to Theology and Practice* (London: SCM Press, 2012), 74.

¹⁷⁷ Moynagh and Harrold, *Church for Every Context*, 74.

¹⁷⁸ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 133.

binding on everybody.”¹⁷⁹ Religion is meant to provide a coherent perspective of reality that can give meaning to those who live in a particularly societal context, but this is truncated with an individualized, privatized expression of faith, and what remains is fragmentation and “the plausibility structure of which may in some cases be no larger than the nuclear family.”¹⁸⁰

Not only is it problematic that this version of faith fails the social responsibility to wider society that is inextricable from the gospel. If it is restricted to family, which is an incredibly vulnerable institution in our society, then the beliefs are even further compromised. Even more, when religion is treated as a religious preference, Berger points out, “it can be abandoned as readily as it was first adopted.”¹⁸¹ This is where it is necessary for the wider faith community to come alongside to support and reinforce the beliefs. The challenge to do this well is limited because one’s connection to a broader religious group is based on affiliation like other voluntary associations. Therefore, when an individual is not receptive to the moral influence, faith remains anchored in the private realm, the influence is limited to the receptivity of the individual.¹⁸²

D. Individualized Spirituality Beyond the Church

In the previous paragraphs we noted how individualized spirituality within the church is impacting and undermining the purpose of religion, the role of community, and the integrity of a coherent and consistent framework of faith. This has both been a causing influence of and a response to individualized spirituality beyond the Church. I will explore the general themes leading people to find new expressions outside of Christianity which has primarily been rooted in suspicion of organized religion’s stifling institutionalism, in-fighting, hypocrisy, and abuse of

¹⁷⁹ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 134-135.

¹⁸⁰ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 135.

¹⁸¹ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 135.

¹⁸² Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 135.

power. Alongside this, these new expressions are possible in large part because of younger generations who were left to figure spirituality out for themselves because they were raised without any particular religious framework.

Callum Brown describes the ecclesiastical impact of individualized faith finding expression in Eastern mysticism:

It is precisely because ‘the personal’ changed so much in the 1960's -and has continued to change in the four decades since-that the churches are in seemingly terminal decay and [Western] Christian culture is in its death throes...The search for personal faith is now in ‘the New Age’ of minor cults, personal development and consumer choice.¹⁸³

In her book *Belief Without Borders*, Linda Mercadante describes growing up in a ‘nothing’ home in a context when the three options were Protestant, Catholic and Jewish. She describes her own ‘spiritual, but not religious’ experiences in the 1970’s:

Like many seekers today, I tried one thing after another: yoga, meditation, vegetarianism, jogging, alternative health practices, Unity, social action groups, and spirituality retreats. I even joined an ashram. But I found nothing that could answer my theological questions or satisfy my spiritual needs.¹⁸⁴

She herself later became a Christian and affiliated with a denomination, and then later allowed her experience to prompt research on the theme of being spiritual but not religious. She focused her research on “the sacred, human nature, community and the afterlife” (which incidentally, aligns quite closely to three of the four categories I am drawing on in Chapters 2, 3 and 5: spiritual identity, community, social responsibility and the eschatological future). She asked four questions:

(i) Is there anything larger than myself, any sacred or transcendent dimension, any Higher Power? (ii) What does it mean to be human? (iii) Is spiritual growth primarily a solitary process or is it done with others? (iv) What will happen to me, if anything, after death?¹⁸⁵

¹⁸³ As cited in Moynagh and Harrold, *Church for Every Context*, 77.

¹⁸⁴ Linda A. Mercadante, *Belief without Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual but Not Religious* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), xii.

She describes a number of “organizing principles” which were common to each in her research group: there was a focus on spiritual practice, openness to mind-body-energy connections; a post-Christian spirituality marked by widespread opposition to Western religious concepts; a rejection of exclusivism; ethical objections due to moral failures by religious people; holding a personal choice rather than a received tradition; withdrawing from external source of authority; an ‘it’s all good’ universalist perennialism; a willingness to hybrid their spirituality in a syncretistic or ‘poaching’ manner; as well as a focus on nature and experience.¹⁸⁶

Whereas the Western Religious framework is perceived as constricting, a self-defined spirituality opens up new vistas for individuals to look for meaning. Psychologist Kenneth Gergen describes this difference:

In contrast to the narrow range of options and the oppressive restraints favored by totalizing systems of understanding, postmodernism opens the way to the full expression of all discourses, to a free play of discourses.¹⁸⁷

Due to the individualistic nature of holding a self-selecting expression of spirituality, Mercadante notes the fragmentation inherent in this approach: “many live with syncretic and frequently inconsistent beliefs, creative amalgams which were often unique and changing.”¹⁸⁸ When pressed, some would shift their answers, and others would simply accept the lack of coherence.¹⁸⁹ Richard Mouw, in *He Shines in All That’s Fair*, tells a story of a young woman named Heather who practices Witchcraft, but also affirms the historical resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. He writes:

I doubt that Heather subscribes to both views of reality, Wicca and Christianity,

¹⁸⁵ Mercadante, 15.

¹⁸⁶ Mercadante, 68–91.

¹⁸⁷ Richard J. Mouw, *He Shines in All That’s Fair: Culture and Common Grace*: (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2001), Kindle Edition, Loc. 981.

¹⁸⁸ Mercadante, *Belief without Borders*, 79.

¹⁸⁹ Mercadante, *Belief without Borders*, 79.

in their robust versions. She is placing fragments of worldviews side by side without thinking about their relationships. And it is precisely the fact that these disconnected cognitive bits coexist in her consciousness that causes my concern ... Heather is a *micro-chaos* of a larger fragmentation.¹⁹⁰

E. Fragmented Spiritualities In Local Expression:

As we acknowledge the *micro-chaos* present in our social context, we also recognize how the fragmentation finds unique expression in our local context. I will focus attention on three ways our neighbours participate in meaning-making: *Self-Mastery*, *Moral Therapeutic Deism* and *Paganism*. None of these are solely unique to our context, but their presence is pronounced in East Vancouver, and each expresses this fragmentation uniquely: one cuts off the religious life from a dynamic relationship with God, another seeks to appease a Higher Power or Force through good behaviour, and still another acknowledges how spiritually charged the world is, but fails to link this to our Creator and Source.

i. Self-Mastery:

The pursuit of health, beauty, fitness and wholeness point to a wave of people who are looking for meaning in the Immanent Frame through self-mastery. This finds unique expression in Vancouver particularly on health and wholeness, seeking inner harmony and balance by being religious about which organic, probiotic, biodynamic, ethically-sourced foods bought at the *Trout Lake Farmers' Market* can be ingested in our bodies, and eliminating what is unclean in the body by detoxing and yoga sessions.

Kettle articulates four themes present in the wellbeing and self-mastery approach: (1) Self-valuing focuses on how each are reminded of our great worth and we need to participate in self-affirming actions; (2) Self-care flows from self-valuing where the slogan is to 'be good to

¹⁹⁰ Mouw, *He Shines in All That's Fair*, Loc. 977, 989.

yourself; (3) Mastery clarifies and heightens idealized self-care by depending on proper health foods and supplements, beauty treatments, exercise activities, diet management, and alternative therapies; and (4) Faith in ‘nature’ draws out one’s intimate connection with the natural world including using herbs, natural essences in food and medicine.¹⁹¹ The experts are nutritionists, herbalists, naturopaths, yogis and inspiring forerunners in the movement.

The pursuit of meaning in this way of living gives renewed attention to the rhythms of eating and living in a way that what we do well gives us a sense that we are not merely doing right by ourselves, but we are also connected to something bigger than ourselves. As we let the Gospel shine its light on this unavoidable groundswell in our specific context, we must first note that this is in part a reaction to our thoughtless living around what foods we purchase, what foods we eat, and how we eat them. The reaction is against, in part, those functioning out of a Christendom context which has devalued bodies because they believe, ‘they won’t matter in the long run.’ Alongside this fair critique is also what self-mastery can remind the church about the importance of disciplines, and habits which are reflections of what we ultimately believe. We would do well to be attentive to the call for self-care, mastery, and a connection to creation—both for the sake of our body stewardship, as well as for the way it deepens how we witness to the presence of faith in our lives.

At the same time, holding the self-mastery approach in light of Scripture reminds us that ultimately, we do not find meaning in ourselves but instead have meaning because we were created as God’s image bearers, he loves us, our bodies find further value in Jesus’ affirming God’s creation in his Incarnation, physical resurrection, and embodied ascension. Similarly, just as our value finds a different source, so too does our self-care as “our care is for what honours

¹⁹¹ Kettle, *Western Culture in Gospel Context*, Loc. 5384-5398.

and furthers the purposes of God.”¹⁹² Though outwardly, the way we care for our bodies might be indistinguishable from those pursuing self-mastery, our motive rests in a different source and the duty of care will also extend to others. The pursuit of mastery also finds a different source. Kettle writes that for Christians, “mastery is always a vocation arising from the requirement of obedience to God; we are called to be *responsive* to God’s will and to the cultivation of skills that will enable us to further this.”¹⁹³ God is the primary agent in our lives and therefore our call is to be mastered by him.

ii. Moral Therapeutic Deism:

In their book, *Soul Searching*, Smith and Denton point out that for those who carry the Christian label, be they in the church or not, a significant expression of their spirituality is *Moral Therapeutic Deism*. They identify this common belief in American youth and argue that this not be exclusive to those from a Christian background. Although Smith and Denton’s focus was on youth, it has since been acknowledged that this expression of spirituality is intergenerational,¹⁹⁴ and might be “the new mainstream American religious faith for our culturally post-Christian, individualistic, mass-consumer capitalist society.”¹⁹⁵ Further, the Canadian study *Hemorrhaging Faith*, reveals that the same spirituality is being expressed North of the 49th Parallel as well.¹⁹⁶

A pattern to this spirituality is marked by the following five traits:

¹⁹² Kettle, *Western Culture in Gospel Context*, Loc. 5419.

¹⁹³ Kettle, *Western Culture in Gospel Context*, Loc. 5435.

¹⁹⁴ Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 264.

¹⁹⁵ Christian Smith and Melina Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, Reprint edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 262.

¹⁹⁶ James Penner, Rachael Harder, Erika Anderson, Bruno Désorcy, And Rick Hiemstra, *Hemorrhaging Faith: Why & When Canadian Young Adults Are Leaving, Staying & Returning to the Church*, <http://www.faithformationlearningexchange.net/uploads/5/2/4/6/5246709/hemorrhaging-faith-april-4-2013.pdf> (Accessed September 15, 2017).

1. A god exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.¹⁹⁷

Moral Therapeutic Deism is a significant concern for us, first because it is present in our churches which is a “threat to discipleship knowing that some in our churches believe God is aloof and distant and uninvolved in their lives.”¹⁹⁸ Part of the threat of Moral Therapeutic Deism is that most ‘adherents’ do not actually realize they are. For those raised in the Christian faith, this approach emerges when we are not clear about what Jesus has actually accomplished on our behalf. In a recent confession liturgy in our congregation included the jarring words from *The Message* translation of Ephesians 2: “the world, which does not know the first thing about living...” There was understandable resistance to these words amongst congregants until I explained how *the world* in this understanding is where people try to find life in places other than Jesus, how we ourselves are part of *the world* in this sense, and how it was to this *world* that God sent his Son because he loved it so deeply. Even more, as the church follows Jesus, we also are to carry the same deep commitment to *the world*. Throughout multiple conversations, I have seen a resistance to not discount the morality of unbelieving loved ones, and a reluctance to speak clarity in the work of Jesus on our behalf.

More significantly, Moral Therapeutic Deism plays out in our congregation’s Community Night dinner context. A much-loved neighbour who was initially hostile and dismissive of our church later attended a Community Night meal, and he soon became one of our core volunteers.

¹⁹⁷ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 162.

¹⁹⁸ John Bolt, Stephen J. Nichols, and Justin Taylor, *Bavinck on the Christian Life: Following Jesus in Faithful Service*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2015), 77.

Initially, when I would thank him for his involvement and for sharing his gift of joy with everyone, he would say to me, “Yep! I’m building up some good points for my day on the other side.” It was not often that any of us heard something so clearly stated, and in the years of continued relationship I was able to share with him that our motivation comes from a place of gratitude for what God has done in our lives. This is the world of grace.

A few years ago, he died suddenly, which was a blow to our community. As his brother came from out of town to go through his things, he found a note written shortly before his death and in the letter he wrote,

I, x, am of sound mind and hereby is an addendum to my will on this day, dated _____, 2015. My wish is that in the event of my passing, my celebration of life will take place at First CRC of Vancouver.

His bewildered brother, who stated clearly that he was not a person of faith, came to me and said, “I don’t know what you guys are doing, but it changed my brother’s life. He had every reason to be turned off of the church—and from God—but of all his decades of life, these last few years since retirement were the happiest years I have ever seen in him.

The example described above captures what we regularly encounter with those who are taking some tentative new steps towards God and church. If there is a message that reaches the public, it is often one that describes God as a cosmic Santa Claus, determining who has been naughty or nice. As we journey alongside individuals who have been shaped with this worldview, the challenge is not only that we need to name and work through the past failings of the church and make space for them to find their place within the community, we also need to address preconceptions of God and faith that they have somehow been cluttered with over the years.

Here we see that Moral Therapeutic Deism is a discipleship matter within the church as well as a missional matter with our neighbours. In First CRC's local context, the Moral Therapeutic Deism is often more nuanced, drawing on spiritual but not 'God' language, evidenced by the common way "karma" is popularly understood and applied. Buddhism is very diverse and does not have a single definition of karma and therefore can be understood in multiple ways, but it originally was connected to the concept of death and reincarnation, that good deeds in this life lead to a good next life; and likewise, bad deeds lead to punishment in the next life. Trying a little harder will lead to a better life in the future.

However, a sense of post-mortem justice is not how karma is used by our neighbours, many of whom are not adherents to Buddhism even though they carry with them a notion of karma. Most commonly, karma is seen as balancing good deeds with bad ones, seeking to ensure that the list of the good deeds is longer than the evil actions. Here the judgment cycle of karma is much shorter, often within the same day or week.

Under this notion of popularized karma, we can adapt these five traits:

1. Our lives on earth are being watched, and so our actions have repercussions.
2. Most people believe that we need to be good, nice and fair to each other, as taught in most religions even if one is not religious themselves.
3. The central goal is to be happy and feel good about oneself, and this might be expressed with good deeds and generosity.
4. Higher powers are not involved directly in people's lives, but things have a way of balancing out, and so a misstep will lead to consequences, and in the long-run, good deeds will find a way to help those who help.
5. Temporary rewards in the here-and-now might be enough, but there is also a nebulous picture of a more lasting reward in the afterlife. This is often latent until crisis confronts someone.

It is of deep concern for followers of Jesus that Moral Therapeutic Deism, or the modified karma-laden version in this context, is the end point of people's framework of faith. It is however, also a helpful beginning point if attended to appropriately—particularly with the

Therapeutic approach. Embedded in this approach is a recognition of how we are interconnected, and I can list many positive actions which we and our community have benefitted from neighbours who were motivated by this outlook in life. Although a mark of our church has been to help neighbours in crisis, there are certainly others drawing from a karma-based motivation who have come alongside those in need.

The Social Sciences have taught us a great deal about the impact of the human condition on one's psyche and their relation to the relationships and world around them. While we do not put all our weight into the therapeutic role, Richard Mouw points out that therapy is "itself a 'secularization' of the older Christian pietism, which paid much more attention to inner states and intimate relationships."¹⁹⁹ He calls us to engage this aspect of our social context:

We now need [a] 're-pietization' of secular therapy, a grounding of psychological motifs in a spiritually sensitive understanding of God's will for human beings in their wholeness. But that 're-pietization' cannot be a simple return to the past. It must absorb all that we are learning from our therapeutic culture.²⁰⁰

We have named a number of the contributing factors above, but it must also be noted that some of this is the result of presenting a self-centred religion where God fits into our needs, and where lower demands are presented to make the message of faith more palatable for those who do not want to re-orient their lives too much. While various social factors have led to this result, Smith and Denton suggest the social factors include therapeutic individualism, mass consumerism, residual positivism, empiricism and the new digital age. Not insignificant on their own, together these forces mold us "objectively, structurally, institutionally, and culturally."²⁰¹

¹⁹⁹ Richard J. Mouw, *Consulting The Faithful: What Christian Intellectuals Can Learn from Popular Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994), 74.

²⁰⁰ Mouw, *Consulting the Faithful*, 74.

²⁰¹ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 263.

I will not explore each of these markers in depth, but I will note the fragmentation present in these five markers. First, affirming that a god exists who created, ordered and watches over human life is true, but incomplete. In our faith story, it is the Creator & Sustainer of life who makes himself known—as companion to the first parents in the Garden, as judge and preserver Noah, as promise-maker and life-provider to Abraham, and as the *I Am* to Moses and the people of Israel and then in the birth of Jesus, God makes himself known through the mystery of the Incarnation, who later with the Father sent the Spirit. God is self-revealing and relational.

God wanting people to be good, nice and fair is also true and here the words of Jesus and Buddha and Gandhi do align. But to what end? This is a teleological misstep: God’s people are not called to be nice for the sake of being nice. As we worship God, his character is formed in us, his love is formed in us; here, the goal is not kindness, but rather relationship with God, each other, and our world. The challenge with the being ‘good and nice’ is that it is an incomplete love because it assumes this takes place outside of relationship whereas in a relationship, love will inevitably challenge and trigger our negative emotions which leads us to dependence on Christ’s presence in us.

The teleological misstep continues in the third trait of needing to be happy and feel good about ourselves. We were created to give God glory and to enjoy *him* forever.²⁰² By following in the footsteps of Jesus, we learn the Gospel’s call is a decided turn away from ourselves and onto attending to God’s presence, how he is revealing himself around us, and who he is calling us to be. Jesus’ incarnate life was marked by humility, selflessness, and forgiveness in order to bring about God’s kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

²⁰² Westminster Assembly, *The Westminster Shorter Catechism* (Radford: Wilder Publications, 2012).

Connected to the first trait of having a deistic God is the fourth trait of God not being involved until they encounter a problem. This finds common expression in our local context where most of my faith conversations with neighbours over the last ten years have occurred when they were in crisis. While I welcome the opportunity to help them attend to how God is at work in their lives, beneath this rhythm is a belief of self-sufficiency and once the crisis is past, so does dependency on God as they carry on trying to find meaning in their own reality.

Finally, good people going to heaven when they die speaks to the hope that people have in life beyond death. Life after death is certainly a core aspect to the Gospel, but the positivism at work in this fragmented spiritual expression is an incomplete morality. People want to live without consequence and find the notion of Divine justice unpalatable. Furthermore, even for those who, by God's grace have the assurance of living eternally with our God, going to heaven is a truncated and fragmented eschatology because it fails to recognize God's plan is much grander in scope than simply bringing humans to be with him in heaven—his plan is the complete redemption of creation.

iii. Paganism:

In our local context of East Vancouver, an unmistakable spiritual expression is paganism. The week children were returning to school this fall, *Vancouver Pagan Pride Day* was held at Trout Lake, just steps from our house and a few blocks from where First CRC worships. The goal of the day and of the organization, is to “be the focal point for the various factions of [their] community to communicate, celebrate with, and learn from one another...[and also as] an educational resource for the non-pagan community.” In short, the goal is to “debunk myths and

normalize [their] faith.”²⁰³ No specific faith statements are mentioned on the website, but there are fourteen different religious symbols surrounding a two-circle moon phase image.²⁰⁴ The timing of the annual gathering is in late summer/early autumn “which symbolizes the responsibilities Pagans hold to their town/city/province in honour of the various Thanksgiving holidays.”²⁰⁵ Furthermore, the group gathers for celebrations tied to each solstice as well as other key gathering times.

Many pagans might not affiliate directly with this group, but *Vancouver Pagan Pride* illustrates for us what is at work in this form of paganism. Tying their gatherings to the rhythm of the seasons and holding their gatherings outside when possible, point to the desire to attend to the significance revealed in the rhythm of the seasons. Reaching out to form a community points to the desire for mutual support to “communicate, celebrate and learn from one another.”²⁰⁶ Here the fruit of an individualized spirituality reaching maturity suggests a longing for deeper social connection, the need for communication and education in how one’s faith is formed, and the need for celebration. As well, the name Pagan Pride points to the desire for vitality in what would be an otherwise solitary endeavour.

Practitioners use magic as a way to seek control in a world that is chaotic and unpredictable. Mouw notes as well, there has been a persistence of folk magic in North America over the last three centuries where the magic “relies on ‘automatic techniques’—incantations, conjurings, spells, sacral objects—that can be relied upon to bring about certain results.”²⁰⁷

²⁰³ www.vancouverpaganpride.org (Accessed October 23, 2017).

²⁰⁴ www.vancouverpaganpride.org (Accessed October 23, 2017).

²⁰⁵ www.vancouverpaganpride.org (Accessed October 23, 2017).

²⁰⁶ www.vancouverpaganpride.org (Accessed October 23, 2017).

²⁰⁷ Mouw, *Consulting the Faithful*, 46–47.

Returning to Paganism alongside this, the website communicates as much in what it does not say. The ‘tenets’ of the faith are ambiguous, and the amalgam of symbols are undefined. Essentially what is communicated is a positive posture towards Eastern Mysticism in a religious buffet for those who are spiritual, but not religious. Any attempt to define parameters are futile, because by nature a self-defined spirituality will resist definition, and as previously noted, holding internal coherence is not a value. Linda A. Mercandate, author of *Belief Without Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual But Not Religious*, points out that even the term “New Age” is not a preferred one for Wiccans and Pagans despite the significant overlap between the spiritualities.²⁰⁸

In 1937, theologian and first General Secretary of the *World Council of Churches* Visser’t Hooft observed that the ‘worship of life’ was beginning to take primacy which could be identified by three markers: the protest against the subordination of life to reason and rational civilization; the search for intensity of experience; and the desire for communion with the natural forces.²⁰⁹ He further described neo-paganism traits of life as being “monism, pluralism, naturism, vitalism, *eros* without *agape*, and absence of hope.²¹⁰ In other words, with *monism*, humanity finds itself under the forces of an impersonal universe. *Pluralism* finds revelation from a number of sources, without discrimination. *Naturism* collapses God and nature together. *Vitalism* “seeks the intensification of life, taking whatever shows itself with unbridled vitality to be self-validating as life.”²¹¹ An aspect of vitalism is *eros* which is self-seeking without the corrective self-giving *agape*. And finally, he writes that this version of paganism:

Is a religion without a definite, well-grounded hope. Where there is only the

²⁰⁸ Mercadante, *Belief without Borders*, 69.

²⁰⁹ As cited in Kettle, *Western Culture in Gospel Context*, Kindle Edition, Loc. 5456.

²¹⁰ Kettle, *Western Culture in Gospel Context*, Loc. 5456.

²¹¹ Kettle, *Western Culture in Gospel Context*, Loc. 5456.

concept of infinity, but no meeting with God, only an abstract omnipotence, but not the omnipotence of the qualities of this one God, there is no centre of time, there is no beginning and no end and we live in an unlimited freedom without orientation and in immeasurable loneliness.²¹²

The appeal of magic in our context points to a desire to manipulate the fates in one's favour. The formulaic approach points to an attempt at control in a framework where one's situation is uncertain. In contrast, the Christian claim is that the world is not subject to Fate but is held together by our loving God who is both Creator and Sustainer of life. Mouw contrasts magic with miracle. He writes: "the crucial difference is between a magical act—which depends upon following prescribed procedures, and a miracle, which is a manifestation of God's free and sovereign decision to make his power known in a specific situation."²¹³ Mouw who follows C.S. Lewis' imaginative use of magical concepts to convey the gospel, takes a charitable posture towards the role of magic for its significance in our context:

Popular fascination with the magical can—and regularly does—function as a substitute for faith in the living God. But it can also serve as a pointer to the Deeper Magic. In complex ways, the gospel both transforms and fulfills what folk magic promises but cannot provide. If we ignore this promise-fulfillment pattern, we run the real risk of failing to address abiding human needs.²¹⁴

Mouw adds this is no simple matter for those who overtly practice magic, but also those within the church who are satisfied with the lack of clarity with how God is involved in our lives when the person and work of the Holy Spirit is minimized:

we need a biblically grounded account of God's day-to-day dealings with us in the midst of our practical uncertainties about, for example, our health, our financial resources, and our intimate relationships. When we fail to provide such an account, people—ordinary Christians—will turn to those elements of folk religion, such as New Age emphases, superstitious, a fascination with angels and demons, which are designed to deal with these very kinds of human concerns.²¹⁵

²¹² Kettle, *Western Culture in Gospel Context*, Loc. 5456.

²¹³ Mouw, *Consulting the Faithful*, 47.

²¹⁴ Mouw, *Consulting the Faithful*, 50.

²¹⁵ Mouw, *Consulting the Faithful*, 53.

The pagan attentiveness to nature, which is embodied and responsive to the rhythms and wonder of the world's order, ought to give us pause. The awareness of the world's rich variety is shared, but it is not enough for Christians to thoughtlessly adopt the notion of nature. Steven Bouma-Prediger notes that "nature implies something autonomous and separate from God, [and] it should be rejected in favour of the concept of creation"²¹⁶ because these terms point to different assumptions about the world, humans and, particularly, God.²¹⁷ Noting that each describe different construals of reality, natural resources, environment, and nature inadequately describe the physical world for Christians for any adequate theology.²¹⁸

Bouma-Prediger cites Loren Wilkinson as a corrective to an under-developed theology of creation which can be also assist as a corrective to Gnosticism. That is, where a robust creation theology is lacking, the church slips into greater commonality with paganism too quickly capitulating to the pagan notions of nature and environment. First, the authors suggest that the North American church has been presenting an oversimplified message of salvation of 'accepting Jesus in order to go to heaven' which has not addressed the responsibility we have as God's image bearers to tend and keep his creation.

Secondly, the message of 'going to heaven when we die' has conveyed a disembodied state that leaves behind a charred earth. This message has presented our neighbours with the idea that Western Christianity does not care about our bodies, or about taking care of nature (creation), or about the future of this world. What is needed, as I will argue in Chapter 3, is a reiterated call to steward the world as God's image bearers and a robust eschatological vision of the complete restoration of creation which will remind the church of our responsibility today.

²¹⁶ Steven Bouma-Prediger, *The Greening of Theology: The Ecological Models of Rosemary Radford Ruether, Joseph Stiller, and Jurgen Moltmann* (Atlanta: Oxford University Press, 1995), 278.

²¹⁷ Bouma-Prediger, *The Greening of Theology*, 278.

²¹⁸ Bouma-Prediger, *The Greening of Theology*, 278.

Closely connected to a more robust vision of a redeemed creation is the need for a clearer theology of the Holy Spirit which is embedded throughout this project. Visser't Hooft summarizes:

When the neo-pagans attack Christianity as a life-denying faith and preach their gospel of the affirmation of life, we must admit that in many expressions of Christianity the negation has been more audible than the affirmation. But we must go on to make it clear that the new life in Christ is truly abundant and does not destroy, but transforms and orients the original life force in us.²¹⁹

Missionaries who are attentive to our social context note how paganism is a significant expression in our culture which must be attended to by the Church. Speaking of his context, Newbigin wrote: “England is a pagan society and the development of a truly missionary encounter with this very tough form of paganism is the greatest intellectual and practical task facing the Church.”²²⁰ Kitchens echoes Newbigin:

Not only is the surrounding culture *not* thoroughly Christian. It has, in the minds of many theologians and missiologists, become “repaganized”...In part, this means that the mission field is no longer at the edge of the empire but—as in the Apostolic paradigm—immediately outside the front doors of our churches.²²¹

To be clear, Christians define the term pagan as ‘that which is not Christian.’ This differs from the way pagans define themselves. Yet there remain areas of overlap. Bavinck identified in paganism a “fear of mysterious forces [yet the goal of] encountering nature without being afraid of it.”²²² It is perhaps preferable to weigh in on how the church has addressed pantheism and materialism as Pagans are looking to find meaning within the immanence of the world.

In looking to the Gospel’s response to a pantheistic form of paganism where meaning and worship is directed toward nature, Bavinck writes:

²¹⁹ Kettle, *Western Culture in Gospel Context*, Loc. 5456.

²²⁰ Lesslie Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda: An Updated Autobiography* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2009), 236.

²²¹ Jim Kitchens, *The Postmodern Parish*, 74.

²²² Herman Bavinck, *Essays on Religion, Science, and Society*, ed. John Bolt, trans. Harry Boonstra and Gerrit Sheeres, Reprint edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 96.

In pantheism the world may be a living organism, of which God is the soul... Scripture's worldview is radically different. From the beginning heaven and earth have been distinct. Everything was created with a nature of its own and rests in ordinances established by God. Sun, moon, and stars have their own unique task; plants, animals, and humans are distinct in nature. There is the most profuse diversity and yet, in that diversity, there is also a superlative kind of unity. The foundation of both diversity and unity is in God...

In the virtue of this unity the world can, metaphorically, be called an organism, in which all the parts are connected with each other and influence each other reciprocally. Heaven and earth, man [sic] and animal, soul and body, truth and life, art and science, religion and morality, state and church, family and society, and so on, though they are all distinct, are not separated. There is a wide range of connections between them; an organic, or if you will, an ethic bond holds them all together.²²³

The critique of the Gospel on paganism rests most centrally on confusing creation with the Creator. Kettle summarizes: "True sacredness lies not in particular things in the world, but in God who discloses himself, in the context of creation, precisely as himself our deepest context."²²⁴ Augustine wrote a lengthy analogy of a bridegroom giving his bride a ring and the bride was so preoccupied with the ring that she said, "this ring is enough for me; now I don't want to see his face again." What kind of person would she be? Instead, says Augustine, "A bridegroom gives a pledge for the very purpose that he himself may be loved in his pledge."²²⁵ This is what God has done. He gave us all things so that we will love the One who made them and entrusted them to us. But if, instead, we direct our love to what he made rather than to him, we become guilty of adultery. He writes, "God doesn't forbid you to love [what he made], but you mustn't love them in the expectation of blessedness...you must favour and praise them in such a way that you love the Creator."²²⁶

²²³ Bolt, Nichols, and Taylor, *Bavinck on the Christian Life*, 143.

²²⁴ Kettle, *Western Culture in Gospel Context*, Loc. 1212.

²²⁵ Saint Augustine, *Homilies on the First Epistle of John*, trans. Boniface Ramsey (Hyde Park: New City Press, 2008), Comment on 1 John 2:15.

²²⁶ Augustine, Comment on 1 John 2:15.

iv. Conclusion:

In this section, we have attended to the fragmentation which is expressed in our spiritual identities. Among the many losses sustained by this fracturing is the loss of coherence producing people who are in a constant search for meaning. Our neighbours might, to quote Mercadante again, “live with syncretic and frequently inconsistent beliefs, creative amalgams which were often unique and changing.”²²⁷ Inherent to an individualistically-formed faith, be it expressed through Self-Mastery, Moral Therapeutic Deism, or Paganism, is fragmentation of beliefs or practices—either fragmented in severing a life of godly living from relationship with God or in recognizing a spiritually charged nature and world, but cutting it off from its Source.

Scripture holds the single great story. Of course, claims of a metanarrative will be resisted, but the task of the preacher and congregation is to tell and live the stories of Jesus’ transformation and how these stories are connected to the single great story told in the Bible. But the loss of a coherent outlook is not reserved for those who are “spiritual, but not religious”—it also surfaces in the church, particularly in how we can misread the Bible. Goheen and Bartholomew describe this happening when Christians treat the Bible like it is a collection of fragments:

If [the Bible] were merely a mosaic of little bits—theological bits, moral bits, historical-critical bits, sermon bits, devotional bits...we ignore its divine author's intention to shape our lives through its story...If we allow the Bible to become fragmented, it is in danger of being absorbed into whatever *other* story is shaping our culture, and it will thus cease to shape our lives as it should...a fragmented Bible may actually produce theologically orthodox, morally upright, warmly pious idol worshippers!

If our lives are to be shaped by the story of Scripture, we need to understand two things well: the biblical story is a compelling unity on which we may depend, and each of us has a place within that story.²²⁸

²²⁷ Mercadante, *Belief without Borders*, 79.

²²⁸ Bartholomew and Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture*, preface.

It is sobering to think that even in the church we can have well-intentioned, theologically correct idol worshippers. If we fail to recognize how fragmented we too are, Goheen and Bartholomew agree with James Smith that we are just as vulnerable as anyone else in our social context to be carried off by any number of cultural liturgies. However, even though the church is also prone to fragmenting the Gospel (and therefore our lives), it is also the Gospel which can restore us and our society out of our fragmentation.

The way to combat fragmentation is to see how the Gospel takes the fragments and weaves together a coherent story and draws humanity into it to participate in God's teleological and eschatological purposes, which we will explore further in Chapter 3. Alongside the concept of fragmentation, the Gospel's light on individualism and community is also instructive. Our society's version of individualism leads to fragmentation, and the solution calls us to root ourselves in community. However, it is a version of community which still retains a biblical individualism. In 1 Corinthians, the Apostle Paul challenges the Empire's version of individualism which was distorting the church in many different ways and [in 12:12-31](#), the antidote is Spirit-powered service for the sake of Christ's body, the church. He does this first by reminding the church that they are more than their composite parts—they are in fact part of the body of Christ. In the span of these verses there are 25 references to "body" and "one" to reinforce how we are designed for and called into, community.

The goal in all of this is that as we better understand our context and our neighbours, that we can be better equipped to offer the transformative message of Christ's promise of personal and cosmological renewal. Our neighbours are thinking about and concerned with meaning and are left trying to find coherence as they hold the pieces of Humpty Dumpty. As God's people we can affirm the longings of looking for life beyond oneself, the delight in the beauty of the world

around us, to affirm the goodness of our bodies by stewarding them well, and the impulse to find motivation for leaving the world because of our influence. Essentially, it is to help us find our voice as Jesus' followers who are seeking to be faithful in his kingdom witness call.

Shift 2. Relating to Each Other: Shining the Gospel light on Autonomy in a Crowd

A recent CBC Radio story highlighted the deep concern of loneliness present in our social context. It described how social isolation is becoming a leading cause of early death, worse in fact, than obesity and second only to smoking.²²⁹ One of the suggestions in the interview is that doctors should in fact to start screening for those who do not have a supportive community.

The story addresses a growing need for social connection which is difficult to identify.

Simon Weil writes about this need to be rooted:

To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul. It is one of the hardest to define. A human being has roots by virtue of his [sic] real, active and natural participation in the life of a community which preserves in living shape certain particular treasures of the past and certain particular expectations for the future.²³⁰

A. Living in a Lonely World

Many factors contribute to loneliness. Though not comprehensive, they can include hyper-individualism, increased physical isolation, desire of autonomy, economics, and an idealized understanding of community.

At its root, loneliness has a close correlation to individualism. This finds expression in our context with people moving to the city for work opportunity without being able to build up a

²²⁹ "Why Loneliness Can Be as Unhealthy as Smoking 15 Cigarettes a Day," CBC News <http://www.cbc.ca/news/health/loneliness-public-health-psychologist-1.4249637> (Accessed September 29, 2017).

²³⁰ Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties Towards Mankind*, Trans. Arthur Wells (London; Routledge, 2001), 41.

social network of support. Others moved away from their smaller towns to pursue the freedom of anonymity to pursue a lifestyle which they felt would not be accepted in their rural contexts. Urban loneliness is compounded structurally with a significant percentage of bachelor suites and one-bedroom apartments, and socially with jobs that demand long hours which further limit opportunities to connect with others. Along with the structural inhibitors our living spaces have on social connection, the prohibitive cost of real estate pushes people to find more affordable contexts which limits the time young people remain living in the city. The nature of fluid mobility is an additional factor as many move from one city to another to pursue new opportunities but also the need for restarting social connections. Yet another contributor to loneliness occurs when the mobility between cities leaves behind aging parents and other vulnerable family members are left without their social network of support that they had once known.

Newbigin notes that loneliness-inducing fluidity in the urban environment is further complicated by the busyness of our lives in the city. In a rural context, the ‘worlds’ of residence, work, kinship, political commitment, largely overlap. Today in contemporary urban society, he writes, "most people live in several places at the same time which pulls the same person in different directions and involves a variety of commitments."²³¹ The challenge for community is further complicated by the way technology now mediates communication rather than in-person connection.²³²

But in order to build community we must be willing to be vulnerable with strangers. Bauman notes that for community to exist, there needs to be the sacrifices of our freedom and security—not something we give up easily. Zygmund Bauman observes:

²³¹ Lesslie Newbigin, "What is 'A Church Truly United'?" in *Ecumenical Review*, vol. 29, 1977, 119.

²³² See Quentin J. Schultze and Jean Elshtain, *Habits of the High-Tech Heart: Living Virtuously in the Information Age* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004).

Promoting security always calls for the sacrifice of freedom, while freedom can only be expanded at the expense of security...[This circumstance] makes living together conflict-ridden, as security sacrificed in the name of freedom tends to be *other people's* security; and freedom sacrificed in the name of security tends to be *other people's* freedom.²³³

As more individuals come to the city, there emerges a greater need for space which in turn shrinks living spaces and moves people into greater proximity. Perhaps out of self-protection, the irony of closer quarters often means lessened connection besides a few words exchanged in the mailbox room or elevator.²³⁴ Even in more neighbourhood-type zoning loneliness appears for the opposite reason—attached two-car garages mean that one does not interact with neighbours by parking on the street, but essentially drive into their home and remain on their own, or with the others who live in the house with them.

Even attempts of architectural design to facilitate and enhance community cannot guarantee to 'make it happen.' Jacques Ellul describes an architectural project designed by French-Swiss architect *Le Corbusier* which was envisioned to:

create great blocks of dwellings where people will meet one another as they did in the village, with everything (the grocer, baker, butcher) included in the block so that people will get to know each other and a community will come into being.

Though this sounds quite ideal, and remains a positive vision for some urban planners, Ellul describes the project as a failed experiment and has little optimism on similar future initiatives because one cannot manufacture community: "No change in the walls, no purification

²³³ Zygmunt Bauman, *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), 20.

²³⁴ See "Getting it Wrong" in Charles Montgomery, *Happy City* (Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2013). Montgomery cites Vancouver Foundation's *Connections and Engagements* report noting that those who live in towers trust their neighbours *less* than those who live in neighbourhoods. They felt lonelier, less connected and half as many were willing to help their neighbours.

of the air or improvement in lighting, no mixture of greenery and cement could transform the city's spiritual being."²³⁵

B. Idealism as a Barrier to Community

The broader social factors certainly contribute to loneliness, but perhaps the most significant are the internal factors rooted in desiring security and holding onto idealism.

Addressing the former, Bauman writes:

We miss community because we miss security, a quality crucial to a happy life, but one which the world we inhabit is ever less able to offer and ever more reluctant to promise. But community remains stubbornly missing, eludes our grasp or keeps falling apart, because the way in which this world prompts us to go about fulfilling our dreams of a secure life does not bring us closer to their fulfillment; instead of being mitigated, our insecurity grows as we go, and so we go on dreaming, trying, and failing.²³⁶

Our desire for security, it turns out, is not possible when it rooted in the wrong place. The same happens when our vision of community is misguided idealism. Idealism is the enemy to community because it sets us up for unrealistic expectations for ourselves, and more often, for others. As Vanier states, "Community is not an ideal; it is people. It is you and I. In community we are called to love people just as they are with their wounds and their gifts, not as we would want them to be."²³⁷

When we believe we find our security in self-protection, we will not be able to be vulnerable enough to discover a deeper, stronger security found in connection with others. Moreover, when we believe in an unrealistic vision of community, we will run away the moment we experience offense and will continue searching for the impossible—a perfect community.

²³⁵ Jacques Ellul and Robert K. Merton, *The Technological Society*, trans. John Wilkinson, (New York: Vintage Books, 1964), 158.

²³⁶ Bauman, *Community*, 144.

²³⁷ Jean Vanier, *From Brokenness to Community* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), Kindle Edition, Loc. 358.

The problem is, when we approach community in this way, the results increasingly worsen.

Bauman writes:

The decline of community is...self-perpetuating; once it takes off, there are fewer and fewer stimuli to stem the disintegration of human bonds and seek ways to tie again what has been torn apart. The plight of individuals fighting it all alone may be painful and unprepossessing, but firm and binding commitments to act together seem to auger more harm than gain.²³⁸

We need to hold and model a more realistic picture of what community ought to look like. As Tim Dickau has said, “Community does not end with conflict...instead, the other side of conflict is where true community begins.”²³⁹

C. Community in the Local Context:

In 2012, the Vancouver Foundation issued a report that, following one year of interviews and surveys, announced that the greatest problem in our city was not housing, or poverty, or infrastructure, but loneliness.²⁴⁰ Kuyper describes the loneliness in a way that could have been written today in Vancouver:

And so you see people in the world go out in two directions. On one side the wretched and distressed pining away in inner solitariness; on the other side, the laughing, always busy, hurried and self-externalizing crowd, which neither even seeks solitude nor harbours a thought about its own solitary soul.

Against this giving way too much to solitude, and this not entering far enough into the appreciation of the soul’s solitariness, one remedy alone is offered unto us, and that is, the coming into the loneliness of our soul of the fellowship of our God.²⁴¹

Kuyper is correct that our ultimate loneliness will not be addressed until, as Augustine said, our souls find rest God. However, the starting point is for God’s community to model

²³⁸ Bauman, *Community*, 48.

²³⁹ Tim Dickau shared this with me in a conversation in 2014.

²⁴⁰ *Isolation and disconnection: Connections and Engagement: A Survey of Metro Vancouver*. Vancouver Foundation, June 2012 <https://www.vancouverfoundation.ca/sites/default/files/documents/VanFdn-SurveyResults-Report.pdf> (Accessed December 13, 2017).

²⁴¹ Kuyper, *To Be Near Unto God*, 80.

fellowship with him to those who are lonely. I will explore how our congregation can address the loneliness in our local context through two aspects: space making and community making.

Space making

While Ellul, who is quite skeptical of the city, is correct that space cannot create community, proper use of space can enhance the opportunity for community. In the Old Testament, we see specific attention given for the use of space as a way to belong. Clear and specific calls to care for the widow, orphan and foreigner within your gates likely meant the practical needs were met, but that first assumed that those experiencing these aspects of social isolation actually *were* inside the gates! The city gate and later square became the spaces for social connection—the socially isolated had a place, so too the elders of the town. And most importantly, the outermost space surrounding the Temple was also a place of gathering where, again, the socially isolated be it by poverty, circumstance or age all had a place.

The impact of social isolation is not merely an arm's length issue for policy makers and sociologists who are interested in cultural shifts. It is an issue felt immediately and acutely. We will now explore how the generalized issue of loneliness impacts our cultural context of East Vancouver to better discern the role of our congregation in addressing one of the greatest needs around us and to recognize the longing for community with those we pass by on the streets, coffee shops, and grocery stores.

As a congregation we feel intensely the loneliness in our context. We are surrounded by a number of three and four-storey higher density housing buildings, only one of which has a very active social committee. We also have some neighbours living within a wider radius who also experience loneliness. Additionally, since May 2016, we now have a six-story building on property our church once owned, where up to 120 refugee newcomers spend their first weeks.

They have not only faced the socially isolating terrors and persecution in their home countries but now face the disorientation of being linguistically and culturally isolated. For these reasons, our church has decided to be involved in space making for those who are longing for deeper connections.

These words are carved into our church building: “Rehoboth: The Lord has made room for us.” The verse is a reminder that we understand our role as stewards of God’s hospitality towards us, is not simply for us, it is to be shared. Jean Vanier offers a positive vision for the need to welcome: “Welcome is one of the signs that a community is alive. To invite others to live with us is a sign that we aren’t afraid, that we have a treasure of truth and of peace to share.”²⁴²

Over the years we have sought to make our church property more enjoyable by beautifying the outdoor space with a Community Garden that many neighbours continue to tell us how much of an oasis it is in our neighbourhood. We have also installed planters and benches at the front of our church building to make the place more inviting. And more recently, we have placed basketball hoops in our parking lot to facilitate neighbour connections. We also expanded our weekly Community Night meals from an average of 6-8 people in 2007 to 60-80 people who represent a wide socio-economic range. At these meals, people are known and addressed by name. More recently our *Chaplain and Refugee Support Mobilizer* has coordinated space-making with Refugee Newcomers through *Tea and Conversations* for all generations, as well as an *Art Night* for the children. As these ministries continue to mature, we are discovering that people are coming to be known. To be clear, it is not yet the full expression of a Christian

²⁴² Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth*, 2nd edition (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 268. Vanier continues, stating that if this welcome and invitation is missing due to “fear, weariness, insecurity, a desire to cling for comfort or just because it is fed up with visitors—is dying spiritually.”

community, but we are moving towards one another through shared experiences, memories and enjoyment.²⁴³

D. Community Making

Where space-making is a more passive way of addressing social isolation, Community Making more actively facilitates social connections. As pastors in the neighbourhood we were able to use a crisis in the neighbourhood to establish a *Block Watch* group, begin semi-regular Block Parties, which then started a neighbourhood google group. People who had been neighbours for forty years and had never met did so for the first time and many of these connections are continuing to deepen.

For our congregation, the process of making the *Garden of Eatin'* and *Community Night* have been formative in Community Making. The purpose of the Community Garden was not only to have a more beautiful space for neighbours to sit in but was intentionally a space-making initiative to get to know our neighbours by stewarding creation alongside them. *Community Night* has also helped us make community, because over food, as we have been addressing the concerns of social isolation, some neighbours who had previously been very isolated are now stakeholders for this ministry as they are involved in the set-up, clean-up and cooking.

We have learned, and particularly in Community Night, have needed to model how to navigate conflict. I believe that slowly, we and our neighbours-now-friends, are learning the truth of Vanier's words: "Growth will come as we come closer to people who are different from us and as we learn to welcome and listen even to those who trigger off our pain."²⁴⁴

²⁴³ One other significant way this takes place has been with our choir which has now morphed into a monthly community choir sing-along who happen to sing worship songs!

²⁴⁴ Jean Vanier, *From Brokenness to Community* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), Kindle Edition, Loc. 385.

E. A Gospel Response Calling for a Willingness to be Changed:

God addresses our loneliness and isolation first by drawing us in communion with God's Triune self, and second, draws us in to relationship with each other by making reconciliation happen. Gordon Carkner reminds us:

Because loneliness and isolation are an increasingly significant element of our virtual society, it is important to remember that faith involves a deep personal relationship with a very personal God, a triune God of communion...It is only a *personal*, loving God who can be asked for an answer to tragedy, evil and suffering, or who has enough depth and history with the human narrative to field the deepest questions of calling, meaning and purpose. In an impersonal world, we need the knowledge that a personal God has our back.²⁴⁵

However, because the heart of the Gospel is reconciliation—first between God and us, and then between ourselves because of Christ—we are stewards of reconciliation amongst our neighbours. Overcoming social isolation, moving from a crowd to community, is in fact a form of reconciliation between strangers. Here we witness again, the Gospel at work:

At the heart of community...there is forgiveness. Reconciliation is at the heart of community. To grow in love means that we become men and women of forgiveness, of reconciliation."²⁴⁶

As stewards of reconciliation part of the gift of living into a more authentic vision of community is the way we ourselves are changed. Here is where, to use Vanier's words again, "God is not just present in [our] capacity to heal but rather in [our] need to be healed."²⁴⁷

²⁴⁵ Gordon Carkner, *The Great Escape from Nihilism: Rediscovering Our Passion in Late Modernity* (Vancouver: Infocus Publishing, 2016), 61-62.

²⁴⁶ Vanier, *From Brokenness to Community*, Loc. 392.

²⁴⁷ Vanier, *From Brokenness to Community*, Loc. 210.

Shift 3. Relating to Society and the world: Continuities and Discontinuities between Social Conscience and the Gospel

A. Relating to Society in our General Cultural Context

To this point we have explored identity in relation to the interior spiritual life and in relation to community. We now turn our attention to how one relates to society—that is, how those in our context understand how they participate in society and, more broadly, the world. Here I will explore how the postmodern identity differs from modernity, how meaning is found positively through social altruism, primarily in the work for justice and creation care, but also negatively through the misshaping forces of narcissism, consumerism and hedonism. I will illustrate these constructive and destructive forces in our local context before concluding with Scripture’s witness for a way forward.

One of the most common ways we relate to the wider world is through multimedia. In today’s social media saturated world, Instagram, for example, gives glimpses of our lives to onlookers scrolling through their feeds. The nature of these images, of course, varies significantly, but some commonalities emerge. Most prominent is the theme of selectivity, as the pictures tend to be most often enhanced with filters and photo editing. Alongside this, people are constantly determining which aspects of their lives are ‘sharable’ and which parts are not. Presented in succession, these images string together a pieced-together image of ourselves, which means our lives are being presented as fragmented.

While reality TV programs like *Big Brother* series, *The Amazing Race*, and *Survivor* point to our fascination with wanting to witness ‘real’ lives of people, it is much rarer that any of us stop to notice how our own mistakes are part of the bigger story. In fact, in a postmodern world, many have been trying to convince themselves that that there is no real thread or meaning

to life. So social media is not simply something *we do*; it is an expression of *who we are*. Being attentive to these fragments reveals the way humanity is trying to find meaning in life, all of which is undergirded by the conviction that we need to live without Transcendent help.

Brian Ingraffia summarizes the shift in our cultural context between modernity and postmodernity in that any symbolic link to the Transcendent is seen as a threat: “Whereas modernism tried to elevate man into God’s place, postmodern theory seeks to destroy or deconstruct the very place and attributes of God.”²⁴⁸ Living in the wake of Nietzsche, there is a rejection of Modernism’s metanarratives: “Not only is God seen as a fiction or a projection of man, as in modernism, but the Christian God is rejected as a *bad* fiction.”²⁴⁹ In his book *Sources of the Self*, Charles Taylor notes that this shift has brought about more change than rejecting any association of a theistic framework—one’s sense of selfhood has also changed within the rationalistic Enlightenment framework. He writes:

My identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose. In other words, it is the horizon within which I am capable of taking a ‘stand.’”²⁵⁰

An identity formed in the way of Enlightenment meant rationalism was still appealing to an external standard. Now what is considered ‘right’ is self-referential and what is ‘good’ reflects the way oneself relates to the various dimensions of ourselves, our relation to each other, and our world,²⁵¹ as we seek to make “the best sense of our lives.”²⁵² Grand narratives,

²⁴⁸ Brian D. Ingraffia, *Postmodern Theory and Biblical Theology: Vanquishing God’s Shadow* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 1.

²⁴⁹ Ingraffia, *Postmodern Theory and Biblical Theology*, 2.

²⁵⁰ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, REP edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 27.

²⁵¹ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 44.

²⁵² Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 58.

particularly religious ones which had previously provided the framework for morality,²⁵³ now are viewed with suspicion. Along with seeking meaning in reference to the external world,

Postmodern method depends on autobiographical reconstruction of the world through the self's experiences, whereas modernist method distances the self, and thus knowledge, from the world. The upside of the postmodern turn is rich immersion in self-experience; the downside of this turn is the neglect of theoretical constructs that can illumine the deep and often invisible structures enmeshing experience.²⁵⁴

We would do well to attend to these invisible structures because as the above authors have argued, while rejecting the external moral standard seemed to bring our social context freedom, we continue to search for meaning beyond ourselves without the moral framework that defines our boundaries. At stake is the question how postmodern people, who are defined by culture, media and occupation,²⁵⁵ come to understand what "good" is and what one appeals to in naming something as a "good."

Our lives have become a "quest", a story which unfolds as we learn who we are in relation to the various goods we deem important.²⁵⁶ Taylor suggests that we really cannot evaluate our moral positions without the background, inherited values he calls 'hypergoods': "Goods which not only are incomparably more important than others but provide the standpoint from which these must be weighed, judged, decided about."²⁵⁷ The rational and empirical method we have inherited has caused a chasm between what we believe is important and why in fact we believe it is important.²⁵⁸ Taylor writes:

We as inheritors of [an Enlightenment and Deist] development feel particularly strongly the demand for universal justice and benevolence, are particularly

²⁵³ Ben Agger, *Postponing the Postmodern: Sociological Practices, Selves, and Theories* (Lanham.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002), 7.

²⁵⁴ Agger, *Postponing the Postmodern*, 12.

²⁵⁵ Agger, *Postponing the Postmodern*, 12.

²⁵⁶ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 51–52.

²⁵⁷ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 63.

²⁵⁸ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 59, 164.

sensitive to the claims of equality, feel the demands to freedom and self-rule as axiomatically justified, and put a very high priority on the avoidance of death and suffering.

But under this general agreement, there are profound rifts when it comes to the constitutive goods, and hence moral sources, which underpin these standards... The moral sources [are distributed] into three large domains: the original theistic grounding for these standards; a second one that centres on a naturalism of disengaged reason, which in our day takes scientific forms; and a third family of views which finds its sources in Romantic expressivism or in one of the modernist successor visions.²⁵⁹

What results, Taylor points out, are conflicting views which “coexist with those which have arisen later in relation to them...[and which] go on influencing and shaping each other.”²⁶⁰

Taylor describes why it is so vital for us to understand how our identities are formed and what is at stake in this way of living”

What I hope emerges from this lengthy account of the growth of the modern identity is how all-pervasive it is, how much it envelops us, and how deeply we are implicated in it: in a sense of self defined by the powers of disengaged reason as well as of the creative imagination, in the characteristically modern understandings of freedom and dignity and rights, in the ideals of self-fulfillment and expression, and in the demands of universal benevolence and justice.”²⁶¹

Having explored how our identities are shaped in our current social context, we are now able to engage our primary question, which is how we relate to society and the world. As we have seen, there is both continuity and discontinuity in how followers of Christ will relate to the world. With our general social context in view, I will focus on justice as a place of continuity between our social conscience and the gospel call. I will then address the discontinuities between our social conscience and the gospel, particularly that of consumerism and hedonism.

²⁵⁹ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 495.

²⁶⁰ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 497.

²⁶¹ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 503.

B. Continuities of postmodernism and the Gospel in Relation to the World:

James K.A. Smith has pointed out that there are legacies of the gospel everywhere in the world around us. These “crater marks of the gospel on society” include both morality and compassionate impulse towards the vulnerable. His encouragement offers words of hope because our society continues to be indebted to the gospel everywhere we look.²⁶² One such place is in the concept of justice.

Taylor affirms that despite conflicting moral foundations, the postmodern sense of justice and public morality is remarkably like the Judeo-Christian expressed morality: “the continuity between various frameworks remain remarkably similar, with the exception of abortion.”²⁶³ I would add to Taylor’s exception the topic of sexual morality. However, the postmodern sentiment does denounce mass killings, political tyranny, economic imbalance and the powerful taking advantage of the vulnerable. Greene and Robinson point out that the postmodern sensitivity towards the vulnerable is in fact, a desire to make amends for past actions: “The legacy of colonialism is often seen as the direct consequence of the inequalities engendered by modernity...hence, postmodernity seeks to right the wrongs.”²⁶⁴ This drive to right the wrongs has emerged from a two-stage shift: first a move away from a common meta-narrative has opened the possibility to view specific situations from multiple viewpoints, and this in turn has tuned the postmodern person’s ear towards voices which had previously been overlooked or ignored.

It should be noted that in some cases, our postmodern conscience identifies and speaks out about injustice before the church does. In speaking of the problem of poverty more than a

²⁶² James K.A. Smith, “Public Lecture for the *Society of Christian Schools of British Columbia*” October 5, 2017 in Surrey, BC.

²⁶³ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 515.

²⁶⁴ Greene and Robinson, *Metavista*, 78.

century ago, Kuyper noted how it was the public sentiment that had been a more consistent voice than the church to address poverty in their context. He writes, "At the late date of this Congress, we find ourselves fighting a rearguard action. The socialists themselves, and not only our Christian leaders, expose our failure to act."²⁶⁵

The social conscience has also called the Church to account for the ways God's people have been complicit in injustice. Examples of society holding the church to account is evidenced in three significant ways: abuse at the hands of clergy, church participation in residential schools, and the church's posture towards the physical world.

We must pay attention to how the Spirit of God is using the social conscience to draw his church back into alignment with his purposes. Indeed, I argue that these three examples are in part, the "craters" of God's kingdom where society has unknowingly taken what they learned from the gospel and is holding the church to that standard. It is also important to point out that the church has been a source of this call for right living. Bavinck argued that to live faithfully requires us to recognize how our actions relate to our own relational context. Bavinck writes:

According to Scripture, the important general principle for a solution to the social question is that there be justice. This means that each person be assigned to the place where, in accord with their nature, they are able to live according to God's ordinances with respect to God and other creatures.²⁶⁶

To live according to God's ordinances with respect to our relationship with God and other creatures, Kuyper suggested a four-part strategy: (1) to oppose all forms of colonization whether military or economic; (2) to work on the salvation and restoration of the family unit; (3)

²⁶⁵ Abraham Kuyper, *The Problem of Poverty*, trans. James W. Skillen (Sioux Center: Dordt College Press, 2011), 26–27.

²⁶⁶ Hermann Bavinck, "General Biblical Principles and the Relevance of Concrete Mosaic Law for the Social Question Today (1891)" *Trans. John Bolt, Journal of Markets and Morality*, no. 2, (Fall 2010): 445.

to insist on the dignity of work above the dignity of fame and riches; and (4) support any government which stands on the side of justice for all.²⁶⁷

This task requires immense wisdom because we live in a creation in which all relationships are tainted by sin. We need to recognize where we are being called to resist that which denigrates, and to work proactively towards that which enriches human life. Wolterstorff points us towards shalom—an existence marked by right relationships with God, ourselves, each other and creation. He says:

An implication of this, is that our world will always have the two dimensions of a struggle for justice and the pursuit of increased mastery of the world so as to enrich human life. Both together are necessary if *shalom* is to be brought nearer. Development and liberation must go hand in hand. Ours is both a cultural mandate and a liberation mandate—the mandate to master the world for the benefit of mankind, but also a mandate ‘to loose the chains of injustice...’²⁶⁸

Wolterstorff touches on a tension embedded within the Transformational tradition which is being pulled between creation and fulfillment.²⁶⁹ Although creation began with perfect peace, shalom here is not a reversion to the way things were prior to the Fall. Rather, shalom is a redeemed peace through Christ which has overcome the effects of the Fall. Taking a cue from Wolterstorff, in Chapter 3, I will argue for a shift from a creation-order to a shalom-order eschatology which means that the picture of shalom is not the *Garden of Eden*. It is a *redeemed shalom* described in the the garden-city of the New Creation which becomes our template for living in the present. This aligns with Jonathan Wilson’s definition of peace (shalom) being the *telos* of creation:

²⁶⁷ Kuyper, *The Problem of Poverty*, preface.

²⁶⁸ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1987), 72. See Isaiah 58:6-7.

²⁶⁹ Nathan Shannon observes: “The tradition is caught between its aversion to restoration as truncating or immanentizing biblical eschatology and a desire to preserve concern for the present order and to avoid the embarrassment of an avertive orientation and a pietistic religiosity.” Nathan Shannon, *Shalom and The Ethics of Belief* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2015), Footnote 62.

The story of God's creative work and the work of God's consummation of that work is one can only be understood as shalom. Peace is the *telos* of creation...this peace is anticipated in the first stories of creation, in the visions of the prophets, in the poetry of the psalmists, in the life of Jesus, in the teaching and practices of Paul and John, and in the Apocalypse.²⁷⁰

The concept of shalom is a common one in our tradition but if not properly understood and applied, it can be as vague as singing *Kumbaya* or the Beatles' *All you need is Love*. Shalom, as I will argue in Chapter 3, ought to be our eschatological template for witnessing how God is redeeming the brokenness in us and our world.

C. Discontinuities of postmodernism and the Gospel in relation to the wider world:

i. Discontinuity of Source

As we acknowledge areas of continuity as well as places where our society has led the church in moral reform, we also need to be discerning about which matters to attend to and which ones ought to be resisted. This means we must also be clear where the social ethos has departed significantly from the gospel. First I will address the more fundamental departure of common moral framework, followed by the discontinuities of consumerism and hedonism. In this, I will also discuss how the church in our social context is not immune from these distortions.

After noting the continuity between the social conscience of the Judeo-Christian ethic, Charles Taylor then points out that while the two moralities are recognizable to each other, they differ in their source because today's view of modern identity is "still entirely anthropocentric and treats all goods which are not anchored in human powers or fulfillments ...as from a bygone

²⁷⁰ Jonathan Wilson, *God's Good World: Reclaiming the Doctrine of Creation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2013), 27.

age.”²⁷¹ In other words, they have dismissed the Judeo-Christian moral framework as obsolete.

He then asks,

so why worry that we disagree on the reasons, as long as we’re united around the norms? It’s not the disagreement which is the problem. Rather the issue is what sources can support our far-reaching moral commitments to benevolence and justice.²⁷²

As Christians, we might share moral convictions with our neighbours, but they might not know where this feeling originates and lack the moral justification for a particular ethical or moral stance. Kettle notes this confusion is the result of abandoning the objective moral standard held by the church:

Secular society, of course, sees itself as sponsoring free enquiry into the truth. However, it tends to neglect the fact that both regard for the truth and enquiry into the truth (which is part of such regard) have tacit cultural and traditional dimensions. This leaves it narrow, explicit, ideological forms of rationality, and inclined to dismiss, trivialize, distract from, or seduce away from the demands of religious enquiry.²⁷³

The result of this approach leads to instrumentalism and subjectivism, leaving us relating to each other through a series of partial roles.²⁷⁴ Not only do people relate to each other in a less human manner, they also become much more subjective in their approach to various moral decisions.

Self-expression, self-realization, self-fulfillment, pursuing authenticity and the ‘triumph of the therapeutic’ are viewed as positive values in our social context.²⁷⁵ However, the result of this approach is an inconsistent and shallow engagement with our cultural context. The reason, argues Taylor, is “because no non-anthropocentric good, indeed nothing outside subjective

²⁷¹ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 506.

²⁷² Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 515.

²⁷³ Kettle, *Western Culture in Gospel Context*, Loc. 552.

²⁷⁴ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 502.

²⁷⁵ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 507.

goods, can be allowed to trump self-realisation, the very language of morals and politics tends to sink to the relatively colourless subjectivist talk of ‘values.’”²⁷⁶ And the problem with subjectivity is that:

A total and fully consistent subjectivism would end towards emptiness: nothing would count as a fulfillment in a world in which literally nothing was important but self-fulfillment... There are consequences to this approach: [There is no guarantee] against loss of meaning, fragmentation, the loss of substance in our human environment and our affiliations.”²⁷⁷

Indeed, by abandoning the Source, those in our social context look for meaning *within* their moral decisions, which can lead to terrible consequences. The recent increase in Westerners becoming radicalized militants is an alarming example. Here, the individual finds meaning within a system that is objectively immoral, but within the system they are presented with a coherent meaning-making moral action. Taylor prophetically described this moral distortion:

In our day as in [Dostoyevsky’s], many young people are driven to political extremism, sometimes by truly terrible conditions, but also by a need to give meaning to their lives. And since meaninglessness is frequently accompanied by a sense of guilt, they sometimes respond to a strong ideology of polarization, in which one recovers a sense of direction as well as a sense of purity by lining up in implacable opposition to the forces of darkness. The more implacable, even violent the opposition, the more the polarity is represented as absolute, and the greater the sense of separation from evil and hence purity.²⁷⁸

ii. Discontinuities of Hedonism, Narcissism and Consumerism:

Individualism leads to inconsistent rationale for morality. It also inevitably results in hedonism, narcissism and consumerism. I list these three because they are so closely related: the goal of hedonism is the primary pursuit of personal pleasure. The often-recurring question a

²⁷⁶ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 507.

²⁷⁷ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 510.

²⁷⁸ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 516–17.

hedonist asks is “how can I maximize the amount of pleasure in my life while minimizing the amount of pain and inconvenience which I must endure?”²⁷⁹

A close cousin to hedonism is narcissism, where self is the centre of existence. Beyond the deep cultural shifts noted above, in *The Narcissism Epidemic*, Twenge and Campbell identify four specific contributing factors to this self-centred living. They write,

Imagine narcissism in society resting on a four-legged stool. One leg is developmental, including permissive parenting and self-esteem-focused education. The second leg is the media culture of shallow celebrity. The third is the Internet: Despite its many benefits, the Web also serves as a conduit for individual narcissism. Finally, easy credit makes narcissistic dreams into reality.²⁸⁰

Developmentally, our society raises people who are fundamentally oriented towards themselves first, which means that anything else one relates to in society must be filtered through a self-centred framework. Taylor notes that the individual reigns in our social context, and “community affiliations, the solidarities of birth, of marriage, of the family, of the polis, all take second place.”²⁸¹ This expression of individualism has significant implications for how one relates to society. To follow the logic of this developmental posture leaves no room for sacrificial giving unless it fulfills a personal good and subjugates responsibility to desires and preferences. But our pursuit of the ‘good life’ can easily be pursued at someone else’s expense. Cavanaugh offers:

The key question in every transaction is whether or not the transaction contributes to the flourishing of each person involved, and this question can only be judged, from a theological point of view, according to the end of human life, which is participation in the life of God.²⁸²

²⁷⁹ Greene and Robinson, *Metavista*, 78.

²⁸⁰ Jean M. Twenge and W. Keith Campbell, *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement*, (New York: Atria Books, 2010), 69.

²⁸¹ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 507.

²⁸² William T. Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2008), Kindle Edition, Loc. 25.

An expression of this narcissism is unbridled consumerism. William Cavanaugh provides the following description:

Consumerism is not so much about having more as it is about having something else...Buying brings a temporary halt to the restlessness that typifies consumerism. This restlessness—the moving on to shopping for something else, no matter what one has just purchased—sets the spiritual tone for consumerism.²⁸³

Drawing on Taylor’s description of the self looking for meaning, we notice here that consumerism is a significant pursuit for meaning-making in our society. Cavanaugh points out that in consumerism, materialism is given the equivalent of faith: “For many people, consumerism is a type of spirituality, even if they do not recognize it as such. It is a way of pursuing meaning and identity, a way of connecting with other people.”²⁸⁴ And, in our social context, the only limits to what we can consume are the limits to finance our appetites. In this economy of consumerism, one uses their power to fulfill their desire, but in so doing, that action puts themselves under the influence of consumerism.²⁸⁵

The painful reality of hedonism, narcissism and consumerism is that these distortions are not just present in our broader social context, but in ourselves as well. Much of what we do in the church has unknowingly fallen into the trap of these influences. The manner in which churches structure themselves as a place that caters to one’s desires illustrates this very reality. It takes two non-Christian authors of *The Narcissism Epidemic* to point out to us how the church has been influenced by our society’s misshaped values of narcissism and hedonism. One of the authors describes his experience as an unchurched person who visited a megachurch and found that the music, flexibility, casual social atmosphere, and even the high-end coffee all appealed to his

²⁸³ Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed*, Loc. 409.

²⁸⁴ Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed*, Loc. 422.

²⁸⁵ Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed*, Loc. 81.

wants and desires. At the same time, he also recognized how this church was using hedonism and narcissism to tell people about Jesus. He reflects:

Filled with options, the church was a giant, customizable religious emporium... by adapting to today's self-oriented culture, this megachurch was able to bring people back to religion... This odd bit of alchemy—taking narcissism and trying to turn it into altruism—is at the heart of much modern religion.²⁸⁶

We not only see hedonism and narcissism in the church, we also recognize how consumerism has unwittingly misshaped Christian's view of the church today. Cavanaugh points out that a key characteristic of consumerism is "its ability to turn virtually anything into a commodity."²⁸⁷ Moreover, out of a desire for a congregation to survive financially, we have adopted those tactics as they pertain to church. Peter Berger describes the sobering reality of this post-Christendom, pluralistic context marked by competition for religious consumers both within Christianity and outside of the Christian faith. I quote him at length:

In the American type of denominationalism...different religious groups, all with the same legal status, compete *with each other*. Pluralism, however, is not limited to this type of intra-religious competition. As a result of secularization religious groups are also compelled to compete with various *non*-religious rivals in the business of defining the world, some of them highly organized (such as various ideological movements of revolution or nationalism), others much more diffused institutionally (such as the modern value systems of 'individualism' or sexual emancipation) ...Religious ex-monopolies can no longer take for granted the allegiance of their client populations. Allegiance is voluntary and this, by definition, less than certain.

As a result, the religious tradition, which previously could be authoritatively imposed, now has to be *marketed*. It has to be 'sold' to a clientele that is no longer constrained to 'buy.' The pluralistic situation is, above all, a *market situation*. In it, the religious institutions become marketing agencies and the religious traditions become consumer commodities. And at any rate a good deal of religious activity in this situation comes to be dominated by the logic of market economies.²⁸⁸

²⁸⁶ Twenge and Campbell, *The Narcissism Epidemic*, 247–48.

²⁸⁷ Twenge and Campbell, *The Narcissism Epidemic*, 247–48. See also Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed*, 394.

²⁸⁸ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 137–38.

Berger adds, "It is impossible, almost *a priori*, to market a commodity to a population of uncoerced consumers without taking their wishes concerning the commodity into consideration."²⁸⁹ Although churches might not talk about their parishioners and those they are trying to seek as "uncoerced consumers," leaders acutely recognize the reality that people do not attend out of duty. Rather, they attend *when* they feel internally motivated, and they attend *where* they believe they will be most fulfilled. As Grace Davie states, "people go to church to fulfill a particular need that arises for them, and not to fulfill an obligation."²⁹⁰

Reflecting on Jesus' prayer for the unity of the church in John 14-16 seems so far from Berger's description. Kettle points out the damage from this distorted representation of the church. Not only is it problematic internally where the Bride of Christ is competing with itself, but it also deeply damages our ability to model the gospel to our society:

As a *model* for Christian witness, consumer Christianity is a betrayal of the gospel insofar as it leaves no room for Christian *challenge* to people's beliefs, appetites, and practices. It betrays the transcendence of the gospel. While pursuing engagement, it actually fails to achieve this because, while adopting the elements of a culture, it does not use them so as to *address* this culture itself; it simply defers to it. By simply adopting a given people's beliefs, appetites, and practices, it betrays the power of the gospel to nurture a deeper, more coherent personal identity than their agglomeration represents, and to foster a more coherent worldview than that already inhabited.²⁹¹

To faithfully embody our faith today we do need to understand our culture—not to defer to its distortions, but rather to shine the gospel's light on it in order to witness Christ's transforming presence within it.

²⁸⁹ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 145.

²⁹⁰ As cited in Kettle, *Western Culture in Gospel Context*, Kindle Edition, Loc. 450.

²⁹¹ Kettle, *Western Culture in Gospel Context*, Loc. 459.

D. Relating to Society in Our Local Context:

As we consider the particular context of East Vancouver, we quickly recognize that the forces that are broadly present in contemporary culture also find expression here. Positively, many in East Vancouver share a conviction of looking to improve the world through the pursuit of justice. This shared sense of the importance of justice is exemplified in both neighbours and congregants taking a stance for indigenous justice, modeled in the recent *March for Reconciliation*, as well as advocating for ecological rights embodied in small symbolic actions such as reducing waste and avoiding plastic, and larger resistance initiatives such as protesting the Kinder- Morgan Pipeline.

There are two notable postmodern expressions in our local context: a suspicion of mainstream power and the stance for justice.

i. Local Suspicion of Mainstream Power:

Postmodernity's suspicion of institution and institutionalized power finds clear expression in East Vancouver. When Vancouver held a referendum on whether to bid for the 2010 Olympics, every polling station across the city was in favour of the bid except for two, and both of them were located along the Commercial Drive corridor near our church building. Long before Prime Minister Trudeau promised to legalize the sale of marijuana in Canada, the anti-institutional posture of East Vancouver meant that the smell of marijuana was a regular occurrence during walks in our neighbourhood. The anti-corporate commitment along Commercial Drive has meant a strong resistance to corporations setting up shop. McDonald's, Starbucks, and Tim Hortons were all boycotted along *The Drive* so that support for locally owned and operated businesses could be maintained. There is a recognition in this action reflective of the awareness that one's choices as a consumer can, and ought to, make a

difference. There is a suspicion that society's messages, which continually bombard us, cannot deliver on what it promises. Newbigin's words ring true:

There is a growing recognition among 'modern' peoples, especially among the young, that the 'happiness' so insistently offered by the advertising media in a consumer-oriented society is not happiness at all; that human dignity is not secured but lost in the plethora of 'good things' which modern technology makes available.²⁹²

However, because of fragmentation, these ideals are embodied inconsistently. Similar to the inconsistencies articulated in the societal section, much of the ethical stance taken in our local context is marked by symbolic idealism because, as other Canadians regularly remind us, the symbolic behaviour in protesting the Pipeline coming through Vancouver does not take into account how dependent we are on the current pipeline for the gas to heat our homes, run our cars and support the industry and infrastructure of the city we live in. Furthermore, inconsistency finds expression in that while there is consumer resistance to some multinationals, consumerism still finds expression in a blind acceptance of others, particularly *Apple* and *Samsung* where little thought is given to whether the components of our smart phones and laptops are ethically sourced or environmentally sustainable.

Alongside this inconsistency, we can be right about 'rights' and still be wrong in expecting them to be solved by someone else. To cite Rabbi Sacks again, "we have outsourced our morality to the State"²⁹³ and therefore expect that protest and resistance will make those in power change their behaviour. While this can be an important part of advocacy, it is incomplete because it ignores the personal responsibility and influence required to affect change in our own choices.

²⁹² Newbigin, *The Other Side of 1984*, 57.

²⁹³ Sacks, *The Danger of Outsourcing Morality*.

ii. The Pursuit of Justice:

The priority of pursuing justice, almost militantly, is a mark of large parts of Vancouver culture. While this is expressed in a number of avenues, one in particular is in the work of eco-justice. In a conversation recently with a parachurch leader, the woman I was speaking with described how excited she was that others are waking up to the work of eco-justice. She regularly sends out group emails to those who are actively combining the work of faith and environmentalism, and within this loosely affiliated community, the acceptance of orthodox, faithful believers are those who are marked by personal initiatives around earth care and who model public defiance of the decisions by “earth offenders.” The particular focus for this network in the last few years has been on-site tours and protests at the Site C Dam location, as well as protests in solidarity with a local First Nations band on Burnaby Mountain resisting the proposed Kinder-Morgan pipeline. The commitment to eco-justice suggests that the locus of meaning has significantly shifted; atonement is found through zealous environmental protection and for those who carry a different opinion, grace is hard to come by.

E. A Gospel Response to One’s Relation to Society

As we reflect on how individuals in our society relate to the public world around them, we affirm the continuity with our social context and the gospel. For the message of the gospel to be compelling to our neighbours, the church will necessarily be involved in the work of righting wrongs, which means that we need to be attentive to the places where our neighbours are speaking out, come alongside that work, and then offer the teleological framework that will ensure this work is sustainable and has integrity. It is becoming increasingly apparent that the global church is responding to the particular injustices our neighbours are naming.

Locally, Christian leaders Gordie LaGore, Jodi Spargur and others are calling their faith communities of the Vineyard and Canadian Western Baptists to move forward from the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, particularly as the church needs to attend to the ninety-four specific recommendations outlined in the TRC Final Report.²⁹⁴ Regarding the work of eco-justice, there is certainly local engagement but it also has the global church getting involved.²⁹⁵

In listing the above two examples, we also remember how Jesus wept over the city that he loved and we too are called to the same posture for this city that is subject to the distorted and confused human expressions of hedonism, narcissism and consumerism. We in the church cannot be naïve about the power of wealth used for personal advancement by taking advantage of those who do not have access to the same resources or power. In citing Kuyper's famous slogan, James Bratt calls our attention to Kuyper's attention in the same speech towards class struggle:

I propose we give the 'square inch' citation ... a rest for twenty years; we get it already. Evangelicals can/must engage this world in all its dimensions. ... Let's concentrate instead on another line from the heart of that speech: 'It cannot be said often enough: money creates power for the one who gives over the one who receives.'²⁹⁶

David Wells asks the core question for us as:

What does Christian faith have to say to a society that is losing its soul in consumption? What does it have to say about the way the meaning of life has been rewritten by the pervasive, ubiquitous, empty, trivializing, entertainment industry? What does it have to say about hope which transcends the narrow focus of privatized, personal experience? Indeed, does it have anything to say that Boomers and Xers do not want to hear?²⁹⁷

²⁹⁴ *Truth and Reconciliation in Canada, Final Report: Calls to Action*, pp. 319-337. The calls to action for the church (#58-61) are found on page 330. <http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/index.php?p=890> (Accessed November 7, 2017).

²⁹⁵ Pope Francis as cited in Jonathan Chaplin, "Laudato Si': Structural Causes of the Ecological Crisis What hath air conditioning to do with Jerusalem?" in *Comment Magazine*, September 24, 2015 <https://www.cardus.ca/comment/article/4697/laudato-si--structural-causes-of-the-ecological-crisis/> (Accessed October 23, 2017).

²⁹⁶ James Bratt, "Keeping Kuyper Current," in *Perspectives: A Journal of Reformed Thought*, July 2013. <https://perspectivesjournal.org/blog/2013/07/01/keeping-kuyper-current/> (Accessed on October 23, 2017).

²⁹⁷ David F. Wells, *Above All Earthly Powers: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Inter-Varsity Press, 2005), 296.

The model in Scripture, beginning with Noah and Abraham shows us that God's work of cultural renewal begins with us. We need to speak honestly about the places of sin in the church, both personal and institutional. We need to carry a posture of humility and correctability in the ways that we are worshipping our society's idols. We also need to understand our social context in order to identify how the distortions of hedonism, narcissism, and consumerism have been woven into the fabric of the postmodern church, and then have the courage to resist these impulses by not feeding into the practice of church shopping, as well to nurture a culture of covenant instead of an individualistic self-serving approach to affiliating with community.

As Transformationalists, however, we also seek to ensure that we are not dualistic in our approach to the economy and the role of the consumer. The sphere of business is a gift entrusted to us, and we need to be able to name the specific ways *unrestrained* consumerism is wreaking havoc humanly and environmentally in our society and more significantly globally; and also how it is being treated as an idol for people who are seeking to find their meaning in the role of being consumers. However, we also recognize the role and contributions of faithful small business owners²⁹⁸ who are seeking shalom in the way they run their businesses and the consumers who are seeking to recognize the positive impact their money can have on the health of the economy.

In step with addressing these internal matters, it is time to speak with clarity in the wider context. This is no easy task. Scott Frederickson offers a way forward:

The very things tradition brought with it, of which community and communion are not the least important, now must be asserted, defined, and discerned. This includes everything else that goes along with *choosing a product* rather than accepting a given heritage...The missional congregation undoubtedly works harder to maintain where it is than any congregation did before the advent of consumerism.²⁹⁹

²⁹⁸ Chaplin, *Laudato Si': Structural Causes of the Ecological Crisis*.

²⁹⁹ Scott Frederickson, "The Missional Congregation in Context," in *The Missional Church in Context*, ed. Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007) p. 58. Emphasis mine.

More positively, the task before the congregation is to focus on a compelling and unfragmented re-articulation of God's teleological vision of human life and the goal of the redemption of creation,³⁰⁰ and a way to shape desires to that end. As Cavanaugh says, "The key to true freedom is not just following whatever desires we happen to have, but cultivating the right desires."³⁰¹

This means, therefore, that we need not reject what is good in our culture, but to come alongside our neighbours as they long for right relationships and to root those impulses in a coherent vision. We need to identify and name that moral conviction is not only inadequate to bring about true transformation, because "morality on demand breeds self-condemnation for those who fall short and a depreciation of the impulses to self-fulfillment."³⁰² Instead, we need to recover the undergirding moral framework which paints a picture that the good citizen is one who is guided by a vision of right relationships in every aspect of their lives. As Plantinga writes, "to be a responsible person is to find one's role in the building of shalom, the re-webbing of God, humanity, and all creation in justice, harmony, fulfillment, and delight."³⁰³

Shift 4. Shining Gospel light on despair about the future

In attending to our societal and local context in order to understand how our congregation can faithfully engage our context, we have explored how we relate to ourselves in meaning-making through diverse spiritualities, to community as one experiences it particularly through loneliness, and to how one relates to society positively in the work of justice and negatively

³⁰⁰ Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed*, Loc. 81.

³⁰¹ Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed*, Loc. 178.

³⁰² Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 517.

³⁰³ Cornelius Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1996), 197.

through self-centred desires. We now conclude this chapter with a brief exploration of our social context and its view of the future expressed particularly in nihilism.

A. The Emergence of Nihilism

In order to adequately understand our society's view of the future we need to explore the historical philosophical developments that contributed to our current reality. Three factors play a significant role in the cultural rejection of the Christian eschatological vision: first, the Enlightenment's focus on the present, which removed the importance of hope for the future; second, a public disillusionment of the Church, State and other social institutions; and third, a nihilism which is felt acutely at death as those left behind hold *a celebration of life* which tries to hold onto something lasting from the life lived while minimizing the finality of death associated by death.

The contemporary fascination of realizing one's maximum potential and the shift of optimism from the future onto the present was further deepened by what culture perceived the church had been communicating. The church's message told everyday people they could not fully live the holy life and painted a vision so focused on future glory that it led people to devalue the immanent world. Zygmunt Bauman cites the work of Jean Delumeau who describes the paralyzing effect of sin and fear as it pertained to one's vision of the eschaton because it was seen as untenable by the ordinary citizen. Bauman summarizes:

Delumeau found the fascination and infatuation with posthumous life, and the demands of the salvation-oriented piety, raised to heights no longer attainable by people still engaged in normal life-pursuits... The care for salvation turned rapidly into a luxury for the chosen few, and willing to opt out from a life normal for the rest and practice out-worldly asceticism and by the same token ceased to be a viable proposition for the ordinary people wishing or obliged to carry on their business of life as usual.³⁰⁴

³⁰⁴ Zygmunt Bauman, "Postmodern Religion?" in *Religion, Modernity and Postmodernity*, ed. Heelas, Martin, and Morris (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), 63.

This led to Modernity's full rejection of Christianity's preoccupation with the afterlife and shifted the focus instead onto the here and now, giving new frameworks for life events, which downplayed the importance of morality and "attempted to defuse the horror of death."³⁰⁵ Modern society reimagined life without its previous religious significance.

In his book *Postmodern Theory and Biblical Theology: Vanquishing God's Shadow*, Brian Ingraffia describes how a despairing outlook on life is due, in large part, to Nietzsche who vocalized the postmodern sentiment that "God is dead."³⁰⁶ Nietzsche's vehemence towards Christianity and the God of Christianity grew out of his perspective that the Judeo-Christian tradition rejected the goodness of the immanent world and minimized humanity's own goodness because of an other-worldly focus. Ingraffia summarizes his argument: "Man projects his values onto a transcendent God and a transcendent realm, thereby denying his own value."³⁰⁷

Peter Berger argues that no adequate meaningful vision of the future has been found in our society. He describes how in postmodernity there was a public disillusionment of the State, the Church and the economy as viable social institutions. The disillusionment has led to a "problem of meaningfulness" which surfaces in the minds of those who are confronted with crises in their lives.³⁰⁸ Along with our society rejecting Christianity as an institution, they also rejected "the particular Christian theodicy of suffering...[and have instead embraced] a variety of secularized soteriologies" which could not offer adequate hope.³⁰⁹ Unfortunately, in our social context, each person's sorrow remained unaddressed which has resulted in existential anxiety.³¹⁰

³⁰⁵ Bauman, *Postmodern Religion?*, 64.

³⁰⁶ Ingraffia, *Postmodern Theory and Biblical Theology*, 46.

³⁰⁷ Ingraffia, *Postmodern Theory and Biblical Theology*, 46.

³⁰⁸ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 125.

³⁰⁹ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 125.

³¹⁰ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 125.

The irony here is that modern people made themselves the source of morality, and being one's own moral compass resulted in nihilism. James Davison Hunter writes:

The power of the will first becomes nihilistic at the point at which it becomes absolute; when it submits to no authority higher than itself; that is, when impulse and desire become their own moral gauge and when it is guided by no other ends than its own exercise."³¹¹

The most significant expression of this nihilism is the meaninglessness associated with death. By removing all external moral authority and rejecting all religious significance around death has reframed society's approach to death. Death has essentially been sidelined by avoiding talk of the "embarrassing topic of death," insulating ourselves from the dying, and replacing significant public funeral rites with private events or no formal acknowledgement of the person's death at all.³¹² Bauman points out that in Death's place, death is:

now dissolved in the minute, yet innumerable, traps and ambushes of daily life. One tends to hear it knocking now and again, daily, in fatty fast foods, in listeria-infected eggs, in cholesterol-rich temptations, in sex without condoms, in cigarette smoke, in asthma-inducing carpet mites, in the 'dirt you see and germs you do not', in lead-loaded petrol and the lead-free, fluoride-treated tapwater and fluoride untreated water, in too much and too little exercise, in over-eating and over-dieting, in too much ozone content and the hole in the ozone layer; but one knows now how to barricade the door when death knocks.³¹³

Nihilists, writes Carkner, "pride themselves in their realism, dispelling fantasy and cutting through false hope"³¹⁴ but the result is despair, not only severing any hint of hope in our hearts, but also cutting us off from the ability to care for others.³¹⁵ C.S. Lewis points out that hope requires a risk that the nihilist is unwilling (or unable) to embrace, which results in an even deeper isolation and an experience of Hell:

³¹¹ James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility in the Late Modern World* (New York, Oxford, 2010), 211.

³¹² Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 125, Also 65.

³¹³ Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization: The Human Consequences* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 65.

³¹⁴ Carkner, *The Great Escape from Nihilism*, 47.

³¹⁵ Carkner, *The Great Escape from Nihilism*, 47.

To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly *be* wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with bobbles and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of our selfishness. But in that casket—safe, dark, motionless, airless—it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The alternative to tragedy, or at least to the risk of tragedy, is damnation. The only place outside of Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all dangers and perturbations of love is Hell.³¹⁶

And yet, despite a nihilistic immanent outlook of “realistic” despair, as James Smith points out, within the Immanent Frame of the world there are hauntings that perhaps there is more to life than making meaning in the here and now. One striking expression of this haunting is our society’s fascination with the ‘undead’ evidenced in movies and TV shows about zombies and immortal vampires. Locally, the annual Halloween costumes in our neighbourhood context are becoming more overtly grotesque and follow the same theme of zombies and vampires. These places are doorways to the sacred where those in our cultural context are, on some level, looking for meaning and something that might endure beyond our physical, mortal lives.

B. A Gospel Response to a This-Worldly, Nihilistic View of the Future

Carkner points out that a nihilistic outlook is not a logical necessity, but is in fact, one position for intelligent people. Key to calling nihilists out of the trap of the immanent frame requires us to focus on the Incarnation where God himself understands the potential for human despair. He writes:

The deep theism of Christianity reveals a God who is familiar with human suffering, a being who has a stake in our wellbeing, a God who has identified with the human community in the incarnation of Jesus. This is a God who has gone to the gallows, a God who promises to be there, with us, in our time of disappointment and broken dreams. It speaks of a God who has experienced our suffering and rejection, our humiliating bullying.³¹⁷

³¹⁶ Carkner, *The Great Escape from Nihilism*, 49.

As mentioned earlier, a nihilist will pride themselves on their realism and therefore will strongly resist a transcendence which encourages an escape from this life. Yet, an honest evaluation of an immanent-focused outlook will also fail to provide adequate hope of a way out. The antidote to those stuck in a world closed in on itself is, according to Taylor, *agape* love which is a unique expression of the transcendent entering into the immanent.³¹⁸

Key to Taylor's understanding of *agape* love is that through the Incarnation, the immanent is infused with the transcendent. *Agape* love not only deepens one's comfort and hope that God understands the human condition, but it also heightens the importance of the immanent. That is, *agape* love discourages an escape from the immanent—rather it transforms us as it helps us understand ourselves, our place in community and a renewed vision for life.³¹⁹ The *strong* version of transcendence means that, while it comes from outside human culture, it offers transforming dynamics within the economies of the full range of the culture spheres: in science, the arts, ethics and religion. It also brings with it a dimension of depth that may be able to unite these cultural spheres."³²⁰

With this picture of transcendence, there is not only affirmation and comfort, but there is also judgment on the areas of life which are out of alignment with God's way of love. Which means that *agape* love is not love only in a metaphysical sense, but rather is profoundly rooted in the context of our lives and society. Kettle explains:

The gospel speaks at once *to* and *within* the context of our personal life-world: paradoxically it is always at once *transcendent* and *contextual*. In this same encounter it at once discloses God's *fulfillment of* and God's *judgment upon* the

³¹⁷ Carkner, *The Great Escape from Nihilism*, 59–60.

³¹⁸ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 110–48.

³¹⁹ Carkner, *The Great Escape from Nihilism*, 142.

³²⁰ Carkner, *The Great Escape from Nihilism*, 143.

context that makes up our personal life-world with its beliefs, practices, and commitments.³²¹

Agape love helps give weight and meaning to our lives and our imaginations because it reorients the conversation. James K.A. Smith points out that Incarnation is distinct from participation because it “is rooted in a more fundamental affirmation of embodiment as an original and eternal good, rather than a remedial ‘instrument’ of salvation whose *telos* is disembodiment.”³²² Fundamental to the Incarnation is a giving of oneself and, as we have already seen, this posture re-frames the oppositional concepts of immanence and transcendence into a new reality.³²³ Here, the church cannot simply depend on Christ’s Incarnation, but as Christ’s disciples, we are also called to live incarnationally in order to point our neighbours to the link between the transcendent and the immanent.

If we trust God’s *agape* love then we can also trust his plan to move his creation forward to renewal. What is needed, I would argue, is a vision of life that accounts for the despair and angst in the immanent while acknowledging a strong transcendence guided by One who designed this world to be marked by right relationships with God, each other and with the physical world; and the One who has promised the complete renewal of his creation in the New Heavens and New Earth. This is what can shine a beam of gospel hope onto the despair in our social context. How this unfolds is something I will explore this teleological and eschatological vision more fully in the final section of Chapter 3 where I explore what it means to live eschatologically.

³²¹ Kettle, *Western Culture in Gospel Context*, Loc. 218.

³²² James K.A. Smith, *Speech and Theology: Language and the Logic of Incarnation* (London: Routledge, 2002), 176.

³²³ Smith, *Speech and Theology*, 176.

CHAPTER 3: Telling the Story, ReTelling the Story, and Performing the Story

Attending to and Re-appropriating First CRC's Tradition

In the previous chapter, we navigated the complex, fragmented social context which contributes to the seemingly insurmountable challenge of finding meaning in relation to oneself, to others, to society and also towards the future. We also saw some preliminary considerations on how the Gospel shines its truth onto our context, ushering in hope and meaning. What is needed is a robust account of the Gospel that can adequately address the various aspects of one's personhood, and I will argue that a Transformational hermeneutic offers such an articulation of the Gospel. That said, for this specific faith expression to find meaning, I will offer some proposed innovations within our tradition to better suit our local and societal context.

In this chapter, I seek to attend to and re-appropriate our theological history in three sections. First, in *The Story We Tell*, where I describe the drama of Scripture with a Transformational accent. Second, in *ReTelling the Story*, where I explore adjustments and parameters to this stream as they pertain to issues of identity, which flows into one's relationship to community, and by extension to society as well as the future. I will conclude this chapter with a call towards integrating faith and life with *The Story to be Performed*.

I. Introductory Remarks:

Two notes before I begin:

First, tradition can be a loaded word. By using it here, I do not intend to advocate for a repristinization of 'good old days' for the Christian Reformed Church. Rather, I intend to use Alasdair MacIntyre's understanding of *living tradition*: "What I am, therefore, is in key part of

what I inherit, a specific past to some degree is in my present.”³²⁴ For us to live faithfully today, we must acknowledge our past and re-appropriate it by discerning what no longer belongs and how our living tradition ought to be expressed into the rhythms of our daily living. That said, it is much easier to talk about beliefs than to live them. Our denomination has long sought to articulate clear, and not so concise, theological views and as a product of this tradition, I recognize how this impulse continues in me.

Second, any living tradition risks becoming insular. To guard against this vulnerability, we need to recognize that in this post-Christendom, postmodern, post-truth context, the strength of Christ’s church relies on its Catholicity and diversity. Here, the strengths of each tradition offer a unique expression of the Good News. The diversity of expressions in our context and from around the world is a pluriform gift through which our Triune God sharpens, enlivens and encourages his church. This posture is held with a much different tone than the doctrines forged in the Christendom territorialism which expressed deep divisions between Roman Catholic and Protestant systems, and within Protestant branches. This includes a more generous posture towards our closest theological cousins with whom debate has often led to suspicion and schism.

II. The Story We Tell:

A. A Story is Needed:

In the previous chapter I pointed out how others in our context are working towards meaning-making in many ways, and the area of social media, Instagram and Facebook posts are one of the attempts to thread together our stories into a cohesive whole. As noted, these stories remain fragmented expressions of our lives and convey a narrative that is unable to provide

³²⁴ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 221.

meaningful answers of personal identity and who we are in relation to community, society, and how we frame our purpose towards the future.

However, it is not enough to say the Bible solves this problem. Misreading the Bible, treating it as merely a collection of laws that God requires or a series of tasks humans need to participate in or an amalgam of universal truths given to us by the Greatest Teacher, is not sufficient to address our fragmentation. This posture causes people to slip into moralism and moral therapeutic deism, being vulnerable to gross inconsistencies of interpretation and reducing life to a system of principles to fulfill rather than orienting themselves around their relationships. A further weakness with this attitude is the reductionistic way it conveys “the gospel” making it focus almost exclusively on “confessing our sin and accepting Jesus into our hearts so we can go to heaven when we die.” Although each Protestant group in North America would confess that their beliefs encapsulate much more than the version of the gospel described above the all too common message has inadvertently minimized the importance of ongoing maturity. The result is a significant population of North American churchgoers waiting to go to heaven when they die while remaining infants in their faith. Furthermore, this message perpetuates a dualism between the sacred/secular and the body/soul, severing other aspects of their life from the work of Christ’s transforming grace because those aspects of life seem unimportant and irrelevant.

Tragically, this version of the gospel has not brought meaningful hope and purpose to those who are longing to find meaning. What is needed instead is to frame the whole Scriptures as one sweeping narrative where the primary actor of the story is God. With this approach, every part of life fits into this story.³²⁵ The grand story not only draws in all the Biblical characters and details throughout the Bible, but this story also draws us in so that we also understand our place

³²⁵ Eugene H. Peterson, *Soulcraft: Spiritual Formation* (Regent Audio, 2002), Lecture 4.

and purpose as we live in God's world. Newbigin illustrates this well as he tells the story of a Hindu Indian who summarized the importance of the Bible to the then missionary:

I can't understand why you missionaries present the Bible to us in India as a book of religion. It is not a book of religion-and anyway we have plenty of books of religion in India. We don't need any more! I find in your Bible a unique interpretation of universal history, the history of the whole of creation and the history of the human race. And therefore, a unique interpretation of the human person as a responsible actor in history. That is unique. There is nothing else in the world of religious literature to put alongside it."³²⁶

The Transformational emphasis on the whole drama of Scripture, summarized simply as *Creation, Fall, Redemption*, is instructive here for those witnessing to the Gospel and transformative for those hearing and seeing it. The Story begins with God who defines our reality because, without a word from him, there would be no life, let alone meaning and identity. This all-encompassing, coherent narrative gives us meaning, first that we are image-bearers of the central character in the drama; and second, that we find meaning and purpose within God's mission to restore his world. He has called his people to participate in his mission. I will argue that Transformationalist hermeneutical lens accomplishes that very aim.

What follows is a summary of God's story with the structure drawn from Bartholomew and Goheen's book, *The Drama of Scripture*³²⁷ which captures the Transformational reading of Scripture. Here we will see how the good, the bad and the ugly aspects of life find their place as Jesus makes visible and fulfills God's work of New Creation, and then calls us to be his people to join him in his mission of reconciling all things to himself.

B. Worship and Giving Glory to God

*Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable his judgments,*

³²⁶ Lesslie Newbigin, *A Walk Through the Bible* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2005), pp. 12-13.

³²⁷ The outline, though not unique to Bartholomew and Goheen, is the template I will draw from.

*and his paths beyond tracing out!
“Who has known the mind of the Lord?
Or who has been his counselor?”
“Who has ever given to God,
that God should repay them?”
For from him and through him and for him are all things.
To him be the glory forever! Amen.
Romans 11:33-36³²⁸*

*“If a person had one hundred lives, this one aim,
to know God, would be sufficient for them all.”³²⁹
John Calvin*

Marilynne Robinson, the author of *Gilead* and *Home*, said recently, “Calvinists are so afraid of God that they aren’t afraid of anything else.”³³⁰ Robinson’s assertion rings true in many historical examples, but the caricature is only helpful insofar as a particular group of present-day Calvinists understand and embody it. Acknowledging who God is and acknowledging who we are not is a historical mark of the Reformed faith. It is also the first step towards identifying our primary *telos* of “glorifying God and enjoying him forever.”³³¹ God is glorified when his people personally and congregationally seek to live lives of worship in all they say and do. A significant aspect of glorifying God is demonstrated in the work of mission as witnesses proclaiming Christ’s transforming presence within his unfolding cosmic kingdom. Moreover, through this witness and proclamation God is further glorified when Jesus Christ’s grace transforms others and they too live lives directed towards this God-oriented *telos*.

Act 1: God and Creation

*LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory in the heavens...*

³²⁸ <http://biblehub.com/romans/11-33.htm>.

³²⁹ Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers*, Revised edition (Nashville, Tenn: B&H Academic, 2013), 206.

³³⁰ Regent College Laing Lectures, Wednesday, Feb. 8, 2017.

³³¹ Westminster Assembly, *The Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Article 1. Though the Westminster Shorter Catechism is not one of the Confessions adopted by the CRC, the sentiment articulated by our theological cousin captures the sentiment well.

*When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,
what is humanity that you are mindful of them,
human beings that you care for them?
Psalm 8:1,3-4*

*“Scripture’s point of departure is creation,
because all relationships are connected with it,
and thus can only be known from it.”³³²*

On some level we all carry a story of origin. If we imagine the start of life as haphazard, chaotic, and violent that narrative will shape how we approach our work, our neighbours, and our world. Within the first pages of Scripture, Genesis describes a very different story of our origins, and that of all creation finds its source in a good and loving God.³³³ In Genesis, we discover that the world’s beginning was ordered, life-giving and good. God created a good world, infused with his divine presence, and he placed humans—bearers of his very breath—and they experienced shalom—perfect peace between themselves their creator God, and all of creation.³³⁴ Shalom is a consistent and defining thread throughout the pages of Scripture. The first two chapters of Genesis do not describe the precise process of how creation unfolded, focusing instead on the question of *who* and *why*. Knowing that this world bears his fingerprints gives the world—and us—meaning. At the centrepiece of God’s work of a creation we find man and woman, persons made in his image. Understanding the origin of all of creation through this lens means that life is not accidental, but intentionally created by God.

The *why* of creation flows from the *who* of creation. Our identity and *telos* are rooted in the gift of life entrusted to us by God. Humanity was created to steward creation through shalom,

³³² Bolt, Nichols, and Taylor, *Bavinck on the Christian Life*, 46.

³³³ Bill T. Arnold. *Readings from the Ancient Near East* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 31. The Genesis creation narratives stand in stark contrast to the Enuma Elish which describes the violent beginnings of the world at the hands of a young god Marduk. See also John Walton, *Genesis*. NIV Application Commentary Series (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 29.

³³⁴ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 69.

by remaining in right relationship with our Creator, one another, and all of God's good world. Our first parents were entrusted with *avad and shamar*—to tend and to keep the world as stewards on behalf of God.³³⁵ Moreover, along with the call to 'rule' over creation was the task of tending and keeping, increasing and multiplying, providing humanity with dignity, responsibility, and purpose.³³⁶ What emerges in humanity's work is culture, which for the Transformational Calvinist is, "an integral dimension of the original creation."³³⁷ Al Wolters summarizes this view which places eschatology through the lens of God's purposes for creation:

From the beginning of human life on earth the human race is mandated to work toward a great future goal: the development of creation in accordance with God's design. That development has been disrupted, but not annulled in the fall into sin, and is reaffirmed in salvation. The goal toward which history is not a return toward the garden of Eden, but an eschatological fulfillment of creation pictured as the New Jerusalem, into which the glory and honour of the nations will be brought.³³⁸

It is important to note here that a Transformational approach, though thoroughly cognizant of the impact of the Fall and sin in the reality of the antithesis, argues that the human responsibility entrusted to humanity in the Garden is deeply embedded in our purpose as creatures and therefore remains after the Fall. However sin has distorted how we live into this human calling and in the Incarnation, Jesus restores for us a clarified picture of what our calling ought to look like.³³⁹ Fundamental to the Transformationalist's understanding of human responsibility is to recognize how God's image-bearers work in the cultural structures or spheres. Every aspect of creation has embedded in it an ordinance that was established in God's creation and therefore falls under his will. God alone upholds creation and holds the whole human

³³⁵ Genesis 2:15.

³³⁶ Genesis 1:27.

³³⁷ Richard J. Mouw, *The Challenges of Cultural Discipleship: Essays in the Line of Abraham Kuyper* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2011), 41.

³³⁸ Wolters, *Creation Order*, 42.

³³⁹ It should be noted here that there is some growing dissatisfaction within this tradition, primarily led by Wolterstorff, regarding the emphasis on creation rather than a redeemed creation of shalom which I alluded to at the end of the last chapter and will explore more fully at the end of this chapter.

destiny, but God also entrusts his will to *delegated authority* to his image-bearers which covers every aspect of life in such a way that no one area of life overpowers another.³⁴⁰ These responsibilities towards ourselves, family, every aspect of our social expressions in relationship and community, as well as societal expressions of governance and politics are God-given, and therefore good and integral to how we are to live well in God's creation. By God's design, every aspect of life was made to give glory³⁴¹ and become a means to glorify God, for he entrusts us with this task and for expressing gratitude for placing us in a world that provides us with our needs. This gratitude continues to send God's image bearers into the world as stewards of a cosmos that bears his fingerprints.

Viewing life and the world through this lens means that to be faithful worshippers of our Creator is much more than whether we are right with God. Here we see God's gracious upholding of life for all, not exclusively to his worshippers alone. Instead, God's sovereignty over all creation is on constant display. His consistent care and provision reveal his commitment to nurturing that which he created as good, and as his image-bearers, when we tend and keep creation we are fulfilling an essential task as our Creator's image-bearers.

Therefore, the proper posture towards God requires more than ensuring we are 'right with God.' Rather, we carry with us a sense of responsibility for what happens in every area of life, wherever we have influence. We share a conviction that what God created is good and he calls us, as his image-bearers, to be continually responsible for what happens to creation.

Act 2: Fall

*The fool says in his heart, "There is no God."
They are corrupt, their deeds are vile; there is no one who does good.*

³⁴⁰ Kuyper, *Sphere Sovereignty*, 4-5.

³⁴¹ Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2005).

*The LORD looks down from heaven on all mankind
to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God.
All have turned away, all have become corrupt;
there is no one who does good, not even one.
Psalm 14:1-3*

The perfect peace does not last long. Genesis 3 describes the appearance of the crafty serpent who undermines humanity's conviction that God is a generous Giver leading them to behave as though he is in fact a miserly withholding deity. This lie misshapes humanity's hearts and minds, causing them to rebel against God by grasping for what was not rightly theirs. This first human rebellion sends shock waves through God's entire creation. Shalom is broken. God's image-bearers hide in shame from their Maker. They hide from each other and point their fingers at one another in blame. The serene garden setting is replaced with the hard reality of thorns and pain, leading towards death. Although the rebellion was only between humans and God, not one aspect of life was untouched by the shadow of the curse. Our entire way of looking, understanding and living in the world has been impacted. As a result of no longer being in right relationship with God, no longer being rightly aligned with the Source of our life, our identity, and our purpose we then go in search of our need for these realities in places, persons, purposes, and positions that cannot fulfill and sustain us. These attempts are all expressions of alienation from God. Because we have become alienated from God, all other relationships have likewise been affected.

Because we have become alienated from God, all other relationships have likewise been affected. The desire to 'be like gods' emerges in the pursuit of success, the accumulation of wealth without considering the vulnerable, the lure of pornography which attempts to separate sexuality from human identity and objectify other image-bearers, the insatiable appetite for overconsumption with little regard for the impact it has in the Majority World and the lasting

impact on the physical creation, are just a few examples of how the ugly temptation of seeking our versions of shalom continues to describe so much of our lives. Alexandr Solzhenitsyn describes the difference between mutual pleasure (shalom) and self-serving pleasure:

One should never direct people towards happiness, because happiness too is an idol...One should direct them towards mutual affection. A beast gnawing at its prey can be happy too, but only human beings can feel affection for each other, and this is the highest achievement they can aspire to.³⁴²

Shalom at someone else's expense, as well as pursuing happiness without human affection permeates our life. A further temptation is to shift the responsibility of our own choices on to other people or other social forces, trying to convince ourselves that the real problem of life lies somewhere else. Jordan Peterson argues that the correction to the problem begins with looking in the mirror:

We are more than we seem—and more trouble than we imagine, when undisciplined and unrealized...our petty weaknesses accumulate, and multiply, and become great evils of state...It is increasingly necessary that we set ourselves—not others—right, and that we learn explicitly what that means.³⁴³

Here the Calvinist affirmation of total depravity is informative.³⁴⁴ Sin has tainted every aspect of our lives to the point where we are helpless to rescue ourselves. Our daily decisions emerge from divided hearts, and so as followers of God in this world, we cannot merely denounce all the bad that is happening in *the world* without confessing how we too are complicit in the very same thing.

At the same time, we recognize that the presence of sin is not only personal and relational, it is also comprehensive. Sin leads us to focus on ourselves to the exclusion of our responsibilities, which becomes problematic when considering our responsibilities to each other

³⁴² Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *Cancer Ward*, Reissue edition (FSG Adult, 1991), 476.

³⁴³ Jordan Peterson, *Maps of Meaning*, 377.

³⁴⁴ The doctrine has been, in my perspective, misapplied in our tradition when people were continually told they are so depraved that there is no good in them, which resulted in a version of “worm theology”, which then led to congregations of very insecure and unsure worshippers.

and to our world. The human responsibility of tending and keeping gets neglected which Paul Stevens bemoans as he notes the loss of the cultural mandate for God's people living in the world.³⁴⁵ It not only shifts our attention off of structural aspects of creation, but sin also works to distort the very structures themselves. The Enemy, according to Jesus' words in John 10:10, comes to 'steal, to kill, and to destroy.' Satan continues to thwart God's plan by not only getting us off-track of our identities but also compounding the impact of sin on all of life by permeating the God-given social structures of life. This antithesis—that which is set against God's rule does not allow for people to set aside their responsibility as if God has abandoned his creation. Instead, God's common grace remains which ensures there remains enough in common in the broader world to continue to carry out our responsibility towards the cultural mandate.

Life's God-ordained structures were created for good, but have been distorted by sin and not only subject to human influence but now limit our vision and constrain our action which is most apparent on the most vulnerable.³⁴⁶ These distortions unfold in primarily two ways. First, when the grasping of the influence of one sphere exerts its influence over other spheres, the dignity embedded in the created order can be lost.³⁴⁷

Another way one sphere encroaches on other spheres is expressed is with Institutional Church Sovereignty. While Christ's Gospel informs every aspect of life, it is distorted when the institutional church exerts its control over the realm of science, government legislation, art and other aspects of life. Too often, this has resulted in the church having a suspicious posture towards God's creative gifts found outside of the church where God-given dignity is

³⁴⁵ R. Paul Stevens, "The Marketplace: Mission Field or Mission?" *Crux: Quarterly Journal of Christian Thought and Opinion*. Vancouver: Regent College, Sep/2001, 7-16.

³⁴⁶ Al Wolters articulates a Transformational 'structures & direction' approach to understanding life in *Creation Regained*.

³⁴⁷ Kuyper, *Sphere Sovereignty*, 4-5. Kuyper cites historical illustrations to show how easily State Sovereignty can become tyrannical if given influence over too many aspects of life.

undermined. The temptation of the church to hold institutional sway over other spheres can lead to power corrupting the faithfulness of God's leaders.³⁴⁸

Sin's impact also distorts life from within. Although the original direction of these structures of life was aimed to unfold *within* God's will, sin reorients the work away from God's will.³⁴⁹ While the direction away from God's will might find primary expression in the world, it would be a mistake to reject a significant aspect of God's good design because of the troubling distortions. Instead, the task for God's people here is to name the distortions for what they are, both personally and societally.

What represents death and struggle and anguish in our daily living finds its root in this part of the story. As a consequence of sin's pervasive impact, God's followers now require diligence to identify sin where it is present, trust that God's original purposes are still present (even if they are muted), and an ongoing responsibility to resist sin personally, communally and societally.

Act 3: Covenant

*Let the one who is wise heed these things
and ponder the loving deeds³⁵⁰ of the LORD.
Psalm 107:43*

*This is what no religion has ever understood;
all peoples either pantheistically pull God down into what is creaturely,
or deistically elevate him endlessly above it.
In neither case does one arrive at true fellowship, at covenant, at genuine religion.
But Scripture insists on both: God is infinitely great and condescendingly good;
he is Sovereign but also Father; he is Creator but also Prototype.
In a word, he is the God of the covenant."³⁵¹*

³⁴⁸ Kuyper writes: "The church must urge that science never become a slave, but maintain the Sovereignty which is its due in its own sphere, and live the grace of God. There is indeed a satanic danger that some will degenerate into devils of pride and will tempt science to arrogate unto itself that which is outside of its sphere... The tyranny of the state can also be applied to the tyranny of science; it cannot arise unless the church declines spiritually; and also when there is a spiritual awakening in the church it will urge science, which chastised it in God's Name, back to its own precise confines." *Sphere Sovereignty*, 16.

³⁴⁹ Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 51-69.

³⁵⁰ *Hesed*: God's faithful, loving kindness towards his people.

³⁵¹ Bolt, Nichols, and Taylor, *Bavinck on the Christian Life*, 61.

A sin-stained creation did not deter our Creator, and the preservation of Noah and his family, as well as Lot and his daughters, are expressions of God's commitment to showing that despite the reality of sin, there remained something good in the now-fallen Creation. Our Creator God did not allow a shattered shalom to be the defining reality of life, and from Genesis 4 to Malachi 4 we read that God promises to not abandon his people. This act is unique to the Biblical story because it is rooted in a self-revealing God who makes himself known and who is always the one who initiates.

In a sin-stained world where humanity seeks to appease an impersonal God through mechanistic strategies, reducing God to a force, or believing that grotesque expressions of sacrifice are required, Genesis depicts a very different revelation of God. Here we see God remaining with Adam and Eve, revealing himself to Noah, to Abraham, to the patriarchs, to Moses and the many other leaders through the generations. God's self-revelation is that he is not merely a life force, but a person. He is not only transcendent, he is also immanent and continues to pour out his common grace over all creation, and is intimately involved in the lives of his people. Watershed moments within this act are the Exodus where we see God's first expression of his salvific grace; the giving of his Law after the deliverance during which God reveals his compassion; reveals God's character, human inadequacy and our longing for one who could fulfill this call; and the giving of the land. In this land, Israel is entrusted to model God's original intention of shalom as they are called to pursue right relationships with God, each other and with creation. There are persistent calls to embody shalom, giving particular attention to the vulnerable, and responsible living including how Israel even stewards the land entrusted to them.

The call for personal, communal and societal responsibility seeks to resist corruption and self-interest, yet humanity never outgrows these distortions as they continue to find renewed

expression in each generation. It could be said that the whole of the Old Testament is learning that humans cannot rescue themselves. As Mouw writes, “We Kuyperians do pay considerable attention to fallenness—at least we ought to—but our basic Kuyperian impulse is to look for signs that God has not given up, even in the midst of a fallen world, on restoring the purposes that were at work in God’s initial creating activity. This calls for Christians, then, actively to work together as agents of this restorative program that encompasses the whole range of cultural involvement.”³⁵²

With humanity unable to fulfill their God-given mandate, God reveals his never-stopping faithful love. From the whole of humanity, God isolates his purposes to a specific people, reveals himself to them and calls them to live as his people. The community on the receiving end of these promises are the people of the Covenant. With a word, Adam and Eve knew that God would not give up on them and their people. With a word, Noah and his family’s lives were preserved. With a word, Abram was called out to follow God. With a word “Let my people go,” Israel was rescued from slavery. God’s words and God’s promises define this act, and the primary response of the community of faith is to remember these moments well and live gratefully in response. The Ten Commandments, the moral and ethical foundation for God’s people, also emerge from the place of gratitude. Rescue precedes obedience as seen in the preamble to the Decalogue: “I am the Lord who brought you out of Egypt. [Therefore] You shall have no other gods before me...”³⁵³

God’s intention does not stop there. Along with God’s promise to bless Abraham was the embedded call to be a blessing “to all the nations” through him and his descendants; and along with Yahweh’s rescue of the Hebrews from Egypt was a standing call to “protect the orphan,

³⁵² Mouw, *The Challenges of Cultural Discipleship*, 20.

³⁵³ Deuteronomy 5:1-2.

widow and alien within your gates, because you yourselves were foreigners.”³⁵⁴ Here we see God’s mission: His intention to rescue his whole creation through his people whose different way of life modelled for others the path towards shalom. He chose the people of Israel to accomplish this purpose. Bavinck observes that there was nothing culturally notable about Israel compared to the nations around; what was unique was that the Living God revealed himself to them:

In art, science, statecraft, in everything belonging to the arena of culture, Israel was far inferior to many a pagan nation. But to her the words of God were entrusted. She knew the value and significance of personality, first of all of God’s personality, but then also that of his image, human beings. For that reason Israel kept in view first and foremost that dimension of a person whereby one would rest in and depend on God. By contrast, the pagans developed especially that dimension of human personality whereby one stood above and over against nature. But since true freedom lay in serving God alone, the freedom idolized by pagans had to result in bankruptcy. Israel’s destiny, by contrast, lay embedded in the requirement to be holy as God is holy. Israel was called to be a Kingdom of God, to constitute a theocracy wherein God’s will governed and directed everything.³⁵⁵

In and through Israel’s daily living, they were to introduce the Living God to the world.

The Covenant people were meant to be the living example of what life in God was supposed to look like. However, just as the human call of the cultural mandate can easily get neglected, so too the call of God’s people who steward a personal and direct relationship with the Maker of Heaven and Earth. The temptation in each generation of God’s people is to rest in an exclusive relationship with God rather than a light that will draw in the nations. This impact finds expression in two primary ways in neglecting their role in the *Missio Dei* and in being inward-oriented covenant-enclaves with nearly insurmountable barriers to keep outsiders out. Alongside God’s call in the third act is learning the hard and painful lesson that they have an

³⁵⁴ Exodus 22:21, Deut. 14:21.

³⁵⁵ Bavinck, *The Kingdom of God, The Highest Good*, 156.

inability to rescue themselves and that they tend to shirk responsibilities as they steward life with God.

Act 4: God with Us, God for Us

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth... For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.
John 1:14, 17-18

The essence of the Christian religion consists in the reality that the creation of the Father, ruined by sin, is restored in the death of the Son of God, and re-created by the grace of the Holy Spirit into a kingdom of God.³⁵⁶

We then come to the fourth act when out of Love, God keeps his promise that he himself would step into the world to restore what was lost. God did this by sending his Son, Jesus of Nazareth whose incarnation reveals God's love for his creation, a love for the particularity of place, and most importantly, a love for his image-bearers. Here, Jesus embodies God's wisdom with his authoritative teaching focused on correcting distortions and revealing the life-giving wisdom of our Creator. He models God's concern for the vulnerable as he challenges individuals and structures which continue to take advantage of the powerless. This is particularly true in Jesus' approach to those with power and influence, continuing to call the Covenant community to keep the most vulnerable at the centre to provide for and to protect them. Here, Jesus reveals himself as the perfect prophet who reminds the people of how to live lives consistent with what their status of image-bearers signifies.

Along with this, Jesus brings profoundly personal and specific restoration for each person who recognized that Jesus of Nazareth's identity is that of the Son of God. As it says in

³⁵⁶ Bolt, Nichols, and Taylor, *Bavinck on the Christian Life*, 141.

Colossians 1:13, “God has brought us out of the kingdom of darkness and brought us into his Son’s kingdom” marked by forgiveness, restoration, and renewal. We read a few verses later³⁵⁷ a description of this renewing work: Jesus is the true priest who mediates for us and brings us back into relationship with the Living God. Moreover, he brings restoration, to the blind, the deaf, the mute, the paralyzed, and the dead. Each expression of this restoration is transformative, but the group of healings together reveal the ways he was overpowering the all-reaching shadow of the curse. Jesus shows he is king over creation, the One through whom all heaven and earth were created.³⁵⁸ Jesus embodies the fullness of God’s love and does for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

Jesus’ rule in the Kingdom is not only on an individual basis. Jesus also embodies God’s lordship over all creation, revealed particularly in his healings and his demonstrations over the created world. By setting aside his glory,³⁵⁹ Jesus revealed God’s character and lived a life which continually opened up fresh expressions of shalom as his teaching drew people back into relationship with God.

While Jesus’ three years of public ministry offer visible demonstrations of his renewing work, the fourth act reaches the climax in the Good Friday and Easter event where Jesus becomes the firstborn of God’s New Creation with all things and where he reconciles our relationship with God, each other and the world. God’s work of restoration is most clearly demonstrated in the Resurrection which ushered in a new moment in history where God’s New Creation began overlapping with the Old Creation even while it was still under the effect of the Curse.

³⁵⁷ Colossians 1:22-23.

³⁵⁸ Colossians 1:16.

³⁵⁹ Philippians 2.

Although the reality of sin, death, and evil remain real and still bring tragedy, Jesus has dealt a decisive blow against the Curse and as God-with-us, he “reconciles to himself all things...making peace by the blood of his cross.”³⁶⁰ Reconciling all things means that Jesus died for much more than to become our Personal Saviour. Jesus reveals that the scope of God’s salvation plan encompasses the personal level, but reaches to *all things* even on the cosmic level. Because Jesus’ resurrection reaffirms his original creation, witnessing the resurrection of the Creator means that we recognize how Jesus reaffirmed the importance of our bodily existence and acknowledged that he is the one who truly models the life of a steward who embodies the creation and cultural mandate to *avad and shamar*. Here, the Transformational emphasis on the grounding creational mandate is in avoidance of an over-realized eschatology. Christ’s resurrection is bringing real change into our present, but his redemption will not be fully present on this side of the Eschaton. Part of the challenge of this approach is to not let the pendulum swing too far in the opposite direction.

Each time and place Jesus’ resurrection power is revealed is another glimpse of God’s promise and mission to re-establish his shalom of perfect relationships within his creation. In witnessing God’s redemption, Christ becomes our source of life, directs our hope, and frames our purpose as we witness to the Word made flesh.

The Good News on display is, as previously described, is much deeper, wider, higher and comprehensive than merely Jesus rescuing us from sin to be with him one day. As the Word who also spoke God’s creation into existence, the resurrection has ripples of redemption and renewal

³⁶⁰ Colossians 1:19-20, Ephesians 1:3-14.

*far as the curse is found.*³⁶¹ Mouw summarizes: “To be redeemed from sin, then, is to be restored to the patterns of obedient cultural formation for which we were created.”³⁶²

Act 5: Church and Kingdom³⁶³

Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Matthew 6:10

*God has now revealed to us his mysterious will regarding Christ—
which is to fulfill his own good plan. And this is the plan:
At the right time he will bring everything together
under the authority of Christ—everything in heaven and on earth.*
Ephesians 1:9-10

The Ascension and Pentecost enlivens the Resurrection witnesses, initiating an outworking of God’s kingdom being realized within and through the community of the church.

Al Wolters notes that for any theological approach to culture, a robust theology of the kingdom is necessary.³⁶⁴ The kingdom revealed in Jesus is not substantively different from God’s original kingdom at creation which emphasized God’s covenant, but Jesus’ ministry restores what was lost in the Fall and advances the kingdom of God.

The Old Testament word “Covenant,” revealed in Act 3 of Scripture’s drama, draws hearts and minds back to see how consistent God’s character and call have always been. Now in the fifth act there emerges a new and complementary concept where God’s people are drawn into God’s community in Christ. While many people seek to establish a connection with the Transcendent through paganism and new forms of self-defined ritual, those within the church

³⁶¹ *Joy to the World*, by Isaac Watts, written in 1719.

³⁶² Mouw, *The Challenges of Cultural Discipleship*, 42.

³⁶³ Wolterstorff describes the kingdom of God in this way: “It speaks of the coming of God’s reign, of signs and samples of that coming, of hindrances to its coming, of the mode of life appropriate to its coming. It speaks of the divine lament and the divine delight.” In Miroslav Volf, ed. *A Passion for God’s Reign* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 66.

³⁶⁴ Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 64–65.

enter into a relationship with the Living God who has most clearly revealed himself in Jesus, but now who also dwells within them through the Holy Spirit. As Jesus' resurrection life flows in us through the indwelling Holy Spirit, God's people are moved to express our worship through orthodoxy and orthopraxy and embodying our shared vocation as missionaries who witness the on-going in-breaking kingdom of God as we seek to maintain God's character in the way we live, and carrying the mysterious and profound task of working alongside Christ in his restoration of all things.

In the mystery of God's way, he still he chooses for himself a people through which to accomplish his work. Our vocation, then, flows out of Christ's vocation and we seek to emulate the way of Jesus in our attitude, posture, and actions. This is core to our identity as God's people, and we need both hearts and minds shaped by doxology, as well as bodies and wills motivated to embody this missionary call. Without an attitude of worship and an awareness of God's presence, our activities devolve into activism and we lose focus of God's purpose to redeem this entire cosmos. This calling propels us into the public where we interact with those whose allegiance is elsewhere, but we carry with us the call to live into the creation and cultural mandate which God gave to humanity at creation. Kaiser points out that *mission* here is not a New Testament novelty, but the expected outflow of the covenant in the Old Testament:

There could be no mistaking where Paul got his instructions: they came from the Old Testament. The case for evangelizing the Gentiles had not been a recently devised switch in the plan of God but had always been the long-term commitment of the Living God who is a missionary God.³⁶⁵

Bavinck notes how Jesus' kingdom ensured that God's people would be outward oriented rather than an insular cultural-embedded community:

In line with the prophets, Jesus removed the national, tight-fitting garment

³⁶⁵ Walter C. Kaiser, *Mission in the Old Testament: Israel as a Light to the Nations* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000), 82.

with which Judaism had clothed, indeed, had concealed, but—and let us not forget this—had also preserved such a glorious idea. For Jesus, the Kingdom of God was the purpose of all of his activity, the main content and central idea of his teaching, whose essence, expansion, development, and fulfillment were presented by him in the most variegated way, with and without parables. Moving outward from his own person, he established this Kingdom in the hearts of his disciples.³⁶⁶

This conviction challenges postures of faith such as *The Benedict Option*³⁶⁷ which calls God's people into isolation so that they may remain faithful. While it is important that God's people be continuously re-narrated into God's call of forming a faithful people who live as Jesus did, it is also critical to remember that because God has not given up on his world, we cannot wash our hands of it either. As Mouw writes, we “run spiritual risks if we fail to align ourselves with God's positive purposes in the world.”³⁶⁸ However, how that aligning happens is not always clear. Most of the church's history has been in a Christendom context where the temptation is to hold the kingdom of God and political kingdoms side by side. Even when sensitivities seek to ensure church and state remain separated, there is still a temptation to work from the side of influence to the detriment of the vulnerable. The task, then, is to remain faithful as God's holy people and to discern how his kingdom is breaking in—at times on the side of influence and other times stepping into places of powerlessness to see how Christ is present.

Christ's redemption is not limited to human souls but extends to the reaches of the created world. We participate in this work of Christ when we maintain that despite the fact that

³⁶⁶ Bavinck, *The Kingdom of God, The Highest Good*, 138.

³⁶⁷ See Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation*. Penguin, 2017.

³⁶⁸ Mouw, *The Challenges of Cultural Discipleship*, 21. Living into this call of cultural engagement faithfully, however, requires immense discernment. Mouw quotes Thomas Case, a seventeenth-century English writer, who captured the drive of the Calvinist who seeks to ensure that God's truth shines on every aspect creation, at times without the awareness of how sin is distorting one's perception of God's will. said: “I had rather see coming toward me a whole regiment with drawn swords, than one lone Calvinist convinced that he is doing the will of God.”

the world is marred by sin, it still bears the fingerprints of its Creator and patiently waits for Christ's transformation to restore life to God's original purposes.

Living into the call for faithful cultural participation not only requires rigorous discernment, but it also demands the eyes of faith to recognize the *already* and *not yet* of God's kingdom. The *already* of God's kingdom gives God's people confidence that God's work of redemption through Christ has already begun, while the *not yet* of God's kingdom recognizes how the defeated and desperate Enemy of God seeks to undermine the redemption made possible in and through Christ. It is interesting to note that this redemption is not one of re-creation, but one that will incorporate some human contributions which will have continuity with God's vision of shalom. It is to this picture of God's promised future that we now turn.

Act 6: God's New Creation

Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

Revelation 21: 1-5³⁶⁹

We are still living in Acts 1-5, but we hold out before us the vision of what life will be like when God's plan of perfect shalom in the New Creation will be fully realized. It is imperative that we hold this picture in mind because our view of what happens in the future shapes the way we live today. Jonathan Wilson summarizes God's commitment to the goodness of his original creation: "In John's vision, we also hear the declaration that God is 'making all

³⁶⁹ <http://biblehub.com/revelation/21-5.htm>.

things new,' not making all new things.³⁷⁰ These words are entirely consistent with a Transformational picture of the New Creation—our future reality will not be disembodied as some gnostic pictures of heaven persistently imagine, nor will it be something completely unrecognizable.

Out of love, God did not abandon what was created, but instead entered human history to restore and renew the work of his hands. One day shalom will be restored to all of God's good creation. This is not just any kind of hope; it is an eschatological hope which describes the *telos* of all creation. Once that picture is in our sights, this eschatological hope reaches into the present and pulls us forward. We know what God will do and we begin to embody that future reality.

It is interesting to note that though Reformed theology has much to say about Creation, the Fall, and Redemption, there is surprisingly little material regarding eschatology and the Consummation, particularly in how it relates to how we live faithfully today. In our tradition, the emphasis has been placed on the activity and responsibility we have in the present. However, given our current context Transformationalists would do well to orient ourselves towards the future that God has promised.

Most Transformationalists, such as Al Wolters, are creation-order in their approach. One of the ways Dennison describes this divergence is their approach to eschatology. In contrast, the shalom-order group, focuses on the future shalom (or peace and justice) as the *telos* of our kingdom efforts,³⁷¹ represented by people like Nicholas Wolterstorff, Anthony Hoekema, and Richard Mouw.

Nicholas Wolterstorff recognizes that while many Transformationalists talk about witnessing and participating in Christ's redemption, the emphasis continues to fall back onto the

³⁷⁰ Jonathan Wilson, *God's Good World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2013), 61.

³⁷¹ William Dennison, "Dutch Neo-Calvinism and the Roots for Transformation: An Introductory Essay" in Journal of Evangelical Theology Society, 42/2, June 1999, 281.

creation and cultural mandate. Instead, in *Until Justice and Peace Embrace*, he argues for a teleological, future-oriented posture of remembering the picture of shalom. At the outset he names this eschatological aim³⁷² and he later describes how our envisioned future drives us in our efforts today:

In the eschatological image of the city we have the assurance that our efforts to make these present cities of ours humane places in which to live—efforts which so often are frustrated, efforts which so often yield despair—will, by way of the mysterious patterns of history, eventually provide the tiles and timbers for a city of delight.³⁷³

In his book, *The Bible and the Future*, Hoekema describes the ‘already’ of God’s Kingdom is realized eschatology, while the ‘not yet’ aspects of God’s kingdom fit into future eschatology. We live in this tension. In other words, we hold fast to our calling today because we trust in God’s wisdom that despite the discontinuity between this Creation and the New Creation, there will remain, by God’s grace, continuities between this world and the next.³⁷⁴ Furthermore, the vision of the fully realized kingdom in the New Creation, therefore, becomes the template for how we ought to go about kingdom work today.

Mouw continues this trajectory in his exposition of Isaiah 60, *When the Kings Come Marching In*. Whereas many voices within our tradition emphasize the present aspects of culturally participating in Christ’s redemption, he unpacks how Isaiah 60 as well as Revelation 21 and 22, hint at the continuity between the present creation being redeemed and God’s future creation which will come in its fullness when Christ returns. Here, even the cultural advancements will find their place when they are repurposed for God’s glory. Mouw argues that though God will incorporate these cultural advancements in the New Creation, the work of re-

³⁷² Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace*, vii.

³⁷³ Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace*, 150.

³⁷⁴ Hughes summarizes: The new heavens and new earth are “but the renewal of the original creation in which all its potentialities are brought to full fruition.” Philip Edgcombe Hughes, “A Key to the Enigmas of the World? In *Philosophy and Christianity* (Watford: Church Society, 1965), 154.

creating and redeeming remains firmly in God’s domain. Miroslav Volf agrees, stating that we must not think that “results of human work should or could create and replace ‘heaven.’”³⁷⁵

III. ReTelling the Story

The Story We Tell captures the Transformational accent of communicating the sweeping story of God and his creation in which we find ourselves. However, I believe that there are four areas within this approach which require re-appropriation to provide a more compelling teleological framework as kingdom witnesses. Through the lens of identity, I argue that the historical emphasis of the doctrine of election within Dutch Calvinism ought to be re-rooted in a missional teleology. Through the lens of how we relate to each other as a covenant community, I call for a shift from an isolationist posture to a more generous and cooperative stance among the broader church. Through the lens of how we relate to our broader society, I offer a shift to an emphasis on embodied praxis. Finally, through the lens of our posture towards the future, I argue that we need to shift our emphasis from being creation stewards to being *eschatologically-formed* creation stewards. In this section I seek to flush out these shifts, continuing to work towards a renewed appropriation of the gifts of our Transformational heritage in the services of God’s purposes in East Vancouver.

Shift 1: Bringing Calling into Election

A. Identifying Problems:

The doctrine of election plays a significant role in shaping our Dutch Calvinist theology, both positively and negatively.³⁷⁶ This emphasis has resulted in two problems in our church

³⁷⁵ Miroslav Volf, *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work*, Reprint (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 92.

³⁷⁶ The emphasis on the doctrine of election for Calvin began when he was seeking to offer comfort to disoriented and disturbed believers who had been condemned by their Roman Catholic priest. Seeking to reassure the believers,

today: first, ironically, theological speculation has not given the hoped-for assurance of salvation which election is supposed to have promised. Second, theological speculation has focused on “who’s in and who’s out” to the detriment of evangelism.

Each new generation within the Reformed confessional tradition has been called back to the 17th Century Confession the *Canons of Dort*, which has proven a challenge when disagreements arise around interpretation. For instance, the CRC has a theologically closely related denomination which split over differing interpretations on what is believed to happen in the practice of paedobaptism. The fruit of this disagreement, and many others, led to unnecessary schisms resulting in new Dutch Reformed denominations. This has contributed to the painful irony of ushering people into a personal crisis of faith while they were looking for assurance of faith. A crisis either because faithful members of the visible church feared they were not part of God’s invisible and elect church, or because the emphasis on trying to understand God’s elective work has led many to be distraught about their fate as well as others’ eternal salvation.

Not only has theological speculation been overly focused on the mystery of God’s will, but a second significant problem resulting from this emphasis is that this attention has detracted from our collaboration with the Holy Spirit in the area of evangelism which has taken a few forms. To begin with, this results in a decreased capacity to imagine how the Gospel can and ought to be shared with those who are not yet rooted in God’s redemptive story. However, a broader, more problematic issue that is at stake with the way the doctrine of election has been emphasized is the belief that if God has already chosen the elect and the reprobate, then there is no real motivation for evangelism.

Calvin reintroduced Augustine’s view of predestination and election. However, the emphasis on election shifted through the years to the peak in 17th Century High Calvinism where Reformed theologians spent much of their energy speculating and articulating the precise boundaries of election.

Additionally, as Rousseau challenges, election understood in this way leads to theological intolerance: “It is impossible to live in peace with people whom one believes are damned... Wherever theological intolerance exists, it is impossible for it not to have some civil effect.”³⁷⁷ Few, if any within the CRC would consciously agree with Rousseau, but we would do well to acknowledge how this might be possible even on a subconscious level. Whether in the more generous sense of seeing how election leads to a lack of motivation for evangelism, or in the more severe description of Rousseau’s concern, many congregations in the CRC have often found the Great Commission one of the last areas they give attention.³⁷⁸

It helps to briefly outline the history of how the Reformed missionary impulse was impacted by the *Synod of Dort*, from which we get one of our three forms of unity. Because our tradition has been shaped by the High Calvinism of the late 16 and early 17th Centuries, Rousseau’s concern is valid. Hogg observed that when the *Canons of Dort* were published, the version of Calvinism which prevailed “worked effectively to throttle missionary endeavour.”³⁷⁹ He even notes that where the *Canons of Dort* do include generous language about proclaiming the message “promiscuously,” this was an accommodation by the Dutch delegates for the international Calvinist representatives present in the meetings.³⁸⁰

Hogg helpfully points out that though this document presents a restrictive picture of a Calvinist God, as early as 1555 and much earlier than the *Synod of Dort*, the church in Geneva was mobilizing and sending missionaries globally.³⁸¹ It should be noted that the missionary

³⁷⁷ As cited in Mouw, *Challenges of Cultural Discipleship*, 2.

³⁷⁸ The neglect of evangelism within the CRC has been demonstrated most specifically since CRC Regional Home Missions pastors began using Christian Schwarz’s *Natural Church Development* as a diagnostic tool for congregations and have consistently found the lowest ‘stave of the barrel’ is evangelism.

³⁷⁹ As cited in William Richey Hogg, “Calvinism and Missions: The Contested Relationship Revisited” in *Themelios* 34, no. 1 (2009), 65.

³⁸⁰ Hogg, 65.

³⁸¹ Hogg, 70.

methods used by Nicholas de Villegagnon and other missionaries to Brazil, took place in step with France's commerce ventures, so too a short while later in Indonesia with the *Dutch East India Company*. Moreover, in 1590 alongside the Dutch Calvinists beginning their colony in America, Dutch Reformed missionaries went to Southeast Asia and in 1668 had translated a New Testament in Malay along with Catechetical materials. Despite the scrutiny around the missions strategy before High Calvinism, there was a missionary spirit at work seeking to share a message about a generous God, and there remains a lasting impact on a Protestant population in Indonesia and present-day Sri Lanka.³⁸²

So what happened? The *Canons of Dort* serve as a reflection of a time when our theological forbears were seeking to grapple with ways of preserving God's transcendence and the effectiveness of God's will in the work of humanity. This history is not often told in our tradition, and without the early Reformed missionary impulse as background, the words of the High Calvinist document loom larger than necessary for present-day Reformed believers. To resolve the dissonance of answering the Great Commission while remaining faithful as a confessional believer, the most common strategy is to ignore the hundreds-year-old document as much as possible. There are many examples of how this has played out where Richard Mouw calls election a "shelf doctrine"³⁸³ and leading missional voices Van Gelder and Goheen make almost no mention of election as described above in their work.³⁸⁴ Today, while all CRC clergy, elders, and deacons submit to *The Forms of Unity* as historical expressions of our theological stream, very few engage the *Canons* in their entirety. Many find the theological minutiae

³⁸² Hogg, 72-73.

³⁸³ Richard J. Mouw, *Calvinism in the Las Vegas Airport: Making Connections in Today's World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Books, 2004), 39.

³⁸⁴ Following Newbiggin's cue on framing election missionally, Goheen does write of election, but in his published writings he does not address the particular challenges resulting from the traditionally-framed understanding of election which I argue below.

cumbersome, the statements offensive, and the method stifling to the fervor of faith. The theological excesses of High Calvinism are decidedly unhelpful in communicating the message of a transformative Gospel today, yet there remain distinct elements within *The Canons* which prove helpful for Christian Reformed congregants' participation in God's mission including the call for 'promiscuous' evangelism 'without distinction'—something of a surprise for a document so focused on 'the reprobate':

Moreover, the promise of the gospel is, that whoever believes in Christ crucified shall not perish, but have everlasting life. This promise, together with the command to repent and believe, ought to be declared and published to all nations, and to all persons promiscuously and without distinction, to whom God out of his good pleasure sends the gospel.³⁸⁵

Overall, the place of the doctrine of election in the Christian Reformed family today leaves us in an awkward position—election is consistent within the Calvinist theological framework, but practically, the traditional CRC emphasis at best is neutral as it relates to evangelism, and at worst, election is a distraction or barrier to it. Avoidance is one strategy. However, we remain a confessional church where the doctrine of election still plays a significant role. I therefore propose a different approach of re-situating the doctrine of election into a missional teleology. I will first describe my understanding of this contentious doctrine by drawing on a voice from within CRC who challenges the traditional application of election with giving careful thought to the concept of limited atonement; and second, by drawing on a voice from the wider church with Paul Hiebert's application of set theory.

Calvinists with missional leanings have struggled with how the limited scope of Christ's work of atonement stood in conflict with passages such as John 3:16-17 which affirm God's loving all humanity, as well as God's people being sent out as witnesses in Matthew 28 and Acts

³⁸⁵ "Canons of Dort," *Christian Reformed Church*, Article 5, <https://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/confessions/canons-dort> (Accessed June 4, 2012).

1. It is believed that God's divine love and limited atonement are at deep odds with each other, and if that is our belief, our behaviour will reflect this conviction.

Succinctly, Harold Dekker notes the difference between the *sufficiency, availability, and desire* of God's offer of atonement from the *efficacy of atonement*.³⁸⁶ Regarding the first, he writes:

If universal sufficiency is not part of the divine design of the atonement, it is an accident, an unintended byproduct. Any such conception is of course theologically impossible and amply discredited by the Bible.³⁸⁷

On the availability of God's offer of atonement, he argues that salvation is *available* to all humanity:

...otherwise the well-meant offer of the gospel is a farce, for it then offers sincerely to all men what cannot be sincerely said to be available to all.... Titus 2:11 is very precise at this point: 'For the grace of God hath appeared, bringing salvation to all.'³⁸⁸

Dekker then asks if God desires that all would be saved:

Can God's desire for the salvation of all men be disassociated from His design in the atonement? Not according to logic or, more decisively, Biblical teaching. I Timothy 2:4-6 says about the design of God's desire: 'Who could have all men be saved, and come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, one mediator also between God and men, himself man, Christ Jesus, who gave himself a ransom for all.'

...The only point at which Scripture and Reformed confessions point to a limited design in the atonement is at the point of *efficacy*. Only there can a doctrine of limited atonement be formulated which does not do clear violence to Biblical teaching concerning the universal love of God.³⁸⁹

Dekker helpfully roots the efficacy of God's atonement in the broader picture of God's generous love toward the humanity he made in his image—the same people he has sent his people to share about his love. Dekker rightly concludes:

³⁸⁶ Harold Dekker, "God So Loved—All Men!" in James D. Bratt, *The Best of The Reformed Journal* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans Publishing, 2011), p.56.

³⁸⁷ Dekker, *God So Loved—All Men!*, 56.

³⁸⁸ Dekker, *God So Loved—All Men!*, 56.

³⁸⁹ Dekker, *God So Loved—All Men!*, 56.

The doctrine of limited atonement as commonly understood and observed in the Christian Reformed Church impairs the principle of the universal love of God and tends to inhibit missionary spirit and activity. God so loved *all men* that He gave His only begotten Son!³⁹⁰

Alongside this voice from within the Living Tradition, I also draw on a voice from the wider church. Nearly forty years ago, Fuller Seminary Missiologist Paul Hiebert applied set theory to the way congregations function.³⁹¹ Hiebert noted the distinction between bounded and centered sets. Bounded sets are focused on the boundaries and tend to default to more either/or categories. Beliefs, doctrines, and adherence to prescribed beliefs play a significantly stronger role for bounded-set congregations. Centered-set congregations, on the other hand, shift their emphasis away from who's in and who's out because on belief or behaviour, and shifts the orientation from the boundaries to the centre where we find Jesus. Focus on doctrine falls second in importance to the orientation of each person towards the middle. Centred set congregations are less concerned with theological precision and recognize the result will mean greater theological diversity for the sake of our orientation is more important than doctrine.

In what follows, I will propose a centered-set application of our doctrine of election where I argue we shift away from doctrinal precision around the mystery of God's will and we re-root it in a missional teleology which is present in the Biblical story beginning with Abraham. Before we explore this further, a qualifying statement is necessary: though the temptation here is to shed the shackles of what has become a burden in our churches, in reappropriating election to a centred set orientation we still benefit from maintaining doctrinal boundaries. I do not propose ridding ourselves of these boundaries; instead, I propose shifting our emphasis from the doctrinal application of election to the teleologically missional application of election.

³⁹⁰ Dekker, *God So Loved—All Men!*, 57.

³⁹¹ Hiebert, Paul G., *Conversion, Culture and Cognitive Categories in Gospel in Context*, 1978, 1 (4):24-29.

After outlining the identifiable markers of this doctrine in the Calvinist tradition, I will explore the pastoral intent of communicating God’s election, and will then draw on an aspect of Karl Barth’s interpretation of connecting election to vocation. Following these three areas, I will propose that the doctrine of election ought to connect to a call into a participatory mission for all of God’s people, which I believe will provide a more biblical and teleological understanding of the rarely talked about doctrine.

In what follows, I will propose a centered-set application of our doctrine of election where I argue that we ought to shift away from doctrinal precision around the mystery of God’s will and we re-root it in a missional teleology—an emphasis that is present in the Biblical story beginning with Abraham.³⁹² After outlining the identifiable markers of this doctrine in the Calvinist tradition, I will explore the pastoral intent of communicating God’s election. I will then draw on an aspect of Karl Barth’s interpretation of the connection between election and vocation.

B. (Dis)Function of the Doctrine of Election

In his book, *Calvinism in the Las Vegas Airport*, Richard Mouw compares the doctrines of predestination and election to the way most modern Mormons would approach their historical practices of polygamy.³⁹³ A shelf doctrine is a fair description of the way many Calvinists today tend to downplay a belief that was quite central in John Calvin’s grid in his efforts to preserve the transcendence of God.

³⁹² Before we explore this further, a qualifying statement is necessary: though the temptation here is to shed the shackles of what has become a burden in our churches, in reappropriating election to a centred set orientation we still benefit from maintaining doctrinal boundaries. I do not propose ridding ourselves of these boundaries; instead, I propose shifting our emphasis from the doctrinal application of election to the teleologically missional application of election.

³⁹³ Mouw, *Calvinism in the Las Vegas Airport*, 39.

Calvin's intention was to safeguard God's mercy and to ensure that God's grace would be effectual and that any works righteousness would not be considered part of God's salvific work. In the Institutes, Calvin writes, "We shall never be clearly persuaded, as we ought to be, that our salvation flows from the wellspring of God's free mercy until we come to know his eternal election."³⁹⁴ In other words, for Calvin, the default fate of all of humanity is to be cut off from a relationship with their Creator. However, God, out of his grace, mercifully chose a people through whom to make himself known. In the interest of re-appropriating the doctrine of the atonement, Hans Boersma argues that a more functional approach would be to maintain the doctrine of election but to redefine it in historical, not eternal terms.³⁹⁵ This line of thinking is complementary to how I believe election functions in Scripture, beginning with the call of Abraham.

For Calvin, election unfolded in three stages: "First his election of the nation of Israel, second his election of individual Israelites and third, his eternal election of individuals to salvation."³⁹⁶ Boersma observes that for much of the Calvinist writing on the doctrine of election, there is a problematic and vast divide between the historically placed election of Israel and God's eternal election for salvation. The distinction is problematic because, he argues, Paul's understanding of election flowed out of Israel's sense of their election in history, which is given little attention, particularly by the time of High Calvinism.³⁹⁷ When the historical context is removed, so too is God's original purpose for election.

³⁹⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xxi.1.

³⁹⁵ Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*, See chapter 3.

³⁹⁶ Boersma, 57.

³⁹⁷ Boersma notes that the *Canons of Dort* decontextualize the Apostle Paul by giving remarkably sparse reference to the Old Testament, and instead divorce the 'Jewishness' of the doctrine and instead approach it through the lens of Greek philosophy. *Violence, Hospitality and the Cross*, 76.

Boersma also takes issue with the emphasis this problematic approach places on individuals thereby weakening the character of election, particularly evidenced in the deeply individualistic approach to faith characteristic of High Calvinism.³⁹⁸ Calvin emphasized the individual nature of faith as a corrective to the errors identified in the Roman Catholic Church at the time, without undermining the corporate nature of faith. Calvin could not have foreseen the hyper-individualism and the profoundly fractured expressions of family, church and society 500 years later. Nevertheless, Boersma's criticism is of particular interest to us because the roots of this preoccupation with personal status are profoundly influenced by the *The Canons of Dort*, one of our confessional forms of unity.

C. Intent of the Doctrine of Election

Because the central aim for Calvin was to preserve the glory of God, everything flowed from that conviction, including God's purposes with humanity. Moreover, although Calvin comes across as cold-hearted in his clear articulation of the doctrine of election, his original intention with this doctrine was to offer comfort to people who were struggling in their faith.³⁹⁹ As a pastor, Calvin leaned on the doctrine of election to reassure and comfort his small congregation that God had indeed chosen them.⁴⁰⁰ Calvin's intention did not always have the desired effect,⁴⁰¹ but we can, at the very least, recognize the pastoral longing behind Calvin's theological decree.

³⁹⁸ Boersma, writes, "For Later Calvinism, God's love is a violent love that forces some individual strangers into the Father's mansions while excluding others from his hospitality because of his decree of eternal reprobation." Boersma, 56.

³⁹⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, III, xxi, 7.

⁴⁰⁰ Peterson, *Soulcraft*, Disc 2.

⁴⁰¹ As a pastor in one congregation for ten years as well as some short-term roles in three congregations previous, I have witnessed firsthand how the doctrine of election has had the opposite effect on parishioners who acknowledged that God's elect are part of the invisible church, but faced deep doubts whether they themselves were part of God's eternal purposes to his elect.

Eugene Peterson points out that beyond comfort and reassurance, predestination and election also “pushes our egos aside and lets God be God. God is the primary agent of history: the Exodus was his Exodus, the Mission of the Kingdom is his Mission. When this is reinforced, and our egos are held in check, we recognize the delight we still have in participating in God’s mission.”⁴⁰² Reading election this way helps us read rich passages such as Ephesians 1:3-14 where Paul and God’s people are drawn up into God’s redemptive purposes revealed in the person of Christ. It also frees us from the pressure of thinking that the survival of the church or the success (or feared failure) of the mission of God’s kingdom is up to us.⁴⁰³

Functionally, we do not always live in this posture of trust that God is indeed the primary agent of history, of our lives and creation’s renewal. Instead, particularly for those in full-time parish ministry, the temptation to feel the congregation’s success or lack thereof, has a direct correlation to our effectiveness and effort. To blow the dust off this shelf doctrine would free us as God’s people to be reminded that God is the originator and initiator of his mission, and therefore everything we do rests in the confidence of his presence and his promise that “*he* will make all things new.”⁴⁰⁴

D. Purpose and the Doctrine of Election

The discussion of election can lead us down multiple avenues, but I want to avoid the academic approach of High Calvinism and instead, shift our attention from the scope of God’s elective work, and onto the *telos* of God’s elective purposes. Two voices from the broader Reformed community assist here: Karl Barth and Lesslie Newbigin. While Barth is theologically thorough in his treatment of the doctrine of election, he is equally thorough on the lived response

⁴⁰² Peterson, *Soulcraft*, Disc 2.

⁴⁰³ Peterson, *Soulcraft*, Disc 3.

⁴⁰⁴ Revelation 21, emphasis mine.

to God's election. Newbigin is more explicit in his emphasis that election is best understood when it is expressed in the participation of God's mission. In his book *The Open Secret*, Newbigin has little patience for theologizing: "the question of eternal salvation and judgment is not a basis for speculation about the fate of other people."⁴⁰⁵ The practicality Newbigin speaks of is "how the action of God brings history to its true end."⁴⁰⁶

Karl Barth wrote much on the doctrine of election, and while I will not engage with his thinking on this issue its entirety, I am particularly interested in his teleological approach to election, which he begins in *Church Dogmatics*.⁴⁰⁷ Barth argues that the purpose of election is that we are united with Christ who is the only one fully elected and reprobate in God's plan of salvation. As Christ draws us into the life with God, we experience God's purpose for election as our primary vocation.⁴⁰⁸ As we live into this calling, we express our proper doxology⁴⁰⁹ to the Triune God, and we bear witness to the life that comes through Christ alone: the "liberation, restoration, renewal, and exaltation to fellowship with God."⁴¹⁰ To point to something other than Christ, even the benefits of faith, is to have misdirected witness.⁴¹¹ Barth also cautions that in this witnessing, as in every other aspect of God's work, God in Christ is the first and the last. He writes:

In Christ's action for the world and the Christian as fully completed in His passion, he can participate only passively, in pure faith in Him, love for Him and hope in Him, without making the slightest or most incidental contribution.⁴¹²

⁴⁰⁵ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, Revised edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 79.

⁴⁰⁶ Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, p. 98.

⁴⁰⁷ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV, Ch. XVI, 71, 3&4*, Trans. G.W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2009), 520.

⁴⁰⁸ Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV*, 554.

⁴⁰⁹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV*, 573.

⁴¹⁰ Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV*, 595.

⁴¹¹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV*, 595.

⁴¹² Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV*, 605.

In other words, Barth argues that the purpose of God's election is that faith expressing grateful worship and holistic witness, pointing others to the in-breaking presence of Christ and his kingdom. Guder summarizes this as follows:

The outcome of [Karl Barth's view of] election is not a preoccupation with the question of who is saved and who is not, but rather a focus upon the missional vocation of the particular community God calls forth, the church, to be the instrument of God's mission.⁴¹³

In this vein, the missionary author Lesslie Newbigin approaches the doctrine of election with an urgency to be lived out as God's witnesses. When the purpose of witnessing fades, the church today is vulnerable to slip into Israel's failure to live into its call to be a light to the nations (Isaiah 49) failing to remember that God is a sending God. Newbigin writes:

This doctrine of divine election has fallen into disrepute because those who were so chosen and called (the 'elect') so often saw themselves as exclusive beneficiaries of God's choice, rather than trustees on behalf of the nations. But this disastrous misunderstanding, so manifest in the story of Israel and in the life of the church in all generations, cannot negate the fundamental truth of the doctrine of election. It is God who chooses, calls and sends.⁴¹⁴

Not only should election focus on God's choosing, calling and sending his people into the world as his witnesses, Newbigin goes even further to suggest that God's kingdom mission is God's entire purpose for election:

To be chosen, to be elect, therefore does not mean that the elect are the saved and the rest are the lost. To be elect in Christ Jesus, and there is no other election, means to be incorporated into his mission to the world, to be the bearer of God's saving purpose for his whole world, to be the sign and the agent and the first fruit of his blessed kingdom, which is for all.⁴¹⁵

Both Barth and Newbigin, and Boersma previously, offer reworkings of the doctrine of election significant enough that our confessional understanding of election would need to be

⁴¹³ Darrell Guder, "Worthy Living: Work and Witness from the Perspective of Missional Church Theology" in *Word and World*, vol. 25, No. 4, Fall 2005 https://wordandworld.luthersem.edu/content/pdfs/25-4_Work_and_Witness/25-4_Guder.pdf (Accessed August 26, 2017), 525.

⁴¹⁴ Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 17-18.

⁴¹⁵ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 86-87.

thoroughly updated from the *Canons of Dort*. They are, however, prophetic voices in bridging the gap between doctrine and practice. At the start of this section on election, I said the doctrine has sat on the shelf in part because the High Calvinist interpretation particularly emphasized the reprobation which made God seem capricious. However, the doctrine has often been ignored also because it has been treated as static theology, not the missional emphasis we witness unfolding throughout the pages of Scripture.

A further criticism aimed at the High Calvinism form of election is its individualistic nature. Boersma, Barth, and Newbigin all offer a corrective to this individualistic impulse where God calls to himself a people, not merely a series of individuals with whom he is entering into a transaction. This corrective, however, is not intended to diminish the uniqueness of value of each person, but rather to enlarge our vision of God's grand purposes. It is of utmost importance that one's place in God's larger plan is not lost, but it would be personal in a corporate setting rather than being understood individualistically. Bavinck wrote:

The image of God is much too rich for it to be fully realized in a single human being, however richly gifted that human being may be...One humanity in its entirety—as one complete organism, summed up under a single head, spread out over the whole earth, as prophet proclaiming the truth of God, as priest dedicating itself to God, as ruler controlling the earth and the whole creation – only it is the fully finished image, the most telling and striking likeness of God.⁴¹⁶

Bavinck's doctrine of the image of God could assist in moving us beyond the confines of framing our faith through individualism as he believed the image of God cannot be fully expressed by one person but only finds its fullest expression in the whole of humanity. Therefore, if God's people are elected to make him known, it would follow that God is most fully expressed in the context of the many, not the one.

⁴¹⁶ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, Vol. 2, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, 2009), 577.

To preserve the doctrine of election as presented in the Reformed tradition, we need to shift our focus by recovering the *telos* of God's election throughout history: that God calls and then he sends us to bear witness to his work. In Genesis 11, it is God who calls Abraham and promises that the other nations will be blessed through him and his lineage. In creating the nation of Israel, many cultural laws were given to God's people to establish and ensure that shalom would thrive. Despite the presence of sin, Israel's way of life was meant to bear witness to the life of God, to all other nations. In Isaiah 49, Isaiah reframes the call for Israel to be a light to the nations, despite their continual failure to adequately embody this call.

We see then in the Epistles, primarily in the book of Romans, where election has the full weight of God's missional purposes behind it, that the Gentiles are also part of God's plan. Drawing on this call, to live out our election for the benefit of those who have not yet heard, is vital if our tradition is to understand God's purposes for us as his people.

Shift 2: Moving Towards a Covenant Community

*These commandments I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.*⁴¹⁷

*"May your mutual love abound more and more in the knowledge and depth of insight, so that you all may be able to discern together what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ."*⁴¹⁸

The second aspect of the teleological character of the church named in chapter two addresses a person's place in the community. The word community itself is somewhat problematic because it is nebulous. For instance, in our context, we speak of community as the neighbourhood in which our church gatherings take place, but it is also expressed in our regular

⁴¹⁷ Deuteronomy 6:5-6. <http://biblehub.com/deuteronomy/6-7.htm> (Accessed November 13, 2017).

⁴¹⁸ Philippians 1:9-10. Italicized words mine to emphasize the communal nature expressed in the Greek.

small group meetings and the Sunday worship services. In this section, I will argue that we need to recover the distinctiveness that marks us as God's people, who are not only part of a community in general, but a covenant community in particular. I have in mind here the distinct benefits and responsibilities that come with being part of a particular worshipping community. I will then argue that we need to re-situate ourselves within the context of the broader community of our theological tradition.

To begin our discussion on what a covenant community is and how it ought to function, I will briefly describe Abraham Kuyper's experience of communal faith formation,⁴¹⁹ as it is instructive in explaining some of the problems facing our churches today. I will then describe the ideals of communal faith formation called for by Kuyper and Bavinck, after which I will explore what committed communal faith formation looks like today. Finally, I will explore the call for covenant community to hold a more generous posture towards the wider Church.

A. Kuyper's experiences of communal faith formation:

Finding a place in a trusted community of faith is a challenge for everyone. In the life of Abraham Kuyper, we find someone who directly benefited from the faith of others, but who was challenged to make room in his life for community. Born in a nominal and liberal faith, Kuyper would not describe himself as a believing Christian until two significant turning points in his 20's. The first, was during the first of his mental breakdowns⁴²⁰ when his wife Johanna gave him the novel *The Heir of Redclyffe* in which the protagonist's transformation led to his own renewal. At that time, church for him "became the longing, the thirst of his life...in that brief moment, his ideal of church life was revealed to him. That thought...proved the genesis of an ideal, the

⁴¹⁹ Communal faith formation includes sustained rhythms of worship such as daily prayer and meditation on Scripture and consistent participation in First CRC's Sunday worship services.

⁴²⁰ Frank VandenBerg, *Abraham Kuyper* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 25.

blueprint of a church according to the Scriptures.”⁴²¹ This event was followed a few years later when, as a young pastor he visited a belligerent peasant woman who stopped attending church because she, along with others, did not want to be polluted by his still-liberal sermons. He continued to visit this woman and soon found himself disciplined by her. Kuyper’s daughter recalled:

Miss Baltus witnessed to her pastor about the grace of God in her life, and she explained how her beliefs differed from his. She presented him with the historic Reformed Confessions and related their doctrines to her learned minister, who allowed a peasant to teach him God’s Word. She urged him to read Calvin’s *Institutes*. He did so, and his conversion followed. He testified that she and others at Beesd were the agents who led him to embrace the Christ of the Gospels.⁴²²

With the patient witness of Kuyper’s wife and the bold witness of a peasant woman in his first congregation, Kuyper experienced the gift of communal faith formation. He sought to establish a model of communal faith formation that would work in both in the institutional church’s official functions, catechesis particularly, as well as the organic church where Christians live out their faith in their everyday lives.⁴²³

One of the unique gifts in Continental Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries was the stability of family and village life. This stability extended to the family where multiple generations lived and worked together in the family business. For a child born at this time, even if he or she lived in a dwelling with only their immediate family, daily home life included the presence of grandparents as well as uncles and aunts. These relatives as well would necessarily play a role in their faith formation through their modeling, and in the overheard conversations

⁴²¹ Vandenberg, *Abraham Kuyper*, 28.

⁴²² Catherine M.E. Kuyper, “Abraham Kuyper: His Early Life and Conversion,” in *International Reformed Bulletin*, 5 (April 1960), 19–25.

⁴²³ Louis Praamsma, *Let Christ Be King: Reflections on the Life and Times of Abraham Kuyper* (St. Catharines: Paideia Press, 1985), 41.

when the extended family was together for their weekly meal.⁴²⁴ For Kuyper, this family time together around the table and Scripture was the primary means of faith formation for young children.⁴²⁵ The rhythm of home life would include reading Scriptures and discussion after hour-long meals, which for Kuyper, “carried the weight of eternity.”⁴²⁶

School-aged children were to have a faith that was celebrated on Sundays and also nurtured in homes and supplemented in Christian Schools. The curriculum included educational requirements of the state, but additionally, the teachers would teach the children the same faith they heard at home and in the church and would ensure memorization of the *Heidelberg Catechism*--the central confession of the Reformed tradition. While this practice of memorization was intended to deepen one’s piety with the Living God, the communal dimension of this was the modelling of faith by the teachers as they were also individuals with whom these children worshipped and lived alongside in day to day life.⁴²⁷

However, this “tenderest and holiest communion”⁴²⁸ was something that was easier to write about than personally live it out. As a theologian, he was able to see how authentic relationships fit into the cosmic scope of the organic church and as a newspaper editor he was able to write about true community, while he keeping himself at a distance. This stands in

⁴²⁴ In village life, this steady influence continued to influence the child throughout their whole lives. Most often, for those who felt the need to differentiate from their families of origin, quite often moved away in order to step away from the influence of the family. One of Kuyper's children abandoned the Christian faith and signified this shift by moving to the Dutch East Indies. However, the opposite was also where sometimes the young person moved away for a better situation.

⁴²⁵ Praamsma, *Let Christ Be King*, 41. Aside from vacations and special holidays, Kuyper retreated to his office when the hour was complete. This would later serve as a model for Dutch immigrants to Canada where the fathers involved in church and school would be away from home most evenings of the week.

⁴²⁶ VandenBerg, *Abraham Kuyper*, 35. Hielema writes, “The church is called to *supplement and support* faith nurture in the home, but because so many homes are harried and stressed, the church often *replaces* the calling of the home instead.” P.17. In Kuyperian terms, the 21st Century has brought about a ‘spherical collapsing’—previously, church and family had very distinct callings in the economy of God and today there is a blurring which Kuyper could not have envisioned in his day.

⁴²⁷ VandenBerg, *Abraham Kuyper*, 35.

⁴²⁸ Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit* Trans. Henri De Vries (San Bernadino: Ulan Press, 2012), 550.

contrast to his personal interactions where he often fell short of his standard⁴²⁹ as he was more in Bratt's words, "a great man but not a nice one, plagued by compulsive overworking and a need for control—a man's man in a world beyond any man's control, however valiant, determined, or smart."⁴³⁰

It is further sobering to note that for many of his final years, Kuyper stopped attending church and instead, worked in his study writing his many devotionals to his readers of *The Herald*.⁴³¹ The impact on Kuyper's view on communal faith formation is immense: although he did not give up on the organic church, he had essentially given up on his personal participation in the institutional church and the community that was available there. Bauman observes this vulnerability for all Christians: the tension between the "community of our dreams" and the "really existing community."⁴³²

The result for Kuyper was that he produced volumes of spirit-filled devotionals, but they primarily explored the dynamic of the individual and their relationship with God. While this is not unimportant, it is a far cry from his first sermon at Beesd,⁴³³ which placed fellowship with others a close second to the sweet fellowship with God. Knowing Kuyper's faith trajectory, we are left with an image, not unlike John Bunyan's *Pilgrim*, who left his family behind *en route* to the Celestial City.⁴³⁴ As Mouw points out, our faith journeys cannot simply depend on an

⁴²⁹ Eric Millar, "Father Abraham: Meet the Dutch neo-Calvinist Who Helped Birth an Enduring Intellectual Movement" (Review of Bratt 2013) in *Christianity Today* (April 2013), 65.

⁴³⁰ Bratt, *Modern Calvinist, Christian Democrat*, xxii..

⁴³¹ Bratt, *Modern Calvinist, Christian Democrat*, 129.

⁴³² Bauman, *Community*, 4.

⁴³³ VandenBerg, *Father Abraham*, 33.

⁴³⁴ Richard J. Mouw, *When the Kings Come Marching In: Isaiah and the New Jerusalem*, Revised edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), ix.

individual: “As pilgrims on this perilous journey, we cannot travel alone”⁴³⁵—we need family, both biological and spiritual to nurture our faith.⁴³⁶ Pastors, as well, need this community:

Clergy, like others, need to be known and loved in a circle of face-to-face relationships... even though they stand as the facilitators and focal points of Christian community...in the long run, no one—clergy or lay—can live a healthy spiritual life without that kind of a life-context for his or her journey.”⁴³⁷

B. Bridging Kuyper’s Experience to Our Own

It would be an overstatement to say that Kuyper’s personal experiences wholly influenced generations of Dutch Reformed believer’s approach to communal faith formation. Not everyone shared Kuyper’s dilemma between the idealism of community and the challenge to get along with those nearest him. His resistance to being changed *as iron sharpens iron* from the counsel of his peers in his later years illustrates the failure of the community to do the very thing Kuyper envisioned many years previously. Furthermore, his critical posture to the institutional church was repeated in the next generation under Evan Runner, who along with his Calvin College students, was highly critical of the institutional church.⁴³⁸

In order that Kuyper’s helpful models of fostering a “deep and warm spirituality”⁴³⁹ and public engagement be sustainable today, his work must be supplemented with a robust vision of the body of believers as the locus of faith formation. For a tradition concerned with every square

⁴³⁵ Mouw, *When the Kings Come Marching In*, ix.

⁴³⁶ Jean Vanier, *Becoming Human*, Kindle Edition (Toronto: Anansi, 1998), Loc. 508.

⁴³⁷ Donald R. Hands and Wayne L. Fehr, *Spiritual Wholeness for Clergy: A New Psychology of Intimacy with God, Self, and Others* (Washington: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1994), 67.

⁴³⁸ This has been communicated to me many times in conversations with various Calvin College *Groen Club* members in the 1960’s, including Henry Numan and Henry deMoor, who were told by Runner not to pursue parish ministry because ‘they were too good to be stuck in the church’ and who would stand with his students after church services criticizing the recently preached sermon loud enough for the minister to hear.

⁴³⁹ Richard Mouw, “Kuyper for Christians” in *Comment Magazine*, June 27, 2011 <https://www.cardus.ca/comment/article/2839/kuyper-for-christians/> (Accessed October 19, 2017).

inch of creation fitting under Christ's Lordship, equipping God's people for every square inch of faith formation requires a significant amount of attention in today's world.⁴⁴⁰

A few factors contribute to this need. First, there is the previously mentioned conflict between the institutional church and the organic church where the kingdom participation is expressed. Second, there is a significant cultural shift within the Dutch Reformed tradition in the manner in which faith is communicated. The traditional Dutch approach of embodying one's faith has defaulted to freely talking about theology, church, and kingdom while a palpable silence emerges when one is asked to share about their personal faith journey. This silence continues in the lives of some of our older members who show a deep reluctance to participate in an off-script prayer, as well as parishioners who have said to me, "that is too personal a question" when I, as their pastor have inquired about their prayer life.⁴⁴¹ Their relationship with the Lord—or the secret life, as Kuyper describes it—is too precious to speak about presumptively.

In pointing this out, I do not want to discount how the stoic nature of faith played out in the larger rhythm of one's life of faith. However, I have also journeyed with parishioners (often to their deathbed) who have been vulnerable enough with me to share that they gave much more considerable attention to their public faith and active kingdom witness than their private relationship with the Lord. Moreover, I recognize too, in Old Testament Israel, how central the Exodus story as told in the Seder meal draws the next generation into the story of God's redeeming grace at work. Particularly in an oral tradition, verbalizing one's faith to the next generation was the only option for faith to continue. In our postmodern, biblically illiterate

⁴⁴⁰ Mouw, *Challenges of Cultural Discipleship*, Loc. 834.

⁴⁴¹ This was told to me in September 2017. A few days later, I inquired of another senior about this reticence and he acknowledge the stoic way of the Dutch and shared in wonder how some of his own family members have been able to "break through" that resistance.

context today, faith stories are increasingly crucial for faith to be transmitted from one generation to the next. Furthermore, in the pluralistic context in which we now find ourselves younger generations need to know about, and witness how, the faith of their parents, grandparents, and grandparents is alive and active, or it will lead them to question the veracity of their faith. If, for instance, a young adult encounters doubts about Scripture or goes through an extended season of not sensing God's presence in their lives, without hearing how previous generations have faced the same questions, the young adult may end up believing they do not have genuine faith or that they ought not to practice this faith at all.

This shift has been unfolding over a few generations and now the Christian Reformed Church is noticing how other traditions approach their faith in a more expressed and verbalized way. When observing other Protestant traditions doing this I often hear comments from our congregation like, "that is way too evangelical." While there are emphases in evangelicalism that do not necessarily aide the CRC in our kingdom witness, the aspect of verbalizing faith is certainly something we would do well to attend to. We also need to acquire a more persuasive communal transmission of faith, for this is not only an Evangelical concern. Karl Rahner, an advisor to Vatican II, offers this corrective of a privatized faith as he points to the necessity of learning and deepening our faith in community:

Man [sic] is both an individual personal subject with a unique history of freedom for which no one else can deputize, and at the same time a social being who can only have a history in the unity of humanity . . . he is never so much an individual that he could be himself without intercommunication with his fellows, without his "world." Both aspects bear upon each other. Intercommunication and self- realization, self-possession, grow in principle in like and not inverse proportion.⁴⁴²

⁴⁴² Karl Rahner as cited in Pádraic Conway and Fainche Ryan, eds., *Karl Rahner: Theologian for the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Oxford Press, 2010), 201.

The quote above captures something of Rahner's emphasis on the Spirit of God present as a theme throughout his writings.⁴⁴³ Both Kuyper and Rahner, though representing different traditions, wrote on 'spheres' and here Rahner offers a helpful corrective to our tradition. Rahner suggests the need for a "private religious sphere" of the individual, which we would most certainly affirm. However, he goes on to state "that which is private on the part of the individual can and should have an influence upon other human beings"⁴⁴⁴ which includes prayer, encouraging one another, and offering comfort to each other in the power of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁴⁵ Where Kuyper slipped into an introspective and quiet "secret" faith,⁴⁴⁶ what Rahner offers here is an unmistakable concern for the other and the necessity of "private religious community life"⁴⁴⁷ where we cannot lift the individual over and against the interpersonal.

C. Towards a Covenantal Communal Faith Formation

Our congregation entered into a period of decline during the 1990's, during which time there were very few babies born to participating families. One of the joys in our congregation over the last number of years has been to celebrate the birth of children once again, and each time an infant is presented by the parent or grandparents for baptism, I remind them that this is not a private event. Though it is deeply personal for them as a family, it is, in fact, a public event witnessed by our congregation. Even more, the congregants are not mere witnesses, but they are in fact *participants* in this baptism as they too promise to pray for this child and promise also to support them as they grow up. We recently sent a young family in their move from Vancouver

⁴⁴³ Conway and Ryan, *Karl Rahner*, 201.

⁴⁴⁴ Farmer "Ministry in Community: Rahner's Vision of Ministry" in *Karl Rahner*. ed. Conway and Ryan, 39. This is suggestive, says Farmer that there is and should be a sphere of mutual solidarity of Christians among one another which as such is not still not a part a participation or sharing in the social organization of the church."

⁴⁴⁵ Farmer, 39.

⁴⁴⁶ The impact of this is still felt in the CRC where, particularly those in the older generations in our congregations have a very deeply held faith, but have a very difficult time sharing this faith, even with family members.

⁴⁴⁷ Farmer, 39-40.

and in his reflection on their last Sunday, he could have mentioned many different things, but he mentioned the fact that the congregation made promises to his children as being one of the most significant things he will take with him. That communal promise is an outflow of God's covenantal promise to the baby and her or his family. This same rhythm has sustained the church throughout its existence. In his book, *The First Urban Christians*, Meeks observes: "To be 'baptized into Christ' nevertheless signaled...an extraordinary thoroughgoing socialization in which the sect was intended to become virtually the primary group for its members."⁴⁴⁸

However, promising to commit to living out a communal faith is not the same as doing it. We are regularly confronted with a disconnect between our confessed beliefs and our lived beliefs. Still, that ought not to deter us from continually pursuing the calling to nurture faith in the context of community, which is becoming increasingly important as the sphere of the family is much weaker than previous generations. Mouw maintains that although one sphere ought not to overpower another, he wonders how can the church respond to the weakening of the family sphere today.⁴⁴⁹

The church in North America has come under hard times. As individuals' lives are becoming increasingly fractured, we have, in large part, forgotten how to live in community. Christians want to offer words of hope and to be a visible hope but in this post-Christian context, our voice is muted and many individuals struggle with how to live in authentic community. Our congregation experiences this acutely: seeking to follow Jesus as faithful Christians in Vancouver is becoming increasingly complex.

⁴⁴⁸ Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*, 2nd Ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 78.

⁴⁴⁹ Mouw, *Abraham Kuyper*, Loc. 983-1004. He writes, "I believe it is important for the church today to provide some infrastructural support for dealing with the problem of sphere shrinkage in family life. By seeing this as a compensatory strategy—the church should work to restore the family's independence—we can still affirm Kuyper's insistence that we be clear about the differences between family and church in the divine design." Loc. 1004. For breakdowns in family and society, see Vanier, *Becoming Human*, Loc. 809.

We cannot make this faith journey alone.⁴⁵⁰ We need to be known and supported by those who are as committed to our faith formation as we are to theirs. Therefore, matters such as regular devotional practices, prayers, and even participation in the life of the gathered church⁴⁵¹ ought to be addressed as we invite each other into a more vital personal relationship with God which can even benefit the church's witness because as we nurture our communal relationships, the incarnational model also offers a greater visible witness of this reality to our neighbours; in committing to settle in, learn about and serve our neighbourhoods, we tangibly witness to God's shalom.⁴⁵² As Doug Pagitt notes:

There is something compelling, powerful, and liberating about living life in harmony with God, not in the isolation of an individual relationship but as part of a community...At the centre of this holistic, communal approach to spiritual formation is the creation of Christian communities that are a continuation of the story of God, from Abraham to Jesus to today.⁴⁵³

Recognizing our need for the support of other believers can also extend much further as we recognize the need for our tradition to benefit from mutual support from other Christian expressions. One aspect of Kuyper's framework, which has unintentionally become problematic is his conviction that *in isolation is our strength*. Schilder summarizes the original intent of the concept:

If our numbers do not shrink over the whole world, we should ask ourselves whether we have ever really comprehended Christ's eschatological discourses and properly understood the Revelation of John.⁴⁵⁴

⁴⁵⁰ Pieta Wooley, "Interview with Shane Claiborne" in *UC Observer* June 2012: www.ucobserver.org/interviews (Accessed on September 12, 2017). Claiborne observes, "Our cultural muscles for community have atrophied."

⁴⁵¹ Sunday church attendance has lessened significantly. 20 years ago, the average CRC member would attend church twice each Sunday and today the average church member is coming to two worship services a month. This changing barometer suggests that as church leaders, we assumed that the heart was (being) transformed along with our minds in the Sunday sermons, sacraments and singing. Perhaps a 'spiritual shrivelling' has occurred alongside our pursuit of increasing intellectual knowledge about spirituality.

⁴⁵² Hugh Halter and Matt Smay, *The Tangible Kingdom: Creating Incarnational Community* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 41, 135-140.

⁴⁵³ Doug Pagitt, *Reimagining Spiritual Formation: A Week in the Life of an Experimental Church* (Grand Rapids: Youth Specialties, 2004), 29.

⁴⁵⁴ As cited in Mouw, *The Challenges of Cultural Discipleship*, 131.

What had been intended to give strength to small groups of believers isolated from society because of their convictions, was also applied in the church, and one group, convinced of their own theological interpretations, isolated themselves from the wider Church.

I have in view here the profoundly damaging internal debates where *issues* have taken priority over *people*. Fellow congregation members, even family members, have been divided over a host of issues. Whether in the Netherlands or North America, issues such as how we understand the function of baptism, common grace, identifying the true church, women in ordained leadership, and even lodge membership have all led to schisms within the Dutch Reformed community. Calvin noted how the divisions are due to us being pulled down in the way of the world:

The world is too replete with divine glory, and the church too replete with earthly patterns, protocols and people, for that kind of contrast to be theologically tenable...No, this side of the eschaton, even as the church's sanctification takes place, it remains, like the wider world, besieged and entangled by vices and weakness.⁴⁵⁵

The practice in the Dutch Reformed churches since the two major schisms in the 1800's has been to divide over principle. I do not mean to minimize these issues, but what has been so damaging was the nature of the fights, which depersonalized other members of the body of Christ. This practice of division over difference has resulted in an alarmingly high number of Dutch Reformed denominations existing side by side with very little interaction.⁴⁵⁶

Being a confessional church has not helped us in this regard. Reading Calvin's sharp retorts to his opponents and the vitriol that worked itself out into the *Canons of Dort*, continue to

⁴⁵⁵ Matthew Myer Boulton, *Life in God: John Calvin, Practical Formation, and the Future of Protestant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2011), 200.

⁴⁵⁶ The Fraser Valley offers a helpful illustration where various Dutch Reformed denominations co-exist with very little interaction: Christian Reformed, Canadian Reformed, Orthodox Reformed, Free Reformed, United Reformed, Netherlands Reformed as well as some smaller, more independent congregations.

shape not only how we frame our beliefs, but also how we talk—and attempt to protect—our beliefs. Furthermore, many of the schisms listed in the paragraph above primarily come down to an issue of *interpreting* the Confessions in light of new cultural contexts. Some have been motivated to protect as much of the 16th and 17th-century rhythms as possible, and when threatened, fear often becomes the presenting emotion and separation becomes the go-to behaviour. Others have wanted the confessions to continue to inform—but not dictate—how they live, and so there is a greater openness to change as faith continues to adapt to new contexts, and when they meet resistance, the default emotion is impatience as they dismiss those who “are stuck in their ways.” The splits that have resulted did not only divide the factions in half. Others, so fatigued with the fighting, left both sides of the fights and either went to a new church, or gave up on church altogether. The CRC in the 90’s lost 1/3 of its membership when they allowed individual congregations and classes to read Scripture and allowed for the ordination of women. Recently, at our annual Synod meetings, the same pattern emerged, with growing angst around how to care for LGBTQ+ members. This issue has the potential to divide the CRC once again, and will, unfortunately, do so if the same pattern plays out. If that occurs, some leaders fear the denomination could withstand yet another schism.

The tendency to slip into a depersonalized intellectual approach to challenges also manifests in how Transformationalists relate to those outside of the CRC tradition. At times, there is an eagerness to debate with other faith traditions in an academic manner. Other times, those in our tradition have been so thoroughly self-convinced that any other viewpoint has been quickly discounted. We have forgotten that Calvin, though he had harsh words in debate, still

longed for unity. In a letter he wrote to Cranmer, Calvin wrote that he would “cross ten seas” to promote greater agreement in the central doctrines of the faith with other believers.⁴⁵⁷

Richard Mouw has led the way in presenting a framework in a generous and winsome manner. He writes:

We need to be clear about how much of our arguing with other Christian traditions... has been motivated by a polemical spirit. Calvinist theologians have been a rather testy lot. We have wanted to keep the boundaries clear between our own perspectives and those of Anabaptists, Catholics, Lutherans, and others. Much of this keeping of boundaries makes sense in the light of a variety of historical factors. But we now live in a different age, one often enamored with nihilism and relativism, such that it should be very clear to all of us in the Christian community that we need to explore the rich dimensions of the gospel together. In this context, we need to search collectively through a variety of traditional theological resources for addressing contemporary ills.⁴⁵⁸

As we explore the rich dimensions of the gospel together, we recognize how we need a new posture where we put the same (or higher) amount of energy into working towards the church universal, where we learn from Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and other Protestant traditions. As I stated earlier, I do not mean this ought to lead to bland uniformity between the worldwide church. Instead, I believe, we ought to allow the strengths and insights of our sisters and brothers from the wider circles of the Church to teach us, challenge us and encourage us.

At times, appreciative inquiry can help us notice places of synergy and agreement. John Milbank’s call to be involved in every aspect of life is such an example:

We need a shift instead to a more authentic radicalism in which the Church gets involved in all kinds of processes of welfare, medicine, banking, education, the arts, business, technology, ecology, and more, and seeks to transform them in the joint name of reciprocity and virtue.⁴⁵⁹

⁴⁵⁷ John Calvin, *Letter to Crammer*, Trans. H.C. Porter https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-1-349-00542-0_5?no-access=true (Accessed on November 30, 2017).

⁴⁵⁸ Mouw, *He Shines in All That's Fair*, Loc. 956.

⁴⁵⁹ Moynagh and Harrold, *Church for Every Context*, 130.

Along with finding places of synergy, opening ourselves up to the wider conversation means that the Holy Spirit will continue refining us. Our tradition has long affirmed that we seek to be *reformed and always reforming* and this also means we are continually sanctified, not just personally, but corporately as well. An interesting book, *Five Views on the Church and Politics*, illustrates this well, where one representative from Transformational, Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Anabaptist and also the Black church streams in the United States came together to share their approaches to the public sphere shine the light of their understanding of the gospel on other traditions. James K.A. Smith wrote these words in his presentation:

In an increasingly secularized, post-Christian culture, it is crucial that the 'church' be understood 'catholically'-as a transnational body that finds its commonness in the Scriptures, the sacraments, and the Nicene tradition... Christians should be looking for allies in the public square, and our shared catholic faith should unite us in our public witness.⁴⁶⁰

As Transformationalists will more readily find an aspect of culture to enter into, wanting to witness to how Christ's redemption redirects it back to his purposes, Anabaptist Thomas Heilke offers an insightful critique:

Do neo-Calvinists choose between God and Mammon? If so, how? If working in the world with the view of transformation, what does it look like when the claim, 'Jesus is Lord' is in conflict with the institution of which you are a part?⁴⁶¹

Lutheran Robert Benne offers a similar response, with a more nuanced perspective:

Its overconfidence in its knowledge of God's will in education and politics, paradoxically leading it to integrate too readily with the reigning secular claims and ideologies of the day...it is tempted to smuggle ('progressive', even revolutionary ideologies) into its vision less critically than it should.⁴⁶²

⁴⁶⁰ James K.A. Smith, "A Reformed (Transformationist) Response" in *Five Views on the Church and Politics*, ed. Amy E. Black and Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 213.

⁴⁶¹ Thomas W. Heilke, "An Anabaptist (Separationist) Response," in *Five Views on the Church and Politics*, ed. Amy E. Black and Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 166.

⁴⁶² Robert Benne, "A Lutheran (Paradoxical) Response" in *Five Views on the Church and Politics*, ed. Amy E. Black and Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 167-168.

Together, these voices point to the temptation of premature cultural integration unique to the Reformed tradition. There are, indeed, too frequent examples where for the sake of cultural engagement, God's people have compromised their own character call to be formed in Christ, and directly or indirectly endorsed behaviour contrary to the Gospel. James Bratt, interestingly, notes how in Kuyper's earlier years, he emphasized the *Antithesis* when it proved more strategic, and spoke of it less once there were many cultural institutions to tend to:

Significantly, Kuyper's appeal to the antithesis peaked in the first half of his career, the period of institutional formation, and declined in his later years, when Calvinists had to take their share of managing public life. The concept served a crucial strategic purpose: besides showing Reformed skeptics that cultural activity did not endanger purity of faith, it fortified group identity during a potentially threatening transition.⁴⁶³

With a decrease of emphasis on the antithesis when there was well-established cultural cooperation hints at the risk that comes with the working in step with the more extensive cultural entities. Bratt notes that where Kuyper's legacy is tainted, it most significantly lies in the way antithesis is misapplied: "few doctrines could match the antithesis at fostering spiritual arrogance or abusing principal analysis."⁴⁶⁴

Though this potential for accommodation, even hypocrisy, occurs in many places, an egregious expression of this occurred when Dutch Reformed believers carried this aim alongside a blind spot to blatant racism and were complicit in establishing the structural sin embedded in the system of Apartheid in South Africa. Conradie notes that:

Although Kuyper did not include ethnicity as one of the orders embedded in creation...[the] notion of 'separateness' and 'overagainstness' is not merely marginal but indeed at the core of Kuyper's politics.⁴⁶⁵

⁴⁶³ James D. Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America: A History of a Conservative Subculture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 19.

⁴⁶⁴ Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America*, 19.

⁴⁶⁵ Ernst M. Conradie, *Creation and Salvation: Dialogue on Abraham Kuyper's Legacy for Contemporary Ecotheology* (Leiden; Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2011), 75.

He points out that Dutch immigrants in South Africa regrettably applied Kuyperian theology and also his racism to South Africa, but shifted his “in isolation is our strength” emphasis from one of survival for a vulnerable network of kingdom participants, to structuring isolationism into a separatist system of Apartheid.⁴⁶⁶ Bosch is more direct in his assessment in noting the shift from social isolation of a splinter church in the Netherlands to the racial isolation in South Africa:

For the first time in South African history, one now encountered sustained theological (or ideological) arguments according to which Africaaners should neither fraternize with foreigners nor break down the walls of racial separation instituted by God. Like Israel, Africaaner’s salvation lay in racial purity and separate schools and churches.⁴⁶⁷

In the racially charged time of 1960, Harry Boer wrote to a North American CRC audience, noting the shame of being so closely connected to the architects of Apartheid, and also the shame much closer to home, of black segregation:

As it is the universal embarrassment of whites to be of the same skin color as the proponents of Apartheid, so it is the universal embarrassment of Reformed people and churches to be of the same ecclesiastical and religious family as the South African Dutch. ...Are we not in particular charged with laying upon the Reformed churches in South Africa the prior claims of God’s love and justice? Can we not do so in the realization that we ourselves are not without guilt in the scandal of American segregational practices?⁴⁶⁸

Following the story further, we see Kuyper’s framework was both distorted as a justification for Apartheid and was used as a liberating force which called the church to acknowledge their racism, worked to undo the structural sin, and modeled a new way of gospel-informed living.⁴⁶⁹ As Russel Botman points out, “Kuyper has had an oppressive influence and

⁴⁶⁶ Conradie, *Creation and Salvation*, 75–76.

⁴⁶⁷ WJ de Kock, *Out of My Mind: Following the Trajectory of God’s Regenerative Story* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 8.

⁴⁶⁸ Harry Boer, “Reformed Does Not Mean Apartheid,” in *The Best of The Reformed Journal* ed. James Bratt, 45.

⁴⁶⁹ *The Belhar Confession*, whose primary author was Black Reformed pastor Allan Boesek, emerged from the Uniting Reformed Churches of South Africa and was pivotal in bringing about this change. This document has since

also a liberative influence on South Africa...It was the task of Black Kuyperianism to select the positive aspects and present their theological relevance to South Africa."⁴⁷⁰

For the South African Reformed Churches, it took a minister raised in the segregated non-white denomination to apply the same Scriptural principles to the Apartheid situation and work for the gospel to transform a distorted structure. In the days when Apartheid was still deeply entrenched, Allan Boesak wrote:

Apartheid is the grave of the dignity and credibility of the Reformed tradition. Many people today, especially black people, believe that racism is an inevitable fruit of the Reformed tradition. In the experience of millions of black people, this tradition is responsible for political oppression, economic exploitation, unbridled capitalism, social discrimination, and a total disregard for human dignity. At the same time, being Reformed is equated with uncritical acceptance of the status quo, silence in the face of human suffering, and manipulation of the Word of God in order to justify oppression...For black Reformed people who suffer so much under the totalitarian rule of white Reformed people, the question is fundamental, decisive, and inevitable. Black and Reformed: is it a burden that has to be cast off as soon as possible, or is it a challenge toward renewal of the church and our society?⁴⁷¹

Boesak chose the latter, and he sought to re-imagine the Reformed tradition in his context:

The Word that gives life cannot at the same time be the justification of that death which comes through oppression and inhumanity...For us as black Reformed Christians [reforming our social world] means that, in following Jesus Christ, the spiritual experience is never separated from the liberation struggle. In the heart of this process God is experienced as a Father to whom every effort and every struggle is offered.

It is my conviction that the Reformed tradition has a future in South Africa only if black Reformed Christians are willing to take it up, make it truly their own, and let this tradition once again become what it once was: a champion of the cause of the poor and the oppressed, clinging to the confession of the lordship of Jesus Christ

been shared with and adopted by Reformed denominations around the world including the CRC in North America, in order that the sins of systemic racism would not be repeated in any other context where Reformed believers live.

⁴⁷⁰ Mouw, *Challenges of Cultural Discipleship*, 14.

⁴⁷¹ Allan Boesak, "Black and Reformed: Burden or Challenge?" in *The Best of The Reformed Journal*, ed. James Bratt, 262. Boesak's later years were marred with charges of immorality, but I draw on his example to illustrate the pivotal role he played earlier on within the South African Reformed church.

and to the supremacy of the Word of God...I believe that black Christians should formulate a Reformed confession for our time and our situation in our own words.⁴⁷²

The Reformed faith which was a significant force in establishing Apartheid, once reimagined, was also a source in naming that distortion and helped share a reimagined kingdom ethic in the Reformed churches of South Africa.

The second area of critique takes this one step further: along with the premature acceptance of cultural norms, matters can be too “cut and dry” as Transformationalists push for an over-realized eschatology. Our tradition, says Benne, can be:

A bit too confident, either in claiming there is such a thing as ‘Christian economics,’ on the one hand or too uncritical in its absorption of secular norms and adoption of them as Christian, on the other....I prefer a more dialectical approach that assumes there will be lots of loose ends, convergences, and divergences in such a dialogue. Integration is the hope for the eschaton.⁴⁷³

A third critique was given, regarding the matter of holy living, inquiring if Transformationalists avoid the life of holiness for the sake of kingdom participation. Heilke cites Walter Kaufman and applies it to our stream: "organized Christianity could be defined as the ever-renewed effort to get around [the Sermon on the Mount] without repudiating Jesus."⁴⁷⁴ Though I did address the temptation to minimize one’s personal faith to the detriment of kingdom participation in the second shift, it is interesting to note how other traditions view our tradition’s approach.

One final aspect I will address pertains to which aspect of Christ’s person we emphasize. It is common to speak of Christ as King, but we do not often talk about Christ as the Suffering Servant. In *Adding Cross to Crown*,⁴⁷⁵ Mark Noll, James Bratt, and others explore what it would

⁴⁷² Boesak, *Black and Reformed: Burden or Challenge?*, 263-4.

⁴⁷³ Benne, *A Lutheran (Paradoxical) Response*, 168.

⁴⁷⁴ Heilke, *An Anabaptist (Separationist) Response*, 166.

⁴⁷⁵ Mark A. Noll, et al. *Adding Cross to Crown: The Political Significance of Christ’s Passion* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, 1996).

look like for our tradition to focus our gaze more on the one who was pierced for our transgressions rather than the one who is bringing about his kingdom. Of course, we affirm both aspects of Christ's character, but we tend to live under the Christ as King rubric. However, particularly as matters of inequality and injustice become more pronounced in the city, across Canada, and around the world, embracing Christ who weeps with those who suffer will soften our hearts towards the suffering and harden our determination to pursue justice. Following Jesus in the way of suffering will be an increasingly vital aspect of our kingdom witness:

If it is the nature of God's life to undertake such sacrifice, it must also be the nature of his Church. The Church is most true to itself when it gives itself up, in current cultural form, to be re-formed among those who do not know God's Son. In each new context the church must die to live."⁴⁷⁶

Shift 3: Adopting New Postures for a new form of practice

In a conversation with Indigenous Christian leader Terry LeBlanc, he described for me a previous interaction he had with CRC leaders who asked him how they can move towards reconciled relationships with First Nations peoples.

*"You need to start with a good doctrine of creation." He answered.
One of them replied, "That's great! That IS our starting point."
"I'm not talking about your articulated theology...I'm talking about your embodied theology."⁴⁷⁷*

Terry LeBlanc's words not only outline the long path we need to take as a church towards reconciliation with the indigenous people of this land, but they also illustrate a profound vulnerability within our tradition to prefer to be more intellectual than pietistic, and to be more institutional than personal. The third shift I am calling for within the Transformational tradition is towards a more fruitful expression of the church today, addressing these vulnerabilities by carrying a different posture of faith.

⁴⁷⁶ Archbishop's Council on Mission and Publications, *Mission-Shaped Church: Church Planting and Fresh Expressions in a Changing Context* (New York: Seabury Books, 2010), 89.

⁴⁷⁷ In a conversation with Terry LeBlanc on July 7, 2017.

In his October 2017 editorial, of the denominational monthly *The Banner*, Shiao Chong called for a new Reformation in the CRC—not a theological reformation, but a reformation in spiritual posture. In the article, Chong cites William Bouwsma whose biography acknowledges “two Calvins at odds within the same person. One...rationalist philosopher who craved intelligibility, order, and certainty...[and the other] a 16th-century humanist, flexible and revolutionary.”⁴⁷⁸ Our CRC tradition has often defaulted to the emphasis on intelligibility, order, and certainty while being wary of uncertainty, paradox, and mystery.⁴⁷⁹

The new spiritual posture I propose impacts us in two significant ways: First, towards having a greater openness in our faith, marked with verbalized witness and emphasis on faithful practices, moving from the pursuit of *information* and to *formation*. Second, a movement towards an embodied theology that challenges us to step away from the comforts of working in institutions and integrating the kingdom witness convictions personally.

A. Adopting a Posture for Formation, Rather than the Pursuit of Information

*Where there are two persons, one of whom is strictly ‘orthodox’ in his faith but indifferent as to his manner of life, and the other strict as to ‘his manner of life,’ but careless as to the faith, then he who doeth the will of God, has a better chance of knowing God, than the confessor who surprises you by his accuracy of detail in doctrinal knowledge.*⁴⁸⁰

In *Desiring the Kingdom*, James K.A. Smith describes the vulnerability of another tradition or community who give more significant attention to intellectualism. He states that it is problematic when a community has

thought it sufficient to provide a Christian perspective, an intellectual framework ...[it] reduces Christianity to a denuded intellectual framework that has diminished it because such an intellectualized rendition of the faith doesn’t touch

⁴⁷⁸ As cited in Mouw, *The Challenges of Cultural Discipleship*, 4.

⁴⁷⁹ Shiao Chong, “We Need a New Reformation,” *The Banner*, September 29, 2017

<https://thebanner.org/departments/2017/09/we-need-a-new-reformation> (Accessed October 11, 2017).

⁴⁸⁰ Kuyper, *Near Unto God*, 187.

our core passions. This is because such an intellectualization of Christianity allows it to be unhooked from the thick practices of the church...[It] is reduced to the intellectual elements of a Christian worldview or a Christian perspective... [and] Christianity is turned 'into a belief system available to the individual without mediation by the church.'⁴⁸¹

In our tradition, we are guilty of defaulting to this error, particularly when our emphasis on memorizing correct catechetical information is the primary measure of faith before public profession of faith. Transformationalists are particularly vulnerable here—although this living tradition's intent is to ensure that faith engages in every aspect of life, its most consistent support, particularly in the United States, has remained among intellectuals. Former Missionary to Nigeria Jan Boer writes, "In North America most adherents of Kuyperianism are found in academic and ecclesiastical institutions, where the philosophical and theological aspects claim the major attention."⁴⁸² What results in this emphasis, ironically, is a tradition that *talks* about faith that applies all of life but proves a challenge to *live* it out in all of life.

To correct this imbalance present in many churches, followers of Jesus need to take on the posture of *apprentice*, where the learning and doing are seamlessly integrated. Richard Mouw and James K.A. Smith have both been significant forces in seeking to do this work of integration.

Smith affirms the need for integrating both learning and doing into practices because we are otherwise not engaging our core passions. When that happens, our *embodied* worship will be formed by the "liturgies of the mall and the military/entertainment complex [which] are making us the kind of people who desire *their* kingdoms, even though we might be *thinking* 'from a

⁴⁸¹ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, Loc. 3780.

⁴⁸² Jan H. Boer, *Nigeria's Decades of Blood*, 23.

Christian perspective.”⁴⁸³ We will engage with practices in greater depth in the concluding chapter of this project.

Currently, leaders in the tradition today have explicitly identified this shortcoming, and both of them call those aligned with Kuyper’s theology to recover vital spiritual practices. Richard Mouw states, “Kuyperians too need to be praying for a renewal of the classical spiritual disciplines, [and] for a more vital experience of the power of the Holy Spirit...”⁴⁸⁴ Al Wolters states it this way:

Generally speaking, neo-Calvinists are more noted for their intellectual ability and culture-transforming zeal than for their personal godliness or their living relationship with Jesus Christ...I believe that neo-Calvinism has neglected to its detriment the whole range of traditional spiritual disciplines, as cultivated in Protestant, Catholic and Eastern Orthodox circles... Speaking for myself, I have found that exploring the tradition of Ignatian spirituality has been stimulating and enriching, but has also left me with many unanswered questions.⁴⁸⁵

This approach opens us up to a more vibrant life of faith, which is not merely marked out with answers, but where worshippers of the Risen Christ also encounter mystery and questions. This posture of a greater openness to not having all the right answers is, ironically, going to be a better-received expression of truth in our postmodern culture than the proofs previous generations have worked so hard at establishing. What this looks like in a particular worshipping community is something I will explore more fully in Chapter 5.

B. Integrating Kingdom Witness Convictions Throughout Our Whole Lives

Following WWII immigration to Canada, Transformationalists were greatly mobilized to establish institutions which mirrored what Kuyper had called for in The Netherlands including

⁴⁸³ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, Loc. 3798.

⁴⁸⁴ Mouw, *Kuyper for Christians*.

⁴⁸⁵ Al Wolters, “What is to be Done Toward a Neocalvinist Agenda?” in *Comment Magazine*, December 1, 2005 <https://www.cardus.ca/comment/article/282/what-is-to-be-done-toward-a-neocalvinist-agenda/> (Accessed August 19, 2017).

the nurture of their children Christian Schools, which closely followed the start of congregations in nearly every community, as well as establishing Christian colleges *Redeemer University College*, *The King's University* and *The Institute for Christian Studies*. Alongside the engagement in education, *Christian Labour Association of Canada* was established as an alternative to labour unions. Periodicals such as *The Calvinist Contact* and *The Christian Courier* were distributed from coast to coast to continue championing this vision. Additionally, *Citizens for Public Justice* was started in order to engage in the broad-reaching justice matters impacting life in Canada and to help guide voters to go into elections with a kingdom vision. Along the way, various political parties were organized.

The fervour to witness to the Lord's kingdom in every aspect of life was exciting and incredibly demanding, particularly for those individuals who could already speak English. For many, these institutions were close to their hearts, which was often demonstrated in their time commitment spent in evening meetings, as well as financial contributions. To be a fully engaged citizen of the kingdom was to be a card-carrying member of each of these institutions.

Now over seventy years later, some of these organizations have disappeared or are struggling, while those still thriving today have done so because they have each re-appropriated their initial mandate. Closer to home, Vancouver Christian School was, for many years, an exclusively a Christian Reformed School. Today only a small percentage of the 600 students and 90 staff identify themselves as Christian Reformed. Some organizations have drawn leadership from other Christian traditions, including *The Kings University* and *Citizens for Public Justice*. Finally, to reach beyond specifically Christian circles, *Christian Labour Association of Canada* has rebranded themselves as CLAC—where decisions aligned with their original purposes, but

many thousands of their mainstream workers are likely unaware that the “C” in the acronym stands for ‘Christian.’

Some of these organizations carry on, but as the leadership is now a generation or two removed from the founders the connection to the grassroots, card-carrying members has waned, if not disappeared. We can give thanks for the organizations who can carry on, but now many CRC congregations are ecclesiological ‘empty-nesters,’ as these organizations are much more self-sufficient. Moreover, just as parents of adult children need to make necessary adjustments, so do our congregations. These organizations as a composite no longer capture the imagination of all our congregants, but the reality of the Kingdom call ought to continue.

I have acknowledged throughout this project that postmodernity has changed the church internally as well as externally. One of the ways this is manifested is through a “deep suspicion of institutions, institutional power, and the control they exert over us,”⁴⁸⁶ stemming from what Foucault describes as power exerting itself over the individual.⁴⁸⁷ Smith describes this further:

Any institution that tries to exert its power over beliefs or behaviour is inherently dominating and repressive. Moreover, because institutions tend to be erected for just these reasons, there is a deep sense that institutions *per se* are structures of domination.⁴⁸⁸

With the double effect of weakening connection the vitality that established these organizations, as well as the hermeneutic of mistrust directed to institutions, we must find a new way to embody our kingdom witness. Our primary focus ought to be on making our personal and communal kingdom witness more visible. Some of this might be tempered by verbalizing our deeply held faith, but even that will not be sufficient.

⁴⁸⁶ James K.A. Smith, *Who’s Afraid Of Postmodernism?: Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 84.

⁴⁸⁷ Smith, *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism?* 100.

⁴⁸⁸ Smith, *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism?* 98.

In shifting our attention from an institutional approach to a more personal embodiment means the whole of our lives must give witness to the Lordship of Christ. This is not a new idea. However, I am arguing that for the integrity of our witness, we need to recover the importance how each of us is pointing to Christ's reign in our work and our way of life as well as our shared witness through the support of community. Institutions might be suspect, but the gift of postmodernity is the opportunity to offer to our co-workers and neighbours our own stories of what Christ means to us and how he is drawing us into his grand purposes even through the ordinary rhythms of our day, including our questions and struggles.

Shift 4: Moving Towards a Shalom-Order Eschatology

In this final section of *ReTelling the Story*, I will pick up the eschatological discussion started in Act 6. I have already described the Transformational framework that all things in creation will be renewed, but in question is both the continuity and discontinuity of God's in-breaking kingdom and completed kingdom, as well as how we understand our present participation in Christ's activities. As noted, there has been a tendency within the Transformational approach to develop an over-realized eschatology rooted in the earthy call to tend and to keep. Although Transformational Neo-Calvinists are rarely at a loss for words, there has been minimal direct engagement on the concept of a shalom-order eschatology but in which follows, I will outline where there is not uniform agreement and offer a way forward.

Bavinck describes our hope for the day when Christ will return:

It is true that the present heaven and earth will in their form pass away (1 Cor 7:31) and that these, like the ancient earth which was destroyed by the flood, will be burned and purged by fire (2 Peter 3:6,7 and 10). But just as man himself is recreated by Christ indeed, but is not annihilated and thereupon created again (2 Cor 5:17), so too the world in its essence will be preserved, even though in its form it undergoes so great a change that it can be called a new heaven and earth. The world in its entirety, too, moves on to the day of

its great regeneration (Matt 19:28).⁴⁸⁹

According to Bavinck, “grace restores nature”⁴⁹⁰ where Christ’s salvation is extended to the whole creation, which is restored perfectly. The essence of God’s present creation will be preserved, but there will be a great change in the last day. The emphasis here is on the continuity between what is present now and what will be. As Bavinck also says, “Re-creation is not a second, new creation. It does not add any new creatures to the existing order or introduce a new substance, but it is essentially reformation.”⁴⁹¹

This message that the world will not be annihilated is a message that would have a significant impact on the physical earth if all Christians believed it and lived accordingly. Interestingly, VanDrunnen observes that for most of the voices within this stream, the emphasis is on the present continuity:

Although they clearly acknowledge that Christ is coming again and that only then will all things be perfectly restored, it is curious that their common threefold division of history into creation, fall, and redemption does not include the fourth category of consummation. Reading between the lines, I suggest that the rather fluid relationship between transformation of culture now and the final transformation to be accomplished at Christ’s return contributes substantially to the absence of this fourth category.⁴⁹²

Mouw confirms this emphasis on continuity, but points to an area necessitating growth and greater articulation. He roots this shift on the substantive change brought about in Jesus’

Incarnation:

We Reformed Christians are much fonder of continuities and fulfillments than

⁴⁸⁹ Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith, a Survey of Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1978), 566.

⁴⁹⁰ Albert M. Wolters, “Creation Order: A Historical Look at Our Heritage,” in *An Ethos of Compassion and the Integrity of Creation*, eds. Brian J. Walsh, Hendrik Hart and Robert E. Vander Vennen (Lanham: University Press of America, 1995), 33.

⁴⁹¹ Jan Veenhof, *Nature and Grace in Herman Bavinck*, Trans. Al Wolters (Dordt College Press, 2006), 12. http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1466&context=pro_rege (Accessed September 6, 2017).

⁴⁹² Veenhof, *Nature and Grace*, 12.

we are of disruptions and novelties. But for all that, I am also convinced that the newness of Jesus' witness needs to be stressed more energetically in Calvinist ethics... Given the arrival of Jesus in our midst, we can never again be content simply to guide our lives with reference to creational ordinances or revealed laws."⁴⁹³

As mentioned previously, an alternative to the creation order Transformationalist framework is Wolterstorff's shalom order approach which shifts the attention off of *creation* norms and instead focuses on pursuing the New Creation's template of shalom in the present:

Shalom neo-Calvinists have held that history and nature are moving horizontally towards restoration. There is, however, a notable difference. Shalom neo-Calvinists do not stress a person's responsibility to act in union with the creation norms; rather they stress humans acting for shalom and justice in the present social order.⁴⁹⁴

In his article *Points of Unease*, Wolterstorff justifies his divergence from other Transformationalists on this point. To begin, he recognizes that the creation order approach draws on a Kantian framework rather than, in his mind, a more biblical one which emphasizes shalom.⁴⁹⁵ Second, Wolterstorff astutely observes how the focus on creation order carries a more legalistic tone, emphasizing moral obligations resulting in a mindset tantamount in which "God the Lawgiver nearly completely occupies the space of God the Creator."⁴⁹⁶ Third, the creation order approach focuses attention of the Fall on simply the failures and disobedience of humanity, but neglects the systemic and pervasive sin which ought also include the "should-not-bes" of a broken creation.⁴⁹⁷ Fourth, says Wolterstorff, Christ is not adequately acknowledged in the order of creation.⁴⁹⁸ Finally, the creation order approach has a problem in referencing what they have in mind because the focus is on *the* nature and *the* norms of *the* state which will change

⁴⁹³ Mouw, *The Challenges of Cultural Discipleship*, 122.

⁴⁹⁴ Dennison, 281. In *Points of Unease*, Wolterstorff justifies his divergence from the majority of voices within this stream.

⁴⁹⁵ As cited in Dennison, 281.

⁴⁹⁶ Dennison, 282.

⁴⁹⁷ Dennison, 282.

⁴⁹⁸ Dennison, 283.

throughout time.⁴⁹⁹ Not only is this a modern self-referencing logical fallacy, more critical to our discussion is that shalom becomes the constant measure to guide our witnessing towards redemption, no matter the setting in which we find ourselves.

A shift to a shalom-order approach is preferable for a few reasons: first, because Christ's redemption is not merely a re-creation of the Pre-Fall Garden, shifting our attention onto a clearer kingdom vision deepens the hope. Somehow, in the mystery of God's grace, he will transform what we do now and will bring under his rule every part of our world not originally designed to give him glory.⁵⁰⁰

Secondly, a shift to shalom will also temper an overconfidence in our kingdom witness activities. Smith cautions that the Transformational "impulse to reorder and reform could easily give license to a draconian, almost fascist agenda: We are the reordered, regenerate elect; *we* know what God wants for society; therefore, *we* impose it."⁵⁰¹ Of course, no one from this tradition would overly state this as their aim, but it is a risk when before us such a grand vision of what we believe Christ is up to in his work of redemption.

At the same time, a proper eschatology offers a helpful corrective. The shalom-order approach "tempers the optimism and therefore offers a 'check-and-balance' on any pretension that this is going to institute 'the kingdom.'"⁵⁰²

IV. The Story to Be Performed

We turn now to Section 3: *The Story to be Performed*. By performance here, I do not mean only acted out as a character in a movie who then when the role is done we carry on

⁴⁹⁹ Dennison, 283.

⁵⁰⁰ See Mouw, *When the Kings Come Marching In*.

⁵⁰¹ Smith, *A Calvinist (Transformational) View*, 146.

⁵⁰² Smith, *A Calvinist (Transformational) View*, 147.

whatever else we might have been doing. Rather, performance here places emphasis on embodying the story. This section, therefore, begins to explore how First CRC is a type of “laboratory” for exploring the visible expressions of kingdom witness.

As we continually live into the Story of God’s redemption of all things, we realize very quickly that we cannot adequately accomplish this aim in our Sunday morning weekly gatherings. Instead, we need to ensure that the whole people of God carry in this kingdom witness vision into everything they do each day, week and year. Speaking of the missional approach for the local congregation, Darrell Guder says the role for Sunday mornings is one where congregants are equipped to live into this shared vocation that we are all missionaries witnessing to Christ’s Kingdom present, and in-breaking, as well as not yet complete.⁵⁰³

The challenge of shifting our attention onto equipping the congregation is significant and I would argue that Word and Sacrament remain central to this task, provided the emphasis on kingdom witness permeates the message. In preaching, for instance, one can frame the focus of the sermons on the big story of God and our place within it, as well as address the challenges it takes to live into the call in our homes, neighbourhoods and workplaces. Indeed, that has been a significant aim throughout my eleven years of preaching at First CRC. Likewise, with the Lord’s Supper, we have this many-sided experience of grace where we are invited to the Table and are invited to remember the past, to take and eat and drink. These embodied practices remind us of Christ’s presence with us in the here and now, and believing all of this draws us into the future as we anticipate the fullness of God’s kingdom. The rhythms of sermon and sacrament root us and

⁵⁰³ Darrel Guder in Ed Sitzler, “Darrell Guder on the Missional Vocation of the Church” in *Christianity Today* October 2011 <http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2011/october/darrell-guder-on-missional-vocation-of-church-and.html> (Accessed on October 5, 2017). Guder notes that “the gathering of the church is not the ultimate purpose of mission, but rather it is the primary means by which God is carrying out his healing mission in the world. The gathered life of the Christian community is then, not an end in itself but the way in which God’s people are equipped for their vocations as witnesses in the world.

remind us of who we are and whom we were created to be. James K.A. Smith would argue that in fact, every aspect of the service carries this teleological weight when we are properly attentive to it.⁵⁰⁴

This has implications for how we understand our identity. When I introduced the lens of identity, I suggested that our doctrine of election needs to be taken off of the shelf and re-appropriated by focusing on the purpose of election. I propose addressing this in the context of preaching and also in the parting blessing where the congregation will be continually reminded of this identity as God people who are called to be lights in their homes, neighbourhoods, places of work and other areas where they have influence.

Addressing the movement towards a covenant community needs to begin with our church council and staff who recognize our shared responsibility to care for our congregations. This means more than being present with them in crisis. It also means that we recognize and lovingly acknowledge times when parishioners' attendance in our weekly gatherings is more infrequent. It also means that in future baptisms, I will continue to emphasize the role the congregants have in the on-going covenantal call to be part of this community. As I said in chapter 2, autonomy runs rampant, and people will likely resist accountability, but Christ's way of bringing each of us to maturity is primarily accomplished in the context of community.

In the third shift, I am calling for more personal faith, finding some practical ways we can move beyond ideation and into a more verbalized faith expression, moving from an institutional approach to a more embodied expression, and from an isolated approach towards greater openness and mutual participation with other Christian traditions. Regarding our work, Matthew Kaemingk who established *Christ and Cascadia* has made the workplace one of his primary

⁵⁰⁴ See James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*.

areas of attention. “To understand our work through the lens of God’s nature, desires, and activity.”⁵⁰⁵ I find somewhat surprising the frequency of congregation members who are excited about the ways our church is involved in various kingdom witness activities, who might be quick to support broader CRC initiatives, but find a disconnect as they engage in their own places of employment. It could be that there is growing sacred/secular split emerging in a place that previously would not have existed for Transformationalists. If so, this would be one significant discontinuity to which I alluded earlier. However, I suspect there is something more profound going on. Our work, particularly the mundane and menial, can be a challenging environment to imagine God’s nature, his desires, and activity. In my role as pastor, I have initiated visits with members in their workplaces to explore the connections between their work and their kingdom witness as I inquire about the ethical dilemmas they face, and how they see how their work connects to the bigger picture. At times, they will resist the idea, but when the pastoral conversation actually takes place, it is a gift to behold moments of clarity, purpose and on-going hope.

Fourthly and finally, regarding our vision of the future and our role leading up to it, a shift to a shalom-order will push us to emphasize the work of justice today, which relates to the emphasis of justice present in our congregation and in our neighbourhood context which I addressed in chapter 1. Although all Transformationalists will recognize the need to work for justice today, an emphasis of shalom will, I suspect, nurture a different posture—from a triumphalist focus on Christ’s redemption to the patient, weeping-with-one-another advocacy. Moving towards advocacy will deepen our understanding of how the “no more tears” promise of Revelation 21 will speak to those today in need of rescue. The scope of God’s in-breaking

⁵⁰⁵ Julia K. Stronks and Gloria Goris Stronks, *Teaching to Justice, Citizenship, and Civic Virtue: The Character of a High School Through the Eyes of Faith* (Eugene: Resource Publications, 2014), 110.

shalom goes much further than advocacy and work for justice, but it orients us and directs our effort in this regard. Additionally, this vision of shalom is comprehensive enough to also continually measure all of our relationships against the standard of Christ's fully redeemed shalom.

Exploring *The Story to be Performed* is not theoretical but is grounded in the experiences, concerns, and questions of First CRC's congregants. As we seek to make meaningful connections between our social, cultural context and our tradition, we now need to draw in their voices of the members of First CRC to put together a congregational hermeneutic. In the next chapter, I will seek to determine the congregants' understanding of the purpose of being a church, how closely this aligns with our social, cultural context as well as our theological heritage. Through this, we will determine areas of strength and places which will need continual support in order for First CRC to be faithful in living out our call.

CHAPTER 4:

Congregational Engagement with our Social, Cultural Context and Living Tradition

This project sought to answer the question: what does a congregational kingdom witness hermeneutic look like if it is faithful both to its social and cultural context, as well as to its theological heritage? I have sought to attend to our social and cultural context in Chapter 2 and theological heritage in Chapter 3 through the lenses of our approach towards identity, community, society and view of the future. We now begin to work out how these reflections get particularly worked out in our specific context as we attend to the insights and questions of our congregants. The goal in exploring these responses is first to ensure this project reflects a congregational engagement with our social context and living tradition, and second, how the concerns identified below point to the need for shared postures and practices which will be the focus of Chapter 5.

	Context	Transformational Approach	Postures	Practices
Identity	Fragmentation	Vocation-infused Election	Humility	<i>Sustained in the rhythms of the gathered church and the sent church</i>
Community	Loneliness and Alienation	Centred-Set Covenant Community	Hospitality	
Society	Outsourced moral responsibility	Cross and Crown Kingdom work	Generosity	
Future	Nihilism & Despair	Living Shalom-order eschatology	Imaginative Hope	

A key component in this research is to determine how well congregants understand and articulate the ways in which First CRC's current practices align with living as God's witnesses in his work of redeeming humanity and creation for his glory. With this in mind, I implemented a

small group-based questionnaire. It was designed to solicit congregational appreciative inquiry to evaluate how well our present congregational practices⁵⁰⁶ correspond with the articulated Kingdom Witness hermeneutic. In this chapter, I will begin by describing the rationale for my choice of this particular research approach and then proceed with an analysis of the data it provided.

I. Rationale for Research Methodology:

Avenue of Inquiry

My primary approach in this study is by means of gathering information via a focused group study. I prepared a nine-question Engagement Activity designed to be completed in the context of a Small Group meeting.⁵⁰⁷ Depending on the level of engagement from each group, the time commitment from each group ranged from 30-60 minutes. As stated in Chapter 1, I also set up opt-in groups after our Sunday worship services to accommodate those, primarily seniors, who are not currently in small groups. Additionally, I worked with our Children's Ministries Director to adapt the questions to solicit age-appropriate and age-specific responses regarding reasons why we as a church do what we do. I left the participant group open to those who felt they had a vested interest in First CRC, recognizing that leaving it open to interpretation meant that we would have members and non-member regular attendees. Each form required the recording of the number of respondents and the number of years each has been part of First CRC,

⁵⁰⁶ These shared practices include Community Night which responds in part to loneliness and food security issues, *Garden of Eatin'* which models creation stewardship and space-making for neighbours, and various Refugee-related ministries which directs our response to the vulnerable "within our gates." Personal practices include resisting a sacred/secular split, seeing one's job as a calling to participate in kingdom work, and everyday decisions as consumers and citizens as they live out their faith at home, in their places of work, in their neighbourhoods and other activities.

⁵⁰⁷ Appendix 1.

which will aid me in determining who the primary carriers of this Kingdom Vision are and how well we are collectively adapting to the challenges in our cultural context.

Various research approaches were considered in this study. I decided to not use a quantitative evaluation because our leadership worked with me to conduct various surveys in the past three years seeking to measure approaches of visioning, leadership, as well a congregational ministry volunteer audit. Because qualitative research is interested in how people make sense of their experiences, the reasons for their behaviour and how they order their lives, I determined this was a preferable avenue, given the scope of my research.

The questionnaire also flows out of previously solicited congregational feedback from key leaders in each of our ministry areas, which was informative for our church Council to measure how well we are attending to our relationship with God, with each other, with our neighbours and with our resources. The research in this project is an extension of those previous modes of research. Because I was seeking qualitative input, I decided not to use closed scalable Likert-style continuums, but opted for more open-ended format.

As I alluded to earlier, I chose not to use a personal survey as I did not desire another tabulated summary of various people's opinions and responses. Instead, I sought to discover just how congregationally-based this vision of Kingdom Witness actually is. For this reason, I decided not to conduct personal interviews of those whom I might consider to be the clearest demonstrators of Kingdom Witness. I did not want to miss out on the *shared* responses which measure the degree to which this Kingdom Witness permeates the broader congregation. The purpose behind asking groups is twofold: not only are the answers each group provides helpful to me in my research, but I also hope that the group process itself has been a way for the various

groups to discern together God's call for our congregation and each person's place within that Kingdom call.

A series of five sets of questions (see Appendix 1) were ordered to assist the flow of information in a logical manner, grouped into four categories. The first question (1a & 1 b) sought to determine the number of participants in each respondent group, as well as the range of duration each respondent has been a part of First CRC. The second question (2a & 2b) was designed to bring into focus the twin ecclesiological reality of being a gathered church and a sent church, or to use the Reformed Transformational (Kuyperian) terms, an institutional church and an organic church. Pairing the questions together was aimed at reminding participants of the symbiosis which emerges out of this mutuality. Question three aimed at establishing the role of the gathered church in equipping our congregants, giving specific attention to the role of gathered weekly worship services, our congregation's primary modes of communal faith formation, and equipping our congregation for missional living, giving space for an open-ended evaluative response of identifying the challenges and barriers which prevent us from doing this well.

My research focus changed for the last questions, from the gathered church to the sent church, which was broken into two parts: one's personal understanding of being part of the sent church (question 4) and our congregation's understanding of our shared calling as being part of the sent church (question 5). Regarding question four, the open-ended responses gave room for each participant to name their own specific question, though most groups chose to focus on one challenge shared by a majority of the participants. Question five was aimed at focussing on the organic nature of the sent church with a recognition of how the institutional church can support

this mission—most specifically in how First CRC as a sent church understands the practical and missiological purposes of our church building and property.

Group Selection

I designed the research to have respondent groups engaging the questions rather than as individuals, primarily because I wanted the research to reach as many congregants as possible, and because I wanted the groups to use this as an opportunity to learn and imagine together what a faithful, missionally-engaged congregation would look like. I had responses from eleven participant groups, which included six small groups, two temporary research groups, our oldest Sunday School class, and our Community Choir, who decided they functioned enough like a small group that they too should participate. By primarily targeting small groups I anticipated an adequate gender balance, and because of my familiarity with the various groups I did not ask each participant to identify whether they were male or female. In the responses submitted by the groups, four of the groups provided their names, which further confirmed my assumption that there was strong gender balance, with women representing a slight majority.

I sought to find a range of respondents' duration of being part of our congregation. Because small groups are voluntary, as a general rule, the majority of small groups are formed through affinity and familiarity, which means that one small group has been together for more than thirty years, while other groups are formed by various people who joined the congregation around the same time. Of the respondent groups, there were three groups of respondents of whom a majority were present at First CRC prior to my pastoral tenure.

Generally speaking, the majority of respondent groups who joined First CRC after 2007 were younger people who were more transient due to education and employment opportunities. These individuals have been quick to join small groups because of the potential for forming

friendships and deepening their faith formation and therefore made up the base of my research group. On the other hand, I anticipated that elderly members, who by and large have not participated in small groups, would have limited engagement in this project which I sought to mitigate by organizing a Sunday afternoon time when non-small group members could participate. This produced a moderate response, with only five seniors participating alongside others in temporary discussion groups. The make up of these three groups was more intergenerational and diverse than the majority of our small groups, who more often than not, tend to share similar life experience and age span.

Those who had been present on a long-term basis included some lifelong members, others more than two decades and still others who were part of First CRC before 2007 when Julia and I began serving here as pastors. I anticipated that the responses from these groupings would vary, particularly due to the emphasises of former pastors, but that there would also be common echoes from our broader living tradition, which might influence their answers, particularly regarding references to *kingdom participation*. I anticipated that those who have joined First CRC since 2007 would vary in their responses, due to influence from other congregations or whether or not they had no previous church experience. The responses from the newly churched group would be more likely to closely reflect the phrases and emphases which I have been communicating over the last decade. This may become apparent in the analysis below.

Limitations of Research

My motivation in this research project is to understand subjective responses of our congregants. I am not a neutral observer, therefore the ethnographic paradigm of describing the behaviour of a group from a neutral vantage point is not possible. Rather, my approach in this study is through a proactive research paradigm that not only describes what is happening in the

congregation and identifies where they are being called to change, but I stand as one who is directly involved in this experience.⁵⁰⁸ Regardless of approach, I recognize that because my research focused on one primary set of questions and necessarily omits other potentially relevant material, a significant temptation for me is to have a “singular use of reason”⁵⁰⁹ where I simply apply a utilitarian approach to the congregational input provided. As a corrective to this vulnerability, I also draw on my various experiences with these participants where I see it being helpful to the aim of my research.

A second limitation for this work pertains to the consistency of responses. Because this questionnaire was available to those who considered themselves part of First CRC, I did not differentiate between a member and a regular attendee, but there were also some neighbours in our Community Choir who identified themselves as those who “belong.” While this is a positive in our overall goal of reaching out to neighbours and drawing them into how God’s Story is unfolding in this particular place, their responses focused on their perceived *telos* that the church is a place to belong, where worship is of secondary importance. Their responses proved instructive for providing a baseline understanding of the purpose and goal for being a church.

A third limiting factor pertained to the time frame in which responses were required. Although each participant had access to the questionnaire before needing to answer the questions, it was clear that the feedback I was soliciting depended on their current understanding rather than requiring each person to read, learn or research the concepts before answering. The answers gave me a truer picture of the congregational self-understanding, but perhaps given more time to prepare, participants might have offered more theologically nuanced answers.

⁵⁰⁸ Myers, *Research in Ministry*, 28.

⁵⁰⁹ Myers, *Research in Ministry*, 28.

A final limitation to the project is embedded in the questionnaire itself where open-ended questions allowed for a wide range of responses. I sought to structure the questions so as to guide the participants toward imaginative responses and toward a solution to the challenges currently facing our congregation. Still, the range of responses was instructive, as it helped me understand the most significant challenges each group identified, as well as responses to these identified challenges. The questions, with responses, are as follows.

II. Summary of Questions and Responses:

Question One: Number of Respondents and Duration at First CRC

Based on the number of respondents in each group, I had sixty participants which makes up 50% of our congregational members. Of the sixty participants, the average duration for the entire group was thirteen years, with 28% being present prior to 2007, and 72% joining First CRC since we began as pastors. Though I did not ask additional demographic information for participants in the questionnaire, the structure of drawing in our older Sunday School class and setting up temporary respondent groups on a Sunday after the worship service, I was able to ensure a hoped-for diversity of age, which included children as young as six and two seniors in their late 70's. Based on my familiarity with the respondent group and my oversight of the temporary groups, as well as the Sunday School questionnaire, I was also able to identify the gender blend of 25 males to 35 females, or 42% to 58%, and 10 (or 17%) of the participants were visible minorities, which is consistent with the ethnic diversity present in our congregation.

Question 2a: Summarize the primary goal(s) for First CRC as a Gathered Church

The first part of question two sought to establish the participants' understanding and expectations for the role of the gathered church. Leaving the question open ended, and not

providing prescribed answers, made it possible for me to determine where the purpose of the church is clearest, and which areas need additional attention.

Ten of the eleven groups identified communal worship as the primary function of the gathered church, the exception being members of our Community Choir who attend various services but see the primary purpose of the church as meeting a social need, which is something identified in Chapter Two. The leaders of the community choir are deeply committed to the centrality of worship themselves but sought to draw out the answers of our unchurched neighbours who are part of the choir.

Vital worship was identified differently between the various groups, but as I note in a following section, the key component of vital worship was prayer, as experienced both within the context of gathered worship and through prayerful listening. This was identified by five of the eleven groups (45%), while the sacraments and preaching were mentioned by three of the eleven groups (27%) as being vital to worship. One of the three groups who mentioned sacraments and preaching also included the Reformed worship service structure as being an important part of the formative rhythm of the worship service, which includes confession and assurance, thanksgiving and lament, and praise. I expect that if my questions sought to solicit the ‘right answer,’ each of the groups would have named prayer, sacraments, preaching, confession and thanksgiving as vital aspects of the gathered worship. It is interesting to note only that a minority named these elements specifically whereas most simply listed the word “worship.”

The second most important element identified for the gathered church is the category of Fellowship and Community. Ten of the eleven groups, or 91% mentioned this as a vital aspect of being the gathered church, and aside from the words “community” and “fellowship,” the third most common description of this element was “encouraging each other.” The responses confirm

general statistics, that even within the church the longing for community and connection are central concerns for people. The responses are consistent with our congregation's weekly practice where there is nearly equal time spent in our worship services to our fellowship times before and after the services. That said, the word "community" and the term "fellowship"—more common in Christian parlance—are nebulous terms which point to the ambiguity we encounter when we seek to identify how community and mutual encouragement are taking place. Observing a recent hour-long Sunday coffee time, for example, proved instructive for me. I noticed three clusters of conversations where visitors were being welcomed, a number of clusters of people reconnecting after the holidays, three individuals celebrating birthdays who were continually being congratulated, coffee servers interacting with those cleaning up from Communion, a family returning home after an extended residence at Ronald McDonald House sharing their farewells, and one woman currently overwhelmed by life circumstances sharing tears in several conversations (including one with me). As nebulous as the concept of community might be, there were numerous illustrations that many in our congregation long for, and experience, this longed-for fellowship.

The ambiguity of the answers was notable in the fact that only two groups of the 11 groups identified the commitment required to make community like this happen. One group specifically identified the word "accountability" alongside the word community. The other group identified the commitment by a more teleological approach of being there to "remind each other of the purpose" for us being the church, and a behavioural approach of "learning to Sabbath together, and live differently as a church." In my role as a researcher, I found it interesting that while I have often heard our older members reflect on accountability and Sabbath-keeping, the

groups who identified this were made up of people in their 20's-30's. It is encouraging to see how this is also seen as important in the next generation.

The third central purpose for the gathered church identified was only slightly lower at 82% or nine of eleven groups who saw another central aspect for the gathered church was to nurture faith formation. While the terms for this vary, the responses pointing to faith formation came from our youngest participants to our oldest participants. A more traditional, didactic outlook used the term “education,” and the majority of those younger than forty approached faith formation with apprenticeship language of “equipping, strengthening, rooting faith” and two of groups also identified how investing in “leadership” is an important aspect to faith formation.

Question 2b: Summarize the primary goal(s) for First CRC as a Sent Church

The second part of question two sought to identify what the purpose of the sent church was, which is where as a researcher I anticipated the more distinct Reformed Transformational impulses to emerge, determining the nature of our witness and—whether these responses would emphasize a verbalized witness, a modelled witness, or a more indirect, structural witness.

The first notable aspect to the responses of eleven groups is that only two groups emphasized God’s action as a precursor to our participation. One group identified the continual role of worship as the sent church in the call to “live grateful lives.” A second group was the only one to describe this worshipful response in specifically Kuyperian Transformational terms: “Knowing that every square inch of the world belongs to God, we go into the world to bring restoration and reconciliation with the world and those we come into contact with.”

A God-focused perspective, where the church is sent to participate in what God is already doing, was evident in two other responses, one specifically naming working in “God’s restoration of all things,” and another group used the familiar words, “bringing restoration and

reconciliation” to where God is at work. One final group, the community choir, noted that there was a “carry-over” from the church gathering times into everyday life which included “a better attitude to engage in life,” “fill our minds and hearts that will filter into the week,” and “make a positive difference whether we know it or not.”

The majority of group responses emphasized our activity. Two polarities were evident: (1) the scope of working “in the world” in general to the more personal relational connections we have, and (2) the verbalized witness and modelled witness. In regards to the first polarity, four of the eleven groups described our calling as a sent church in general terms: “going into the world” and participating in “the restoration of all things” being the clearest descriptors of this approach. On the other side of the polarity, four groups were more specific about which relationships this work included—specifically friends and family, those we come into contact with, our neighbours at Community Night, and the seniors at a nearby retirement care centre. Once again, the community choir noted, from their unique perspective, a call for the church to come out of being insular by having a concern of “being connectors” with a focus that was “wider than just the people in the church.”

The second polarity pertains to the posture of witness—does it require that we verbally share God’s Good News or it is demonstrating God’s Good News of the kingdom through our actions? While this is a false polarity as both are crucial for holistic mission, this has traditionally been a point of significant contention within the Christian Reformed tradition between *Resonate Global Mission* and *World Renew*. That is, as an amalgam of CRC Home and World Missions, *Resonate* emphasizes verbalized witness while *World Renew* emphasizes demonstrative work through its holistic developmental work and disaster response.

Three groups specifically named the role and necessity of verbalized witness. One group cited the call to “share Christ’s teaching,” while another acknowledged the role of witnessing to the truth, and the final group assumed the role of verbalized witness where our task as a sent to church was to “dispel falsehoods” in a non-judgmental way assuming that there would be conversations between church members and those who are followers of Jesus. The other eight groups emphasized an action-oriented type of witness, using familiar descriptors such as “living as salt and light of Christ,” “living out the fruit of the Spirit,” reflecting God’s image,” being “Christ-like” in our living, modelling our “faith in action,” and “offering life in the kingdom.” Only two groups mentioned both Word and deed witness—one group called the church “into the world to live in the way of Jesus,” and the other used the description of “Ambassadors who are called to show the love of God through Word and deed.”

I find the responses emphasizing action quite instructive, as they provide an accurate reflection of our living tradition’s reticence to verbally proclaim the Good News, particularly if it has been a barrier historically to even verbalize one’s personal faith to one’s own children. However, there is a comfort level with emphasizing Christian behaviour and the quiet witness of being “salt and light” in the world around. Despite Christ’s emphasis on sharing the Good News this was seen of lesser importance than demonstrating God’s love through action. So, it is evident that giving verbalized witness is an area of our church life where the majority of our members feel less confident. Our giving patterns also reflect a preference towards the practical action-oriented kingdom witness where year-over-year, the ministry of *World Renew* consistently receives an average of four times the offering amounts compared to our missionary agency offerings.

However, we can also recognize the way God is using our congregation's preference for a demonstrable witness. The responses of our Community Choir members prove helpful here because they illustrate the challenge for God's people to faithfully witness to God's transformative work in this secularized culture where there is a heightened sensitivity to judgmental attitudes from church members. In our post-Christendom society, our neighbours resist aggressive evangelism but affirm the practical ways the church is involved in attending to the needs of our community, including helping refugees, the under-resourced, those impacted by food insecurity, and those who experience loneliness. While this practical approach is subtle, it is clear from our community respondents that the emphasis on action is valued and can also serve as an avenue of trust-building, from which our members would have the cultural credibility to verbally witness into people's lives. Indeed, our Community Night meals and Refugee events have been the primary ways our congregants have 'found their voice'—that is, learning the necessity of communicating convictions of faith in a compelling and culturally-appropriate manner.

Question 3: When we are being well equipped to live as God's witnesses, describe what happens in our worship services, our small group meetings and/or other faith formation activities, and our shared outreach activities. What are the barriers that might prevent this from happening consistently?

This question is designed to identify what equipping looks like in our worship services, our small groups, and our shared outreach activities. Under each category of worship, discipleship and outreach, respondents identified what they felt were barriers to this equipping. I will explore the barriers within each section.

Question 3a. Equipping in worship services with identified barriers to this equipping

This third question was designed to solicit the input of the respondents' perspective on how they are being formed and equipped. I anticipated that the responses would made evident the priorities and might also help me identify the places where First CRC's equipping ministry is lacking. I separated the question into three parts for a few reasons. First, because worship services can be viewed as consumeristic activities, I wanted the respondent groups to recognize a deeper purpose than getting the teaching they enjoyed and singing songs worshippers would enjoy.

In regards to Small Groups, because the congregational model of small groups is organic and has little institutional oversight, there is little to prevent a specific group to inadvertently pursue community and fellowship to the exclusion of Bible study, prayer, formation and equipping as vital elements in these gatherings. Finally, I also wanted the respondent groups to recognize how our shared outreach activities did not automatically happen, but also required intentional equipping.

Regarding the role of the worship services in equipping God's people, it was clarifying to see how our gathered times of worship were seen as a primary way of building up through deepened relationship with God and each other, gaining a clarified vision for living as God's people, and being the place where people learn about the opportunity for service and leadership. The answers provided in this question are complementary to those of Question 2a, which means that whether our relationship with God is specifically mentioned here or not, most respondents have already identified that as the central goal of worship. The answers below, therefore, are seen to be either descriptive or prescriptive outcomes which are the fruit of gathered worship services.

Two groups identified the central goal of worship to be deepening our relationship with God. One group described worship as “communication with God in shared community” and the other group identified how in worship there are “deepened connections with God, with Scripture and with each other.” Although other groups did not specifically describe deepened relationships, seven of the eleven groups described some sort of shift in perspective as God’s worshipping people which happens when we engage God’s Word and sing together. The clearest response described the worship service as a place where there is “teaching that brings together the text, tradition, our current cultural moment, and our Christian hope.” In a delightful surprise, this group described the broad categories of my project’s design—engaging with God’s call to be faithful people by attending to our cultural context, our living tradition, in a way that deepens our eschatological hope. Other groups described this shift in perspective where “God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit are revealed,” where listeners are “receiving solid, applicable biblical teaching,” where “we are spiritually nourished, educated, and uplifted,” and where there is also clarity of call so that “we would know deeply who/what we are witnesses to.” This is what another group called “convergence.”

The deepening of perspective for one group meant that the preaching and teaching would “equip practically for the reality of the other 6 days of the week,” and another group described the goal to “hear and learn from each other how people are experiencing God’s presence in their lives.” While many of the answers above could be seen as descriptive of what currently happens in our worship services, the last response is more prescriptive of a hoped-for outcome of the group, which is not currently seen as being true for the majority of worship services.

The hoped-for empowerment taking place in our services also points to an engagement that is not merely rational, but also draws in the emotional parts of our lives, both in vulnerability

and in encouragement. As we open our lives up to each other to share how people are experiencing God's presence in their lives, another group hoped for more of a space where people could be "open about the fact that they are broken." Communion with God and with each other was noted by two other groups: one group described the gift that already exists in our services for people to give "intentional praise [that is] sincerely hopeful and joyful" and another group, whose participants described experiencing "internal emotional connection and feeling the emotions related to faith, particularly when space for lament is given while singing "By the River of Babylon, we sat down and wept" and when space for joy is given as we sing "There is a Redeemer." This last response is revealing, as it demonstrates the transformative impact that sung worship has for God's people. The Sunday School children also identified the importance of sung worship, particularly in the more repetitious songs which are also reinforced by singing them in the Sunday School worship time.

Along with the rational and emotional ways people feel equipped, two groups noted how important relational ways impact how we are equipped. One group cited their experience of services that are "harmonious" while another group called for services that were more open to being a space "where people of all walks of life feel welcome and accepted." The range of experiences here is telling, as it captures a range of experiences and expectations—while some saw the services as structured ways to draw people into the life of the community, others described a goal of having services that were more open to personalized participation "where people can find their place," which underscored the reality of the variety of perspectives and expectations people bring with them as we gather together to worship.

Finally, the equipping nature of worship services were seen to draw people into deeper commitment into the life of the community. Two groups specifically mentioned the services as

being the place where people are encouraged to enter into deeper, more intentional ways of leadership. Four groups identified that regular attendance and increased involvement were a reflection of one's commitment and willingness to be shaped through the life of the church. One group named how the services ought to also be places where people are equipped to express their gratitude to God through the giving of their tithes and offerings.

As a pastor, over the past two years specifically, I have also emphasized the importance of the benediction. Of course, we have always practiced the benediction, but I have sought to make this element more meaningful by making it a time of bridging the gathered and the sent church. Here, I have invited the worshippers to imagine the places they will find themselves in the following week, both life-giving and deeply challenging situations, and to remember that as we go into those places, we remember that God goes ahead of us, and we go to those places with the opportunity to express our gratitude and worship. I anticipated there would be at least one group who would have identified this as formative in our weekly worship rhythm, and noting its absence gives me pause to reflect on whether I am communicating this adequately, or whether respondents do find this helpful but unintentionally left this element out of their responses. Interestingly, I was recently a guest preacher at another CRC congregation and closed the service with a similar benediction. After the service, one of the members asked me if this was a common occurrence at First CRC because she said she had never felt so blessed by a pastoral benediction. Perhaps our congregation is now used to it, perhaps they would benefit from new ways of conveying this same message, or perhaps they do receive it as formative but decided not to include it.

The barriers which prevent God's people from being equipped to live out who we are as a congregation, include internal, individual barriers which prevent our congregants from living

more fully into their identities, external barriers which impact everyone who is part of our society, as well as structural barriers in which First CRC's culture.

Regarding internal or individual barriers, four groups identified their lack of time and focus as well as a lack of confidence to speak the language of faith in their contexts which has had a negative impact on how well we are being equipped in our faith. The lack of commitment was seen as the highest internal barrier, which was most often identified by the older respondents. One comment from this group included "lack of awareness of First CRC's cultural norms and expectations," but two groups of those younger than forty also described the discouraged feelings when there are more empty spaces in the pews around them. One group identified the individualism at work, where "there is now more 'I' than 'we,'" which prevents people from demonstrating their commitment to each other. Our attendance records confirm this: whereas two years ago, our average attendance was between 120-130, with the occasional spike to 150 worshippers on a Sunday morning, 2017 attendance averaged between 90-110, with the occasional spike of 140 worshippers.

The attendance 'spikes' are instructive here because the overall number of participants in the First CRC community have not dropped as dramatically as the attendance has declined. While we have had people move away from Vancouver in this time (particularly due to the prohibitive housing market), and we have had some attrition to neighbouring congregations, there have also been newcomers who have started attending First CRC. The greatest factor in the drop of average attendance is the drop in the average frequency of each congregant's attendance. Twenty-five years ago, First CRC had two different worship services with declining attendance of the evening service. However, it has become more common for worshippers who used to come twice a Sunday now attend twice per month. The negative impact is not only having fewer

people in the pews, but also means that there are fewer people to maintain the various functions of the church, including Sunday School, worship leading, and Council.

While a majority of the groups identify lower attendance as an issue, more groups suggest that the reason behind the decline is due to external factors, particularly increased busyness. Whether worshippers are in fact busier than previous generations or it is rather a matter of personal choice of allowing other commitments to become conflicting priorities to gathered worship is a matter of debate, which often leads to awkward and defensive responses. Regardless of the perspective, gathering for public worship is seen now as lower priority which has had a direct impact on the ethos of our Sunday morning services. This leads me to wonder whether our leadership will use this identified reality as a reason to capitulate to excuses for infrequent attendance or to use this as a wake-up call for deepened commitment.

The groups also identified barriers which are due to First CRC's culture and way the services are led, including a lack of resources and "lack of time to coordinate a service," "a lack of flow and confidence in service progression," "formal structures of the service outline are too rigid," "lack of structure." Other factors include "logistical organizational church issues," which was somewhat ambiguous, as it is difficult to determine whether this is due to an interpersonal conflict or a problem in the manner in which elements of the service are communicated.

A lack of invitation is perceived as one indirect barrier coming from the church, as well as an uninviting building, which was most clearly identified by three groups with the front door not being physically open before the service and locked just a few minutes into the service: "a closed building doesn't feel open."

Along with the challenges to our services named above, two groups also identified "the style of teaching" and "heady theology" being further barriers to the role of worship services

equipping God's people. A neighbour who is not yet a Christian, but part of our choir suggested otherwise, as she expressed that the sermons invite thought and engagement. Neither she, along with another unbelieving neighbour, feel "preached at" or "pounced on" (their words).

The range of this feedback gives me pause. As a researcher, I did solicit the feedback because as a pastor, I wanted to ensure that we as a church we are remaining faithful and that we are also effective in the way we go about planning and leading our services. Though not surprising, this feedback confirmed the difficulty we experience in trying to achieve balance between working within a structure, which many see as formative, while others find it stifling.

Alongside this, I recognize that some of the negative comments are descriptions of my preaching and teaching style. Over the last eleven years, when I have encountered negative feedback, I have sought to embrace this as an opportunity to discover ways of preaching more compellingly and have also recognized that right alongside the negative feedback there are others who have been encouraging about my teaching style. The range of opinion expressed here means that there is still further growth to come to ensure that the sermons are transformative for more people in our congregation.

3b. Equipping in small group meetings and/or other faith formation activities with identified barriers to this equipping:

Small Groups at First CRC are not directly organized and managed, and membership for most of them has occurred spontaneously with individuals forming groups themselves according to their preferred frequency and emphasis. Most groups maintain the core functions of fellowship and support, prayer, and Bible Study, with one group also seeking out service opportunities. Some of the groups have very much become like family because of the duration they have been together, or because of the crises which they have navigated together.

Each of the groups shared the same goal of deepening their relationships with each other more intimately. This was described in various ways including supporting and encouraging each other (70%), being vulnerable with each other through “honesty,” “accountability,” and “authenticity” (70%), and enjoying time together (40%). Sharing life together is the most common goal for small groups, but within this emphasis of life together is the shared commitment to deepen each person’s relationship with God by “deepening faith,” “clarifying truth,” and “calling each other to maturity” (40%). Alongside deepening our relationship with God is the shared commitment to prayer and Bible study (both of which were mentioned in 20% of respondent groups). Three of the groups identified the commitment to meet regularly as core to their functioning as a small group, with one group meeting weekly. Finally, one group celebrated the gift of having a small group that is diverse and intergenerational.

Barriers to the gifts of small groups as contexts where God’s people are equipped at Kingdom Witnesses are similar factors to the external and internal barriers in our public worship services. The external barriers, which prevent small groups from being effective places of transformation, were most frequently identified as busyness, and life circumstances, which kept people from meeting together regularly. One group placed a value on flexibility, which had a negative consequence of going for long stretches of not meeting together. Other external barriers identified the challenges of physical distance, limitations due to age and health concerns, generational gaps, societal changes and relocation.

Alongside the external barriers however the groups also identified internal barriers, which again reflected the answers given to the barriers for the worship services—these include a lack of commitment, failure to maintain personal faith formation practices, and being more individualistic than community oriented. The preference of wanting to be comfortable, according

to one group, keeps others from joining small groups, and other barriers identified were the barriers of fear, pride, and misplaced priorities. One group shared the insightful observation that the individualistic impulse in the CRC living tradition meant that the desire to be independent and not wanting to be vulnerable and share with others was rooted in the “CRC norm of expectations in wanting to be private.” This last barrier was one of the four challenges I identified from within our living tradition, which works against being a covenantal community of Christ’s followers.

3c: Equipping in outreach activities with identified barriers to this equipping:

When our Outreach Activities are equipping God’s people for Kingdom Witness, 60% of the groups identified that hospitality would make our witness tangible so that people would feel accepted and welcomed, and that those in the church would be accepting of all visitors by consistently showing kindness and love. Moreover, outflow of this hospitality would be that neighbours would feel open and trusting enough to have relationship with people in the church, that they would feel connected to others in the neighbourhood and motivated to participate in the community activities. Undergirding this was an identified goal from 40% of our groups that our neighbours feel valued. Carrying the goal of having neighbours who feel connected and valued was the broader vision that we as a church “would be actively seeking the prosperity of the community” through connection, commonality and activities that are relevant to our community and its needs as well as our strengths and opportunities.

Two of the groups described that if they were better equipped, they would feel more confident to offer verbal witness in being “ready to share sincerely by having an answer for our hope” in a way that is relevant to our neighbours. Feeling more confident in how we speak about

our faith was matched by a desire for more prayer—that our members would feel more confident to pray and that our neighbours would be trusting enough for us to pray with them.

One group observed a positive shift in our approach to outreach activities. They wrote:

Our shared outreach activities...don't look like "outreach" anymore. They dissolve the line between the church and others and make room for collaboration and mutual transformation. Not doing activities to or for people, but serving *with* people.

This is an accurate description of the way we have tried to shift our posture in our outreach activities where there have been a few areas for a variety of neighbours to feel comfortable enough to participate in First CRC's activities. Of the groups, 40% identified Community Night as the primary avenue for this, and two groups noted how neighbours at Community Night are active participants in Community Night with set-up, cooking and clean-up. Others identified other outreach ministries, including *The Garden of Eatin'* Community Garden, our more recent work with Refugee Chaplaincy and Support, and the ongoing commitment of our Community Choir at *Chelsea Gardens* Seniors Care Home. One group noted how positively these activities help us "witness how broad God's kingdom is in the diversity of people."

Groups identified various barriers to seeing our outreach practices as places of equipping. Two groups noted that the church can believe they are doing the right and helpful thing, but it can result in irrelevant activities, which could end up hurting more than it helped. Neither group provided an example of which activity they deemed was irrelevant and which group of people they felt were not being helped properly. However, one other group also noted how conflicting priorities within our congregation can be an additional barrier. Based on the same group's response to the barriers of worship, they seem to hint that our church might act one way in our outreach, such as everyone feeling welcome at Community Night, but be less welcoming to

visitors on Sunday mornings because of the highly structured and more reserved posture present in our worship services.

Other barriers include busyness for those who feel overly committed, and emotional or spiritual fatigue for those who have been too busy for too long. These responses point out how important it is for our leadership to understand the capacity of our congregants and to help each person honour the importance of their physical health, while seeking to find the balance between maintaining their personal rhythms and shared life together.

Two other barriers noted had to do with a lack of trust of oneself and of our neighbours. The lack of trusting oneself was identified through fear of not knowing what to say, feeling awkward about how Christians are being perceived, and feeling marginalized in such a way that sharing the gospel feels like an insurmountable barricade. One group identified that the lack of confidence on the one hand, is matched with a mistrust of our neighbours when we fail to trust the people who are being helped to share in the mission or activity. While this may continue to be a challenge, the leadership for Community and the Community Garden have specifically extended this trust as they sought out the energy and availability of neighbours to help run our church's outreach activities because of a common commitment to seek the health of the neighbourhood that they live in.

Question 4: What is a challenge that gets in the way of your personal calling as part of God's mission? What do you want instead of the challenge, and what would it be like if the problem were solved?

One of the nine groups who answered this question identified external life challenges including health uncertainty and forced employment transitions, while the other eight groups named the challenges of being a witness of Christ in public. One group shared how they do not

feel equipped in their faith to be faithful witnesses. Four groups recognized the societal response of hostility and resistance to overt expressions of faith, particularly for those who are trying to model their faith in public. Finally, two groups mentioned the negative impact of other Christians' aggressive evangelistic activity and "damage done to vulnerable and gendered people."

The core of these eight answers identify the complexity and challenge we have in living faithfully in a post-Christendom world. Respondents point to feeling disoriented in a broader culture. Two groups cited our society's general hostility and impatience toward followers of Jesus who do not keep their faith private. One group wrote:

Vancouver is a pagan city. People are not interested in talking about God and people can be angry when asked. We want to speak openly about God and faith and overcome resistance to speaking about God. [We wish that] there would be an expectation to talk openly about faith and that there would be an openness has been gained so that we could enter into deeper conversations. This would help address people's loneliness and isolation.

This assessment suggests the heightened sensitivity to echoes of presumptuous and assertive evangelistic strategies, which imposed the Christian narrative on those who were not interested and even those who were resistant. Now that society in general has been freed from the shackles of this manner of proselytization, there will be resistance towards any approach asserting there is only one way of being human.

Two respondent groups' sensitivity to the damage done by Christians points to the overlapping reality of some Christians in our society who are still functioning as if Christendom was still alive and well, and as a result, unbelievers have found this approach disrespectful at best, and deeply hurtful, at worst. One group, who have former members who now attend another congregation but still participate in their group, felt strongly that our own congregation has a long way to go in faithful witness that does not offend:

What is going to happen when strangers to church enter the church building or attend a service? We have a fear of having to backpedal and say “Not all Christians are like that!” We’re embarrassed by our faith community and its social history. We hope for an environment that feels safe, the service is shorter, the language is inclusive, the people are welcoming, and no one carries assumptions about anyone’s common background.

The sensitivity from these two groups reveals a preference not to impose one’s assumptions and convictions on someone else but rather embracing a posture of respectful pluralism. Within the extremes of aggressive evangelistic techniques and a more passive posture concerned with the unique personhood of individuals, the majority of respondents recognize Jesus’ call to make disciples, despite the reality of living in a context that is overtly resistant. It is fine, it would seem, to follow Jesus privately. However, most respondents identify a sense of inadequacy in not feeling equipped in their faith and not having found a means of verbalizing their witness in a manner that is both respectful to friends and neighbours in a pluralistic context, while remaining faithful to the truth revealed in the gospel. One group described the internal wrestling as follows:

Self identifying as a Christian in public, when many people can hold negative connotations or preconceived notions of Christianity. Sometimes it seems easier to build the relationship first, to prevent adversity to Christianity being a barrier to build that relationship in the first place...Also, though prone to stumbling, identifying as a Christian raises the expectation of how righteous we should be; one might feign goodness in order to not seem hypocritical to someone who does not know us.

The responses for some Christians in the wider church have varied significantly. Some have sought to carry on with overt evangelism, frequently seen on the corner of East Broadway and Commercial Drive, where they will cite Jesus’ words of warning “in this world you will have trouble” and they anticipate the resistance as part of the cost of being a disciple of Jesus. Others believe a more patient approach is needed, where the “trouble” people experience is due

to the message of the Gospel itself, and not because of the offensive techniques of God's people. In light of the responses to question four, as well as earlier questions, it is apparent that the majority of respondents defer to being visible witnesses and seeking to build trust with unbelievers through the patient work of trust-building. Still, there is a longing articulated in answers to this question for congregants of First CRC to feel better equipped and to live out their faith in a more confident manner, while maintaining a healthy suspicion of not doing damage to others in the process. One group summarized: "We want to be more daring to pray, stay strong in trouble, and feel Jesus' encouragement. We wish that people would be more open to learning about Christianity." Another group described a hoped-for future where there is a "feeling like our relationships have bridged that chasm, where there is sharing and expansion of God's kingdom, and where there is confidence and deepened faith."

5. What is our congregation's shared calling as part of God's mission? Identify the places of hurt, pain, disparity and injustice in our church neighbourhood. What difference do you believe God is calling First CRC to within the next few years? Describe what you imagine be it a change in attitude, a cultural or structural change.

In response to this final question, I had sought to have the small groups discern what our congregation's shared calling was to our neighbourhood. The question itself has taken quite some time to establish because since 2007 our congregation has tried to figure out our culture: are we a predominately a denominationally-affiliated congregation, whose members live across a wide catchment or are we a parish church who has a significant number of members committed to living near the intersection of East 11th and Victoria Drive? In the first half of our tenure in particular, we make a concerted effort to focus our attention on the neighbourhood where our church is located. Through this, our church has become integral to the well-being in the lives of

some of our neighbours and some congregants moved nearby to reinforce this work. However, those who did not live nearby felt alienated from this ministry work—some expressed a feeling that they no longer belonged and others joined churches closer to their homes. Despite a concerted effort to invite congregants to live in the neighbourhood where they worship, First CRC better fits the description of a catchment approach where we have a majority of people who cross multiple neighbourhood boundaries to worship together. Within this context, when we have talked about our commitment to “the neighbourhood” and “our neighbours,” the majority of members who live further away have felt inadequate and somewhat criticized. In response, we have tried to nuance our language to encourage our members to imagine God’s mission “in your own neighbourhoods and in our congregation’s neighbourhood.” This shift has allowed us to unapologetically recognize the importance of our specific parish-oriented ministries such as *Community Night Dinners*, the *Garden of Eatin’* Community Garden, and the Refugee-related ministries, while still encouraging our members to engage in their own neighbourhoods as well. Therefore, our congregation’s shared calling does have a specific geographical location in mind.

Being attentive to the challenges visible in First CRC’s neighbourhood, various vulnerabilities were identified: two groups mentioned the poverty and homelessness present particularly near Commercial Drive, while three groups mentioned loneliness and social isolation as being significant problems for our neighbours. Seven of the nine groups identified a lack of affordable housing. These three problems are the greatest city-wide challenges continually identified by the Vancouver Foundation each year.⁵¹⁰ In response to these needs, there is a longing for our church to be involved in making our neighbourhood a place of “dignity, security, safety, community and stability.”

⁵¹⁰ Vancouverfoundation.ca

It is striking to see how, although various strategies were mentioned for the church to improve community, including breaking out concrete in front of the church building and setting up basketball hoops in the parking lot (which we did shortly after), each of the nine groups who responded to the question suggested that the use of our church property was central to our shared calling as part of God's mission. This was most notable with the dominant theme of our community needing affordable housing. Five of the seven groups, or 71% of respondents who felt strongly about housing believed our church property ought to be used to address this issue. The matter of redeveloping our church property has gone through cycles of attention and inattention throughout the decades, which has made longer standing members cautious to begin the discussions again. However, this result reveals that 2/3 of these respondents have joined First CRC since 2007 and amongst them there is significant support for our congregation to begin exploring redevelopment. Even more, as we explore redevelopment, most shared that affordable housing ought to be considered. Two groups noted how the need for affordable housing is not only for our neighbours, but also for our congregation, and suggested that future housing would be for both congregants and neighbours. Here, Grandview Calvary Baptist's *Co:Here* building was suggested as a model of what this could look like. The desire to use our church's land effectively means we need to have conversations around what stewarding our resources can and should look like. One group wrote:

We have property and resources in the middle of a city in an area that has so much need – we have an incredible potential and we believe that we are called to research and review our resources and the needs to see where we can help most. Starting a conversation - what are we doing well and what can we do to help. From affordable housing, social programs, the property development for social housing, addiction assistance.... So, so, so many ways we could be there for our community but we need to learn and decide how do we effectively use what we have on a consistent long-term basis to do greatest good?... We would seek a visioning process for especially with our property to discover our options, research, develop partnerships (especially with our limited numbers) to see if options are viable.

Alongside the significant attention given to long-range planning, it was also instructive to read the respondents' approach to shorter-term strategies. Five of the nine groups suggested that First CRC's response was to carry on in the direction that we have already been taking—though, with increased urgency or effectiveness. This list includes supporting the AA group who meet in our basement, perhaps by inviting them to meet in the Annex, as it's a nicer space; open the church doors on Sundays before the services (a suggestion by two groups); continue to address loneliness through Community Night Dinners and visiting *Chelsea Manor Care Centre*; and making the grounds of our church property more hospitable. One group (those most concerned that our Sunday services are restrictive and potentially hurtful for unbelievers in Question Four), provided a long list of suggestions addressing how our church could respond to the needs of our neighbourhood. These include that we begin using the church as a community centre during the week, being creative about how we use our spaces to host events and ease the barriers and process to renting. Other physical changes called for included building improvements, such as full spectrum lighting in the basement, and even hosting a tent city in our parking lot.

Along with this, are changes the group called for to make our church a safer place by having discussions about injustices in the world and in the neighbourhood and allowing inviting outside voices to facilitate these discussions.

III. DATA REDUCTION AND CONTENT ANALYSIS:

In the section above, I have summarized the responses to my five questions. What follows is an evaluation of the process as well as a summary of notable themes.

As I described in Chapter 1, my intended purpose in conducting the research was to engage a large enough participant group that it would provide a dependable sample size from

which to expound my conclusions. I had 60 participants, which makes up half of our congregation's membership, although two participants were non-member attendees and two members had recently become inactive members when they stopped attending one year before the research engagement. These participants formed eleven groups which included all of our current small groups, our older Sunday School children, community choir, and three temporary small groups formed for the purposes of my inquiry.

Although the responses are instructive in and of themselves, a closer analysis reveals some additional insights, which correlate to the previously identified lenses of identity, community, society and view of the future. Each of the four lenses below include at least one aspect of evaluation from the participants' responses.

Lens of Identity: Duration at First CRC and where the church gets its energy

In Question Two, I invited responses about the nature of the gathered church, and in Question Five, two groups provided bookends of how the church's culture was perceived. Group one, with the longest standing members, noted the importance of attending to the health of the ministry of the gathered church from which the congregation can take on the more peripheral ministries of outreach. Group nine perceived the outreach activities were the source of energy and the stabilizing force for the community from which the perceived thick culture and structures of the gathered church should be challenged in order to make more room for the marginalized to gain more acceptance and support from our congregation. There were a variety of answers between these two outliers, but this comparison reveals which aspect of the church is most important to various congregants—is outreach simply an activity that some people in our congregation do, or is being with those outside the church walls core to who we are?

In these responses, it became apparent that both nurturing the gathered community and making more space for those who are not yet part of the community are crucial for a healthy church, but we also see that there are different ways to evaluate who we are and how vital our congregational health is. Here we see a connection to the previous chapter of attending to our identities and the connection between the doctrine of election and our identity, as both groups captured the tension and challenge around bridging from one to the other.

Lens of Community 1: The Intergenerational Nature of First CRC

As we consider the nature of being a covenant community, what is particularly notable is our intergenerational make-up. The commitment to community, given our age diversity, is particularly notable: being intergenerational is a distinctive feature of our 120-member congregation. Positively, this is expressed in a commitment towards each other in a situation where most everyone knows each other and cares for each other. Within the small group context, this has meant small groups giving each other spiritual, relational and practical support through life events, as small groups spearhead baby showers, organize moving days and meal support, hospital visits in crisis, and have become the primary place for personal and supportive prayer. Small groups, therefore, are the most significant faith formation supplement to our times for common worship on Sunday mornings.

There is, however, a notable absence of seniors in our congregation's small groups, in part due to the previously identified hesitation to be open and vulnerable about one's life and faith. These individuals still see the most significant support to Sundays being the regular pastoral care through the visits of pastor and elder. The results of this study suggest that our leadership ought to be attentive to this shift, and perhaps being open to adjusting the daunting

responsibility for elders to do personalized visits for all members, and toward elder care and those in crisis.

Further, regarding our intergenerationality, although the respondent groups are comprised of the adults, a growing edge of small groups at First CRC are beginning to explore how to better integrate their children into their rhythms as a small group. Still, most small groups are organized around age and affinity, which shape the topics and concerns identified in the responses and are reflective in the range of opinions on our worship services, preaching, and culture of the congregation.

Lens of Community II: Welcome and Hospitality at First CRC

The most notable range of opinions between the groups were reflected in how we welcome and demonstrate hospitality towards our neighbours. One group, the longest established small group, were more thorough on their responses to the questions and focused on the gathered community's concerns of worship and discipleship. Other groups put a greater amount of energy on what First CRC needs to improve on as a gathered community in order to be better at welcoming our neighbours. Some of the suggestions, such as the use of hymnals and the order of service, focus on a called-for shift in culture from being highly structured to being more accommodating to visitors. Some responses suggested there is a palpable culture of cautious, if not reluctant, welcoming of neighbours, particularly seen in having closed and locked doors on Sunday mornings. Others named a frustration and fear that some church members in conversations and in the worship service would knowingly or unknowingly say hurtful, offensive and ignorant words further perpetuating the irrelevance of the church in our social context.

The wider LGBT conversation in our cultural context is a significant example of this—some believe that not having conversations and making congregational adjustments around this

new reality will further perpetuate irrelevance and offense from the church, while others with a longer memory of our denominational story, recall how divisive women's ordination was across the CRC in the 1990's and are reluctant to engage in further controversy. How First CRC will navigate the LGBT conversation, as part of a wider denomination doing the same, remains unseen. Locally, we have navigated pastoral conversations with gay people who have grown up in the congregation and who have attended, and we have also hosted some *Generous Space* conversations. These have been meaningful beginning steps which demonstrate we have not suppressed the conversation, but we do recognize that being part of a confessional denomination also requires a discerning approach. This serves as an example of the expressed need for the church to provide a foundation for, and integration of, our faith formation.

Lens of Society: Kingdom Participation in our Own Backyard (Commitment to Place)

In evaluating the response in Question Five, it was noted how each of the respondent groups revealed an attentiveness and commitment to our shared context. Most notable were the responses on our housing affordability and church property. When we arrived as pastors in 2007, there were a handful of core members who expressed genuine interest in selling our church property and relocating our congregation outside of Vancouver proper. However, eleven years later, it is notable that while each group surveyed was aware of the housing increase due to increased property values, not one group suggested selling our church property to developers and relocating. Rather, the groups who imaged how our congregation might address the housing crisis suggested that we leverage the asset of our property to provide housing to address the crisis in a meaningful way.

This shift is notable, particularly in considering how affordable housing is seen as an extension of our congregation's ministry. If a project like this was undertaken, either by First

CRC directly or by a partner agency, the legacy of our church on the corner of East 11th and Victoria would be appreciably expanded. Secondly, it is significant because of the outward-oriented posture more evident now.

As we consider the concept of housing redevelopment, it is instructive to view it through the lens of the cross and crown kingdom work identified in the previous chapter. As noted there, the cross and crown refers to the manner in which we engage in kingdom service. It might be easier to view Christ as King when working in places where we have influence. Likewise, where we are called to come alongside those without influence, we hold before us the cross and Christ as the Suffering Servant. A redevelopment project, reflecting both crown and cross, could lead us to explore ways our Crucified and Risen King is calling us to work on earth as it is in heaven in this specific geographical location.

Lens of the Future: What will sustain our journey of faith?

The final lens we have considered pertains to our view of the future, in the fully redeemed and restored New Creation. In reviewing the responses, each of the groups focused on the present challenges, but they did so with an awareness of how God is at work. Though not overtly eschatological, there was a consistent thread in each of the respondent groups of recognizing how we attend to what God is doing. As noted above, some recognized how this takes place in worship, while others noted it in the neighbourhood and at work. In the next chapter, I will introduce the necessity of practices to sustain us as a congregation. Most centrally is nurturing an awareness of how God is present and active in the world, through sustaining communal practices of the gathered and the sent church. This dynamic was identified in the responses as they pertain to sharing faith together and bringing faith to work.

The question of faith formation was not directly asked, but it was identified as one of the foci within the gathered church. There was an expressed desire for adequate faith formation throughout the respondent groups, which surfaced in various ways. Some groups focused their attention on the importance of the rhythms of the worship service, others identified the importance that faith formation would engage the various issues at work within our context, and still others expressed the desire that faith formation would equip them to navigate the challenge of faithful witness in their unique contexts. Undergirding each of these responses is the less overt felt need that we are dependent on each other for our faith formation. That is, for us to live faithfully, we need to have common commitment to God and to sharing community together through the formative external rhythms of worship and sacraments which continually reshape our imaginations, as well as the internal support and accountability which emerges in the context of intentionally sharing life together. There was widespread recognition of how vital small groups are in central call of discipleship, but there were no overt calls to models of sharing life within a new monastic approach to sharing life and faith together. Perhaps the positive recognition of small group roles will prove to become the leading edge of our congregation, growing more fully into more intentional community rhythms.

What is encouraging to see in the range of opinions is how consistently each group recognized the importance of both natures of what it means to be a church. Although some respondents emphasized either how vital it was to be a gathered church and others focused more on our nature as a sent church, there is a shared conviction towards having a healthy church with intentional faith formation that prepares us as kingdom witnesses to embody the good news of Jesus Christ in our everyday lives.

Implications for First CRC as a Gathered and Sent People

As I conclude the summary of the research, I recognize the various internal and external challenges. Internal challenges identified above include the diversity of expectations; one's view of the congregation's dominant way of doing things; varying views on whether culture is deemed as static and "stuck in the past"; or the disorientation caused by changes resulting from our rapidly changing cultural context.

In truth, as a congregation, we *are* disoriented in this changing cultural context. Some are more open and willingly for fluidity in adapting to these changes, while others are cautious about changing too much and losing our core identity as God's faithful people. We need both voices to discern how to navigate living faithfully as God's kingdom witnesses in a post-Christendom, postmodern and post-truth context.

In Chapter 5, I will introduce postures to refocus our attention on who God is calling us to be and how we are being called to live. As we attend to our identities as God's people, we recognize the challenge of how other people different than us might fit into God's story and a posture of humility ensures that our message will be shared in a positive way. As we attend to who we are as a community, we recognize that the way forward to overcome various barriers which separate us can be fostered through the posture of hospitality. As we attend to our response to society, a posture of generosity will help us be attentive to the ways God is sending us out where we have influence as well as alongside the vulnerable. As we attend to our view towards the future, our awareness of God's in-breaking kingdom can be fostered with a posture of imaginative hope. And finally, what will give us our bearings throughout all of us is recognizing how our activities as a gathered and sent church are in fact practices which shape who we are. It is these postures and practices to which we now turn.

CHAPTER 5: Postures and Practices of Embodying Kingdom Witness

Driving with a GPS has transformed the way many people travel today, particularly when they need to go to a new, unfamiliar place. However, for a GPS system to work, one needs three vital pieces of information: the current location, their desired destination, and possible routes to get there. In this project, attending to matters of identity, community and posture towards society, in both Chapters Two and Three, I have sought to describe our current location and starting place. Our final destination is God’s eschatological future of a redeemed and renewed creation, which we saw echoes of in the final section of Chapter 2 and a fuller picture in Chapter Three. This chapter seeks to align our coordinates to God’s promised destination, and like driving with a GPS-system when the traveller takes a wrong turn, the coordinates of the destination—God’s promised future—remain the most important, despite the many times we find ourselves disoriented and needing to “recalculate” our next steps.

However, unlike typical GPS-systems, which provide step-by-step instructions for the traveller, in this chapter, I will instead introduce four postures, shaped by God’s eschatological future with hopes that they might help us develop a pattern of living until God’s kingdom comes in its fullness. These postures are (1) imaginative hope, (2) generosity, (3) humility, and (4) hospitality. Each of these postures will have accompanying practices, to assist us in embodying each posture in our daily lives.

The call to love God and love our neighbour with all we are is the basis for kingdom witness mission. In the previous chapters, I outlined an argument for participating in God’s kingdom witness. I sought to respond to four unique challenges in our societal context, to which I believe our tradition can speak. Alongside this, I also addressed four unique, yet still related challenges from within our tradition that I believe are barriers preventing us from participating

more fully to God's call. As stated previously, these challenges pertain to identity, community, society and the orientation towards the future. Following this trajectory, I will now turn and focus on the postures and practices needed to continually find our bearings as a community of faith whose vision of God's redeemed and renewed creation sets the pattern for how we embody our faith as God's kingdom witnesses.

I have organized the content of this chapter into three primary sections. First, with *Telling the Story*, I will begin with the end—our literal and teleological end—as it pertains to how we envision God's shalom in the redeemed New Creation. This vision will then serve as a pattern for the Gathered church in the second section,⁵¹¹ *Nurtured in the Story* where the rhythms of the institutional church shape and realign us to God's purposes for his people. And finally, in the third section, *Sent to Live the Story*, God's pattern of New Creation shalom will also provide the *telos* for the Sent church in all the places where we live, work and play. To ground this theological reflection, I propose specific postures and practices of Imaginative Hope, of Generosity, of Honesty and of Hospitality in order to facilitate the practical embodiment of our *telos*. But before we turn to our discussion on these proposed postures and practices I believe it is necessary to take a step back and discuss why these two aspects of faith must be wedded.

1. Theory and Practice, or Praxis?

The practices proposed here are integral to the theory and theology presented in the previous chapters. Ray Anderson observes that theory and practice are often seen as an either/or manner, rather than a both/and reality:

If theory precedes and determines practice, then practice tends to be concerned primarily with methods, techniques and strategies for ministry, lacking theological substance. If practice takes priority over theory, ministry tends to be

⁵¹¹ Mouw, *When the Kings Come Marching In*, 19.

based on pragmatic results rather than prophetic revelation. All good practice includes theory...theory without good practice is invalid theory.⁵¹²

An illustration of practice over theory can be seen in the CRC Home Missions⁵¹³ strategy throughout much of the church growth movement. As I noted in Chapter Three, theory has often preceded practice within the CRC Living Tradition, which has led some to the conclusion that those within our denomination are more concerned with *talk* about right ideas, than with the *walk* of right living. In order to correct this perceived default behavior, CRC Home Missions motivated many congregations to be more engaged in their neighbourhoods by adopting new strategies and missional techniques from the broader church. This decision emerged because our church planters wanted to distance themselves from the distasteful aspects of our history and behaviour, (which I discussed in Chapter Three). This has offered a more immediate, measurable response. The strength of these congregations is the vitality they have in worship, being missionally engaged, and their connection with the wider Church, all of which can teach established Christian Reformed congregations a great deal.

However, as we have seen, strategies and techniques can have limited effect. The limitation of this strategy is that a number of these church plants have adopted the templates and behaviours from other living traditions⁵¹⁴ without the patient work of attending to the nuances of our tradition. This has resulted in a disconnect within our denomination; more traditional CRC congregations tend to place them on the periphery. As church plants distance themselves from their CRC roots, there has been something lost beyond merely having the words “Christian

⁵¹² Ray S. Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology: Empowering Ministry with Theological Praxis* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2009), 14.

⁵¹³ *Home Missions* is now called *Resonate Global Missions* but held the previous name throughout the years which I describe.

⁵¹⁴ Over the last 30 years, this would include Willowcreek /Saddleback models, Community-based emergent church, Simple cell-based church, parish models in the 2000's, and now complemented by examples of multi-site campus models.

Reformed” removed from the church plants’ signage and logos. I would argue that the church plant strategy has thrown the baby out with the bathwater: a significant missional strategy of our denomination has been to distance itself from our ‘Christian Reformed-ness’ without attending to the unarticulated theological convictions preventing us from participating in this renewal. In our denominational church plants, we seem to have modeled church shopping on the grandest scale, rather than facing the slow, awkward and even painful conversations required if we are to deal with the challenges we face as a denomination. Moreover, for the many who have remained in established congregations this approach has minimized the effectiveness of becoming more missionally engaged.

The *CRC Home Missions* example illustrates what happens when practice takes priority over theory. This serves as a corrective to the CRC default behaviour of pitting theory over practice. What is needed is to hold both theory and practice as side-by-side priorities. The concept of *praxis* allows for a both/and approach to theory and practice—seeking to ensure that the two poles are not mutually exclusive. Karl Barth labeled this dichotomy as a “primal lie, which has to be resisted in principle.”⁵¹⁵ Barth writes, “Praxis and theory, Church and theology, love and knowledge, simply cannot be set over against one another in this kind of abstract way.”⁵¹⁶ In the context of this project, where kingdom witness mission is the primary praxis, and the primary lens of theology explores the nature of the church, we can see a generous picture emerging between praxis and theory. In his reflection on how the theology and mission both emerge out of the nature of the Trinity, Ross Hastings writes:

If the contemporary church truly grasped and lived by the truth that mission is the mother of theology and theology is the mother of mission, that is, if the church were intoxicated with the triune God, it would be transformed and a

⁵¹⁵ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 787.

⁵¹⁶ Barth, as cited in Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology*, 15.

powerful transformer of culture.⁵¹⁷

In our postmodern context, we must now attend to the way truth is understood and applied more generally before we identify a practical theology which is faithful both to our faith and our societal context. Ray Anderson notes three postmodern shifts in how truth is understood and applied as a servant of practical living: (1) a *celebration of diversity* which is “reflected in a moral relativism [where] what is right is defined as ‘what I feel comfortable with’ or ‘what is right for me’;⁵¹⁸ (2) a demand for tolerance in resistance to universal claims;⁵¹⁹ and (3) “an expanding secularism,” that is, in order to give room for reason to be expressed in its diversity, it needed to break from the confines of “ecclesiastical authority.”⁵²⁰ The implications for the church are significant. First, because postmodernism rejects truth as solely objective, followers of Jesus are called to become “communities in perceiving reality.”⁵²¹ Anderson writes:

None of us is an autonomous individual, cut off from the influences of social traditions. We belong to communities that help shape our perception of reality. We offer a living community—the church. The distrust of reason means that truth must be experienced to be believed, and it is in the church that the truth of the gospel is to be lived out.⁵²²

Our practices, therefore, must model a humility which recognizes that for our neighbours, and for those in the church, objective truth will only be received as true insofar as these claims are embodied and are wrestled within the community.

Second, because postmodernism embraces the significance of narrative and story, practical theology calls the church to:

reflective, critical inquiry into the praxis of the church in the world and God’s purposes for humanity, carried out in the light of Christian Scripture and tradition,

⁵¹⁷ Hastings, *Missional God, Missional Church*, 250.

⁵¹⁸ Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology*, 20.

⁵¹⁹ Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology*, 20.

⁵²⁰ Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology*, 20.

⁵²¹ Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology*, 20.

⁵²² Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology*, 20.

and in critical dialogue with other sources of knowledge...[practical theology's] primary purpose is to ensure that the church's public proclamations and praxis in the world faithfully reflect the nature and purpose of God's continuing mission to the world and in so doing authentically addresses the contemporary context into which the church seeks to minister.⁵²³

Anderson draws on Gerben Heitink's argument for two forms of praxis: Praxis 1 focuses on how the Christian gospel is communicated where the church is the "foremost channel of mediation through the ministry of Word and Spirit."⁵²⁴ Alongside this is Praxis 2 which unfolds in people's everyday lives of home, relationships, and workplace, where "individuals and groups, motivated by their individual ideals and driven by varying interests, make specific choices and pursue specific goals."⁵²⁵ We see here that faith gets worked out in the gathered community as well as in congregants' daily living which aligns well with the Transformational approach to the two natures of the church as institutional and organic. That is, the institutional church gathers to be formed by the gospel, and the organic church is sent to reveal the gospel. Postures and practices in the gathered and the sent church are illuminated by the Gospel and reveal the Gospel's light to the broader world. Part of the challenge here is to discern which postures and practices ought to be emphasized in the two expressions of the church.

Discernment:

As we seek to articulate the postures and practices which will reinforce God's work in the world around us, it is critical we have an ongoing commitment to discernment, which must permeate all of our activities. Once again, Anderson argues:

The practical theologian is the theologian of the Holy Spirit, who points to and participates in the creative indivisibly of God who holds all things together. The Holy Spirit is the revelation to us of the inner being of God as constituted by the

⁵²³ Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology*, 22.

⁵²⁴ Heitink as cited in Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology*, 25.

⁵²⁵ Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology*, 25.

relations between Father and Son. For this reason, practical theology is grounded in the intra-trinitarian ministry of the Father toward the world, the Son's ministry to the Father on behalf of the world and the Spirit's empowering of the disciples for ministry.⁵²⁶

As we are attentive to the way in which Father, Son and Spirit lead our church, it is important to recognize that in a congregation with a highly-bounded tradition and deep theological identifiers, we can easily become beholden to the received tradition, at the expense of meaningful engagement in our context. Therefore, alongside an attentiveness to what we have received, we recognize that a kingdom witness lens must remain in the forefront of our minds and activity. This is not simply a matter of shifting our energy, but a re-orientation of our self-understanding. Van Gelder notes that some believe being missional means:

giving the priority of missions in regard to the church's various activities... [However, the] concept of a church being *missional* moves in a fundamentally different direction. It seeks to focus the conversation about what the church *is*—that it is a community created by the Spirit and that it has a unique nature, or essence, which gives it a unique identity. In light of the church's nature, the missional conversation then explores what the church *does*.⁵²⁷

As we seek to attend to our identity as God's people, we recognize how important it is to be aware of our *telos* as it sets the template for how we live in the rhythm of our lives. It is in attending to our *telos* that we find meaning in our practices and that we are continually being formed into the people God has created and called us to be. As we saw in Chapter 3, attending to our *telos* points us forward to see God's promised reality in the New Creation.

2. Pattern for Daily Living Teleologically: The End is Our Beginning

The Bible paints a vivid picture of the fully redeemed and renewed Creation⁵²⁸ but God's promised future of the New Creation is not only our eschatological destination, it also sets the

⁵²⁶ Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology*, 40.

⁵²⁷ Craig Van Gelder, *The Ministry of The Missional Church: A Community Led by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 16–17.

pattern of our living today. Our future is relationship with God the Father, Son and Spirit without barrier, and we seek to live into that reality today. Being fully reconciled with all of creation sets our template for living today. Our future is a redeemed and renewed creation, which means that we must seek to tend and steward—*avad* and *shamar*—right now, because the physical world matters to God. It is towards this future reality, made possible through Christ, that we set our GPS-coordinates. Lesslie Newbigin writes:

We are not engaged in an enterprise of our own choosing or devising. We are invited to participate in an activity of God which is the central meaning of creation itself. We are invited to become, through the presence of the Holy Spirit, participants in the Son's loving obedience to the Father. All things have been created that they may be summed up in Christ the Son. All history is directed towards that end. All creation has this as its goal. The Spirit of God, who is also the Spirit of the Son, is given as the foretaste of that consummation, as the witness to it, and as the guide of the Church on the road toward it."⁵²⁹

Gary Simpson stated "The church in North America has an obstacle to overcome if it is to get past its impoverished missional imagination...that obstacle is its inadequate view of God."⁵³⁰ Our view of God matters a great deal because it influences not only how we believe God is working, but how we view ourselves in our relationship with God, with each other and the world. Moreover, our view of God, with an expansive picture of God's mission, sets the stage for our own congregation's mission.⁵³¹ This future reality is what God has always planned. Michael Goheen summarizes how God's mission, beginning with Israel, is to be understood: universal, centripetal and eschatological.⁵³²

⁵²⁸ See New Creation Isaiah 40-55, 60, 66:18-24; Zechariah 9:9-13; Psalm 102:13-22, Revelation 21-22.

⁵²⁹ Newbigin, as cited in Ruth A. Meyers, *Missional Worship, Worshipful Mission: Gathering as God's People, Going Out in God's Name* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2014), 19.

⁵³⁰ Gary M. Simpson, "No Trinity, No Mission: The Apostolic Difference of Revisioning the Trinity" in *Word and World* 18 (Summer, 1998), 264.

⁵³¹ See Elton, Terri Martinson "Corp of Discovery" in Van Gelder, *Missional Church in Context*, 147.

⁵³² Michael W. Goheen, *Introducing Christian Mission Today: Theology, History and Issues* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2014), 48.

God works through a chosen people, but his intention for redemption is universal; God's people's way of life was unique, but was designed to attract others to the way of shalom by being a light to the nations; and because so little of Israel's calling is actually realized in their history, actually accomplishing this goal points God's people towards the future.⁵³³

Like Israel, little of our calling is fully realized in our history, and so we need an eschatological kingdom imagination to continue be the 'truth north' for our compass. As we do, our hope and imagination holds a vision of God's mission before us and we then have the proper the lenses through which to perceive the world.

With the teleological pattern for daily living established, we are now able to engage postures which will make that living inspiring and winsome for our community of faith. Here, once again, we return to our four categories of one's understanding of identity, community society, and future. Earlier I argued that a Transformational kingdom witness can speak to the needs of our present context in each of these areas, but that adjustments within the Transformational approach are necessary in order to be effective in this new cultural climate. To mitigate the risk of this project remaining words on a page, I now add *postures* to each of these categories.

3. Necessity of Postures for Daily Living

As we follow the category of identity we have already seen how the fragmentation present in our social and cultural context can be addressed by the doctrine of election, provided there is a teleological emphasis of vocation and that through election, God gives the gift of identity to serve his mission. Here the posture of humility emphasizes how we see ourselves, particularly who we are and who we are not, in order that we can find our voice for kingdom witness.

⁵³³ Goheen, *Introducing Christian Mission Today*, 48.

In the category of community, I identified alienation as a predominant experience for those in our social and cultural context. Here the doctrine of covenant can add hope and purpose for those who are looking for a place to belong. That said, the Reformed expression of covenant has turned inwards and an attitude shift of greater openness to the broader church (and to those who are not yet considered part of the believing community) is necessary. Here the posture of hospitality can open our lives up to others, through vulnerability and discovering the gift of mutuality.

As we listened to our congregational understand of the broader culture there is a sense of powerlessness and resignation as we recognized how morality and responsibility are outsourced - that is, unhitched from biblical foundations. While there is still a desire for things to be better, life is still fragmented. To this the kingdom witness approach offers hope, as it connects all of life to a bigger picture. However, the Transformational approach has more often identified with the reign of Christ the King and tends toward triumphalism. So, I propose a corrective. I believe kingdom witness should be viewed through the lens of Christ, the Suffering Servant, opening our eyes and energies increasingly to advocacy and the work of justice. To this approach, we draw on the posture of generosity—that is, taking our cue from our generous God, we follow the Spirit’s leading as we witness to the ways God provides “more than we can ask or imagine” to the many places of brokenness we regularly witness.

Finally, as we identify the default presence of nihilism and hopelessness within our context, I propose we need the emphasis of the grand story to give us reason and purpose for this time, in light of God’s purpose from eternity past to eternity future. It was observed that while the Transformational approach of emphasizing creation ordinances validates the creation and cultural mandates, an eschatologically informed shalom-base deepens the weight of our living

because it shifts our focus towards a fully redeemed creation. Here the posture of hopeful imagination helps us to live eschatologically—that is, that our future reality becomes a template for our daily living.

These four postures tie in with some of the “CRC tripping points” which I identified at the start of this project—aspects of our tradition which have kept us from living into the call as kingdom witnesses in our social and cultural context. Holding an expansive kingdom vision in our context which invites meaningful engagement with our neighbours calls for new approaches to long-held beliefs. And in order to make a connection to these postures meaningful, in the paragraphs that follow, I will illustrate themes significant to our congregation which show how necessary having postures are for our congregation. Briefly, to begin, the congregational feedback of being unsure of what to say leads to the necessity of confident humility ensuring the message is more accessible and inviting while still faithful. Second, we also saw that First CRC’s core ministries of Community Night and Refugee Ministries are tangible expressions of drawing people in, but this is leading us to recognize how a vulnerable mutuality will lead to a deeper transformation. Third, the feedback highlighted a desire to be generous, but actions of generosity can become obligation and duty unless they are rooted in the confidence of God’s generosity first poured out to us. Fourth, noticeably absent from the statements were references to our eschatological vision of the New Creation, which points out how beneficial a posture of hopeful imagination is. We will now explore these four postures more fully.

A. Posture 1: Humility in Theology, Catholicity and our Daily Living

Humility in our Conversations for the Sake of the World

Talking with someone about faith is a key part of kingdom witness, but in the previous chapter we have seen how our congregants can fall into two equal but opposing errors. On the

one hand, we do not know what to say. So, the rare times when conversations of faith or church come up we find ourselves either silent or fumbling around for the right words. After a few conversations like this we easily find ourselves embarrassed into silence. On the other hand, one respondent group in particular noted the other extreme occurring, when significant assumptions are made, and we end up coming across in a strident tone, doing more harm than good. Can we find a middle ground to avoid the pitfalls of awkwardness and embarrassment, as well as the problems that result from being self-assured and ‘out-of-touch’? I offer that a posture of humility, properly understood, can give us the confidence to have a message to share, and one communicated in a respectful manner that we might live into the Great Commission with courage and boldness.

When we consider interactions with those outside of the church, courage and boldness are hardly words we associate with being a Christian in Vancouver today, let alone from a Reformed believer. For Calvinists, the vision of a generous God sending his people with a message of hope for the world has almost come to a screeching halt, particularly when the topic of evangelism and missions comes up. In extreme cases, the excuses from within the Calvinist camp are not unlike the accusations from outside of Reformed circles—with predestination and election so central to the framework of preserving the effectiveness of God’s will, why bother with telling other people about Jesus?

We addressed this matter more thoroughly in Chapter 3, but it is relevant once again because, I believe, an unintended consequence of the High Calvinist theological discussions is that subsequent generations of Reformed believers have become much more cautious, even reluctant, to share their faith. Indeed, I would add that to not read the *Canons* within their

historical context is to fail to recognize the early missionary zeal within Calvinism and God's missionary call for his people throughout Scripture.

As we seek to embody humility in our identity as God's elect, we are reminded of his loving actions for the sake of the world, through the Incarnation, the clearest source of our vocation.⁵³⁴ Craig Van Gelder notes that with this picture of a loving God, reformed and always reforming calls for *reformanda* in the confessional sense and *formanda* in the missional sense.⁵³⁵

He writes:

This polarity creates a dynamic and healthy tension between change and continuity, and between mission and confession. In this polarity the leading of the Spirit maintains the tension line between the challenge of recontextualizing a congregation's ministry in the midst of a changing context and the challenge of continuing to maintain the truths of the historic Christian faith as understood by the congregation.⁵³⁶

Holding this polarity together while stewarding a vision of a generous God requires discernment and robust discipleship. Van Gelder reinforces our missional vocation:

The Spirit of God not only creates the church by calling it into existence, but also leads the church by sending it into the world to participate fully in God's mission in all of creation. This means that congregations are missionary by nature.⁵³⁷

We must also remember that the church is not the end of God's generosity, but that our cup overflows for the sake of the world around us. Ingraffia describes what this picture of discipleship could look like:

What we should strive for, surely, is a church that is full of teaching (doctrinal, ethical, historical, spiritual), rigorous in its discipleship, and patently faithful in its exercise of godly discipline—and *at the same time* a church in which believers know how to communicate with non-believers, whose public meetings, however full of teaching and discipline they may be, are authentic in all they do, welcoming and warm to strangers, and careful to apply the Scriptures

⁵³⁴ John 3:16-17.

⁵³⁵ Van Gelder, *The Missional Church in Context*, 37.

⁵³⁶ Van Gelder, *The Missional Church in Context*, 37.

⁵³⁷ Van Gelder, *The Missional Church in Context*, 38.

to all of life, with contemporary probings that are simultaneously faithful to Scripture and culturally penetrating.⁵³⁸

Humility with our Beliefs

Early 20th Century Scottish Presbyterian James Sutton MacKay described the Dutch in his interactions:

They like to see things clearly, and to see them as they are—at least, as they seem to be men of sound understanding. ‘We are a people of dykes and dams,’ a Dutch writer said recently, ‘both as to our land and our mental life.’ And Dr. Kuyper’s often-quoted saying about the danger of ‘blurring the boundary lines’ is characteristically Dutch. It might seem that such a mind is perhaps not the best fitted to deal with such subjects as religion, but if we are to treat theology as science, and accept the old saying that *qui bene distinguit bene docet*—a favorite maxim of theirs—much, I believe can be learned from a people who have a remarkable gift of making distinctions, wrought into their nature, possibly, by many centuries of unrelaxing toil in making and holding that distinction of land and sea, which to them is a matter of life and death.⁵³⁹

Seeing things ‘clearly’ while avoiding the danger of “blurring the boundary lines” capture a tradition which has continued through the significant transition of bringing that faith to a new world. MacKay’s words help explain where the impulse for precision and clarity originates, but it also shines a light on how that posture has been seen by those from other traditions. I have found the strident manner of describing faith unpalatable and therefore this call to a posture of humility comes from a long-standing desire to approach talking about our faith differently. There are a number of reasons for this, most notable the recognition that no theology can be in itself the fullest expression of God’s revelation.

⁵³⁸ Ingraffia, *Postmodern Theory and Biblical Theology*, 152.

⁵³⁹ As cited in Mouw, *The Challenges of Cultural Discipleship*. *qui bene distinguit bene doct* means “the one who distinguishes well, teaches well.”

Humility without Humiliation

Just because we need to avoid arrogance, does not mean we neglect the message we carry. As we discern our particular way of living as God's kingdom witnesses in Vancouver, we also need to appreciate and live into the gifts of our tradition. In a rapidly changing world, it is easy for a traditional church to experience an identity crisis. In light of so many other churches in Vancouver, an existential question underlies this project. It is the basic question of whether or not our congregation, or our tradition for that matter, has anything unique to offer. If we do, then what is it and how can we make use of it for the glory of God? This project is my attempt to help us both acknowledge our strengths and our places of brokenness. In so doing, I hope for us to find our unique voice that we may be able to say:

This is who we are: Congregational life is to be both centrifugal and centripetal—both incarnational and attractional. The church as a hermeneutic of the gospel is salt, light, and a city on the hill: the church loves, does good, seeks justice, brings healing, celebrates, proclaims the gospel, and invites.⁵⁴⁰

And this is who we at First CRC Vancouver are: our shared life together is to model our lives after Jesus way of humility, hospitality, generosity and imaginative hope. And as his character forms us, personally and as a worshipping community gathered and sent, we witness kingdom transformation with vibrant, hopeful imagination, a respectful humility while stewarding the Gospel story, experiencing the gift of mutual hospitality and the kingdom economy of generosity. And as we journey into this call, we nurture discernment and celebrate ups and downs together, listening for God's voice in the midst of the noise of the city and pointing out all the places where we see God's kingdom flourishing.

⁵⁴⁰ Mark Lau Branson, "Ecclesiology and Leadership for the Missional Church", in Van Gelder, *The Missional Church in Context*, 114.

B. Posture 2: Hospitality through opening our lives to others

The posture of hospitality impacts our everyday relationships, but it begins with how we see ourselves in relation to others. Therefore, before we explore what hospitality looks like on the ground, we must first explore how those in our tradition have viewed themselves and viewed others in relation to themselves.

Hospitality and the Wider Church:

As we have seen thus far, the historical dominant posture towards the wider church might be better described as hostility, not hospitality. In Chapter 1, I engaged with a pair of articles by Yoder and Mouw who, emphasized a common Reformed and Anabaptist concern for right church governance, the importance of integrity with the regeneration of faith, and that the church engages the culture as an expression of faith. About that public exchange, Mouw writes:

We joined forces from both sides of the Reformed-Anabaptist divide to argue that the arguments between Calvinists and Anabaptists are not disputes between radically theological types. They are elements in intrafamily argument. These disputes reach a high intensity because the differences between the two groups are of a more intimate character than either their arguments with, say, the Lutherans or the Catholics.⁵⁴¹

This is a more generous and humble approach to theological exchange. The Transformational tradition offers unique theological gifts, particularly in philosophy through the work of Alvin Plantinga; catholicity with Richard Mouw; missiology through Craig Van Gelder; and faith formation in a postmodern world through James K.A. Smith. But a strong desire for precise statements has limited our attention to the mystery of God's kingdom, and the surprising ways of the Holy Spirit.⁵⁴²

⁵⁴¹ Mouw, *The Challenges of Cultural Discipleship*, 155.

⁵⁴² Mouw, *The Challenges of Cultural Discipleship*, 155.

Although the previous paragraphs have focused on intra-denominational interactions, it is by no means the only aspect of hospitality towards catholicity I have in view. It is also vital that we learn from our sisters and brothers in the global church. As Kenyan-born philosopher John Mbiti has said:

It is utterly scandalous for so many Christian scholars in older Christendom to know so much about heretic movements in the second and third centuries, when so few of them know anything about Christian movements in areas of the younger churches.⁵⁴³

In *The Next Christendom*, Jenkins notes that the global shift to Africa, Asia, and Latin America means that by 2025 “the vast majority of believers will be neither white nor European, nor Euro-American.”⁵⁴⁴ In the midst of this dramatic shift, we must be attentive to the African Indigenous churches, not merely to celebrate the diversity in the church, but because their contextualizing more closely resembles Christianity in the first few centuries than does our Western interpretation of the faith.

Goheen notes that the Global churches can teach us to “embrace holistic spirituality, while avoiding paganism and syncretism.”⁵⁴⁵ Along with an openness to learn from churches on the African continent, we also have much to learn about the urgency of evangelism from the churches in Asia,⁵⁴⁶ particularly important given the demographic shift in Vancouver over the last four decades. The work of justice is integral to the gospel expression from the Latin American churches, which also ought to open our eyes to bearing kingdom witness that takes seriously both our message and our deeds.⁵⁴⁷ Churches in the Middle East and North Africa

⁵⁴³ As cited in Goheen, *Introducing Christian Mission Today*, 188.

⁵⁴⁴ Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, 3rd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1.

⁵⁴⁵ Goheen, *Introducing Christian Mission Today*, 194.

⁵⁴⁶ Goheen, *Introducing Christian Mission Today*, 198.

⁵⁴⁷ Goheen, *Introducing Christian Mission Today*, 201.

model for us what it means to be faithful in that witness, particularly as they follow Jesus alongside their Muslim neighbours..⁵⁴⁸

Herman Bavinck said that the image of God is most completely expressed, not in an individual, but in community. As Paul outlines in I Corinthians 12, the same can be said of the body of Christ, in which each member serves uniquely, but does so, by design, in conjunction with the whole Body. So our tradition has often functioned as if it has been a complete body in and of itself, as evidenced in the history of many schisms in Dutch Calvinism. It follows then, that we need to gain a deeper appreciation of the wider, global and universal church of which we are a part. Newbigin's words remind us of how much we need each other: "This mutual relatedness, this dependence of one on another, is not merely part of the journey toward the goal of salvation, but is intrinsic to the goal itself."⁵⁴⁹

Hospitality as Living Witness:

Craig Van Gelder describes missional congregations as communities of faith that learn to read their context theologically and they respond in particularity.⁵⁵⁰ Another way to put this is that there is no model congregation.⁵⁵¹ It also means each congregation is freed to respond to the most significant needs in the location where they have been placed. An unmistakable aspect of life in East Vancouver is attentiveness to food and making an event out of enjoying that food together. Since 2005, First CRC's *Community Night* has been our most consistent outreach practice and through the years we have recognized the gift of this time together.

Community Night has benefited our neighbourhood in a variety of ways. It has been a venue for us to come together with our neighbours and share a mutual appreciation of food. The

⁵⁴⁸ Goheen, *Introducing Christian Mission Today*, 206–8.

⁵⁴⁹ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 82.

⁵⁵⁰ Van Gelder, *The Missional Church in Context*, 39.

⁵⁵¹ Van Gelder, *The Missional Church in Context*, 41.

preparation for each vegetarian meal requires a great deal of chopping and cooking. In the process of cooking and eating together, we have learned to overcome our fears—of neighbours worried that we will be pushy proselytizers, and our own fears of not knowing what to talk about with our neighbours. The posture of hospitality has been a way to address the deep loneliness present in the lives of our neighbours. Many of the regulars say the meal is the only time they share food with someone else each week.

Our building's cornerstone says "Rehoboth: The Lord has made room for us." Those words were engraved by members of our then 20-year old congregation in 1948, as they were moving into their new church building. Those words continue to stand as a reminder for us that the hospitality we extend to our neighbours is an outflow of the hospitality we have received from God.

Though *Community Night* is the clearest example, our community garden, *The Garden of Eatin'* is another way we have learned to extend hospitality. More recently congregants have begun to ask how we might redevelop our property to benefit our neighbours. There is still a self-protective impulse which limits the degree of hospitality we extend collectively, but it fair to say that a majority of our congregation value the role a posture of hospitality plays.

Hospitality through Mutuality:

Van Gelder also identifies that missionally engaged congregations ought to anticipate reciprocity, that is, that we recognize our need for others and allow ourselves to be changed by them.⁵⁵² Newbigin wrote:

God chose [his people] to be the bearers of his purpose, because God does not wish to make himself known to us in the isolation of our own individual souls. He doesn't communicate with us on a one-to-one basis as if by telephone. God

⁵⁵² Van Gelder, *The Missional Church in Context*, 41.

makes himself known to us in the context of our shared life as human beings because that is what our human life is.⁵⁵³

We need each other in the church, and in our neighbourhoods. As a community who seeks to use our resources to benefit our neighbourhood, it is tempting to establish a dependency model where meals are served “soup-kitchen style.” While this model might scratch the itch of wanting to help, it does not preserve their dignity of the recipient who is also an image bearer of God with unique gifts to share. The adjustment to working alongside one another in food preparation and serving might seem insignificant, but it has been deeply formative for those of us involved in Community Night over the years. It has modeled to our neighbours that we believe they have something to offer us too, and we have consequently learned some wonderful things from our neighbours. In fact, as our core volunteers for Community Night have lessened as people move away, the roles of prep cook, set-up and clean-up are now being shouldered by our neighbours.

Dena Nicolai, the Christian Reformed *Chaplain and Refugee Response Mobilizer* who works out of our building, regularly talks about the gifts of mutual hospitality and the corrective it provides. It is tempting for a community who also want to help refugees to make help one-sided. There are certain things we can and do to help under-resourced newcomers to Canada, including giving welcome baskets with groceries, hosting weekly English conversation times, and allowing a Refugee Claimant food and clothing bank to operate out of our building. But if that is the extent of our interactions, then we are really missing out on the gifts that these new Canadians have to offer us. Over the last two years, I have gained many new friends and have enjoyed so many abundant and delicious meals, representing cultures from all around the world!

⁵⁵³ Newbiggin, *A Walk Through the Bible*, 6.

This mutual hospitality reaches to a deeper level as well. Along the way, in this posture of mutual hospitality, we have recognized an uneasy tension at work, most evident in our neighbours wanting community but not wanting the commitment required to experience it. This tension has also helped us recognize the same tension in our own members too, which has helped us understand how the ideals of community are easier to articulate than the vulnerability it takes to live them out by making room in our lives for other people.

Our journey with Community Night has also taught us an important lesson in faith interactions. Earlier I suggested a posture of humility must be present when verbal witness takes place, though these interactions are rare. We have learned in our weekly meals that unless there is an acute crisis in a person's life, it often takes years of building trust with neighbours before they are prepared to ask questions about faith. Much more effective than verbal witness has been the deepening of relationships between us as neighbours, and from the place of mutuality and friendship come opportunities to discuss spiritual matters. Though this may seem to undermine the importance of verbal witness which I just argued, in our context it is clear that kingdom witness must be embodied. At times, these comments have been accompanied by pent up hostility. Other times I have been invited to listen to a description of a rather amorphous and aimless spirituality—but it is likely that without hospitality, these conversations would not have taken place. It is in living together that our witness is shared.

In his book, *The Patient Ferment of the Church*, Alan Kreider argues that the marvel of the early church's growth did not happen primarily through bold verbal testimony, but rather through the example of God's people who endured brutal treatment including ostracism, and even execution. Of course, when words were required Jesus' early followers expressed their faith

boldly, but they held weight because they had first been embodied. In 256 AD Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, wrote an encouragement to continue embodying the good news:

Beloved brethren, [we] are philosophers not in words but in deeds; we exhibit our wisdom not by our dress, but by truth; we know virtues by their practice rather than through boasting of them; we do not speak great things but we live them.⁵⁵⁴

Kreider explains that like yeast slowly working its way into the dough, the early Christians recognized the disincentives but:

Had a perspective that they called ‘patience.’ They believed that God was in charge of events; they knew they were not...they were not concerned to cover the world with their evangelistic efforts. Instead the Christians concentrated on developing practices that contributed to a habitus that characterized both individual Christians and Christian communities.⁵⁵⁵

A posture of hospitality was part of the early Christian communities’ practices throughout the Roman Empire,⁵⁵⁶ but that hospitality was integral to a faithful witness where these followers of Jesus opened their lives up for all to see. A world of martyrdoms is foreign and unimaginable to our context, but as part of our cloud of witnesses, the early church modeled an emboldened, visible witness for us, as they sought to give God glory in their daily lives.

C. Posture 3: Stewarding God’s generosity for the sake of the world

Building on the postures of humility and hospitality that we would embody his call for us to be kingdom witnesses, we must also adopt a posture of stewarding his generosity. At stake here is our view of God, the marvelous diverse unity in his church, and the outpouring of his love which flows through us to those the Lord has put in our paths.

Encountering Our Generous God:

⁵⁵⁴ Cyprian, as cited in Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 13.

⁵⁵⁵ Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*, 74.

⁵⁵⁶ Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*, 122–23, 140.

I recently spoke with an older member of our congregation who was raised with an expansive and awe-filled picture of the King of Kings. In her narrative, common to many members raised in the Reformed Tradition of her day, the Lord's holiness and otherness reinforces our unworthiness. This sense of unworthiness is so significant that after 90 years of immersing herself in God's story, and nurturing her faith through prayer and spiritual practices, she does not have assurance of her faith and believes that she is not part of the elect. Though the deepest question is rarely acknowledged, her picture of God fuels her desire for the minister only to welcome the congregation at the start of the service (as opposed to a worship leader) and raise hands in the blessing (as opposed to seminarians), as well as for Communion times to be quiet. This has helped me understand what has been behind her negative feedback and reactions.

Through our many conversations this elderly sister's understanding of God has deepened in me a greater appreciation of God's transcendence. It has also helped me recognize that the image of God we hold becomes the lens by which we filter everything and everyone else. James Bryan Smith notes that attending to the landscapes of our imaginations is the work of discipleship. He writes:

Discipleship must ensure that we examine the narrative we believe, engage in the spiritual disciplines, and grow in the context of community. When we attend to these things which we have influence over, then the work of the Spirit does what we cannot do for ourselves.⁵⁵⁷

As an example, Smith describes a common, but false narrative about God in a swivel chair (conditional love), that when we are good he is facing us, and gives us his attention and blessings, but when we are bad he turns away and distances himself from us.⁵⁵⁸

⁵⁵⁷ James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful God: Falling in Love with the God Jesus Knows* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2009), 22–30.

⁵⁵⁸ James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful God.*, 94.

False pictures of God are held by all of us. I too see shadows of God as a severe judge, one whose love is conditional. But the clearest picture I want to hold is that described in Psalm 23—a good shepherd who does the leading, guiding, and protecting, and whose provision makes our cups overflow. That is a generous God who has poured out on us more than we can ask or imagine, so much so that goodness spills out beyond the confines of the church.

Eugene Peterson has noted that one of his motivations for writing *The Message* was to amend the fragmentation of God’s story, caused by the chapter and verse divisions found in most of the versions of the Bible we have all grown up reading⁵⁵⁹ As we have seen in Chapter 3, when we hold God’s Word in our hands, we are drawn into God’s grand story. To be sure, we are part of this story, but God’s vast purposes are much broader than that. Stewarding a posture of generosity is rooted in holding out the myriad examples of how God’s abundance and generosity are on display from the first words of Genesis 1 to the last words of Revelation 22. As we recognize the fragmented pieces of our own stories and the shards we hold of God’s grand story, we experience a lack of coherence. We need to know how everything is held together by our generous God, who is involved in redeeming and recreating every aspect of life. Considering the view of double predestination espoused by Calvin, this vision of God being generous might be unexpected. However, his generosity is evident in that creation is itself an overflow of God’s creative activity, God’s restraining of sin in a fallen world, fellowship with the Living God “apart from the mediation of priest or church,”⁵⁶⁰ and the many displays of human goodness made possible through common grace.⁵⁶¹

⁵⁵⁹ Peterson, *Soul Craft*: Disc 3.

⁵⁶⁰ Brant Himes, “Distinct Discipleship” in *The Kuyper Center Review*, Vol. 4: Calvinism and Democracy, ed. John Bowlin, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 162.

⁵⁶¹ Mouw, *The Challenges of Cultural Discipleship*, 142.

Embracing our Generous God's Diverse Unity

One of the positive features of God's eschatological future is a vision of the many nations surrounding the throne of Heaven and in unity giving praise to God—this too is an outpouring of God's generosity for his people. Our posture of generosity pours into the ways we live into our future described in Revelation 7. In contrast to the Tower of Babel story in Genesis 9, where diversity was the result of self-serving ends, Revelation 7 illustrates that God's design is for people of every tribe and tongue and nation to be unified in their diversity, and the spirit of this unity is oriented towards praising God. In contrast to the Babel story, we see the Spirit working towards a diverse unity. Barnard Anderson writes: "The longing to connect to the whole is to coexist with identity in a language group. Unity is not to be at the expense of cultural diversity, nor is diversity to prevent unity."⁵⁶²

Because our eschatological future is a diverse multi-ethnic gathering of people worshipping the Living God, then it sets the template for how we view our current context.

Jenkins notes how this diversity is already being reflected in the global church:

Already today, the largest Christian communities on the planet are to be found in Africa and Latin America. If we want to visualize a 'typical' contemporary Christian, we should think of a woman living in a village in Nigeria or in a Brazilian *favela*... Soon, the phrase 'a white Christian' may sound like a curious oxymoron, as mildly surprising as a 'Swedish Buddhist.' Such people can exist, but a slight eccentricity is implied.⁵⁶³

This diversity is not forced or manufactured but expresses God's Spirit at work continually calling his people to cross barriers, which would have previously separated us from each other. First CRC is historically a mono-ethnic congregation. Often, those who have not had Dutch background have had a more difficult time fitting in. Of course, the CRC story cannot be

⁵⁶² Anderson, as cited in Moynagh and Harrold, *Church for Every Context*, 174.

⁵⁶³ Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*, 2–3.

understood without the influx of Dutch immigration, but it can no longer depend on it either. It follows then, like the early church in Acts 15, we don't need to begrudge our history, but it is necessary to identify the *culturally specific markers* for a Dutch Reformed believer. As we are better aware of these markers, we can better identify what it means to be a faithful follower of Jesus in the multiethnic, pluralistic, postmodern context we find ourselves in.

There are, however, signs of slow movement towards greater diversity as we seek to be more attentive to our geographical context in East Vancouver.⁵⁶⁴ It is slow because to this point those coming from other backgrounds have felt welcomed, but the expectation is that they conform to the Dutch CRC way, rather than allowing their perspectives and insights to impact our collective behaviour.

One example of this slow movement and a willingness to allow the dominant culture to be adapted, can be seen in our leadership. Although ethnic representation on our church Council has been limited through the past ten years, we have adapted our structured *Robert's Rules* practice to include a circle discussion in various parts of our meetings. This is in part, because Mark Charles, a Navajo friend, taught me another model for discernment which sought to ensure everyone had adequate opportunity to speak. In the context of those meetings, Mark's frustration was evident because the pace of discussion and highly structured agenda of the denominational board meant this particular indigenous approach was largely ignored. Upon returning to Vancouver, I sought to incorporate what I learned from him and to continue learning ways to be more attentive to leaders on our own council who find the *Robert's Rules* format foreign and restrictive. Though our meetings are still guided by *Robert's Rules*, and do not entirely reflect the Navajo way, each meeting now begins with a circle discussion and concludes with key points

⁵⁶⁴ At a worship service with another East Vancouver congregation a few years back, the other pastor made a Dutch joke in reference to First CRC and with the exception of our family, the other First CRC people who were there we all non-Dutch including the last names Bacon, Danielson, Wan Lim, and Pritchard.

of discernment which sets the tone for communal discernment. This adapted model has begun teaching us a more patient and diverse approach to deliberation which seeks to ensure that those who have a different approach to discernment have the opportunity to be heard. Newbiggin pointed out how vital it is to have mutual growth and correction through diversity because it helps us recognize our own blind spots:

All our reading of the Bible and all our Christian discipleship are necessarily shaped by the cultures which have formed us...The only way in which the gospel can challenge our culturally conditioned interpretation of it is through the witness of those who read the Bible with minds shaped by other cultures. We have to listen to others. This mutual correction is sometimes unwelcome, but it is necessary, and it is fruitful.⁵⁶⁵

Generosity towards Shalom:

With a picture of the generosity of God before us, alongside the marvelous diversity of his body, we see God's plan for his people. His desire is that we might steward his generosity through the diverse gifts of his body, *for the sake of making him known to all nations*. God's promise to Abraham makes this clear—the Lord promised to bless Abraham and through him, all the nations. As Israel lived into the Mosaic law, the blessing to the nations was not a monetary one, but one that communicated what it meant to be truly human by experiencing right relationship with God, with each other and with their physical world. This is what Jesus alluded to when he said we were to be a light to the nations. As we embrace our *telos* we behold life as God intends for it to be, and promises us that it *will be* in the fully redeemed New Creation. We do not always apprehend God's generosity towards us, but it is this picture of wholeness and abundance and the flourishing of all creation that grounds us in our kingdom witness.

As a community of faith, we hold a vision of shalom and the generosity of God, and this permeates every aspect of life. Kreider notes various ways this vision was lived out in the early

⁵⁶⁵ Newbiggin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 196.

New Testament church, where distinctive community rhythms modeled a particular way of doing business; pursuing sexual discipline; encouraging intergenerational/diverse relationships, manifesting the Spirit of God’s life-giving power to heal and caring for the vulnerable; resisting infanticide by adopting babies; advocating for life; and living out their faith in Christ, which did not compel or force conversions.⁵⁶⁶ Through such examples Christians modeled a way of life and witness that transformed the lives of those around them, which eventually permeated every aspect of culture.

How do we take what was modeled for us in the New Testament expression of the church and embody the same impulse in our context? Here the Transformational framework of *structure* and *direction*, or *design* and *spirit* is valuable.⁵⁶⁷ Because all of life has the potential to give God glory or to detract from his glory, we can envision what shalom and a generous picture of life can look like in each situation we find ourselves in.

We saw in Acts 1 and 2 (Chapter 3) that all of creation was designed by God and therefore oriented towards shalom. Though sin marred all of creation God’s good design has not been completely lost—there remain what N. T. Wright calls *echoes of a Voice* of “the longing for justice, the quest for spirituality, the hunger for relationships, and the delight in beauty.”⁵⁶⁸ Because God did not abandon His creation, but came to creation in Christ that it would be redeemed and made new, this enables us to approach each aspect of life with the question of how has this been created towards shalom and to give God glory. From there, we are better able to evaluate the spirit in which a particular activity is done.

⁵⁶⁶ Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*, 96–120.

⁵⁶⁷ Wolters, “What Else Must Be Done Towards a Neocalvinist Agenda?,” in *Comment Magazine*, Dec. 1, 2005, <https://www.cardus.ca/comment/article/282/what-is-to-be-done-toward-a-neocalvinist-agenda/> (Accessed April 15, 2017). In this article, Wolters recognizes that “structure and direction” are less helpful terms in today’s context and with some hesitation offers “design and spirit” as an alternative.

⁵⁶⁸ N.T. Wright, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 3.

Just as the early church wrestled with issues of sexuality, so we too are confronted with similar issues in our context. In late 2017, Hugh Hefner died, leaving behind a legacy where his empire had contributed to “liberating” sexuality from the confines of old, stuffy morality. Just weeks after his death, however, North America was swept into the #metoo movement after allegations were made against Harvey Weinstein, which called for a public accounting of those who had been accused of sexual harassment, perpetrating unwanted sexual advances or engaging in outright sexual abuse. Weinstein took Hefner’s sexual liberation, made it much more self-serving and manipulated women into silence. In the former movie producer’s wake were many others who were accused and held to account. In this time of accounting where courageous victims have named injustices, few have drawn the connection between the *Playboy* founder and the destructive pain-filled stories of those who had been (and continued to be) objectified for self-serving ends. It turns out that what seemed to be life-giving and “generous” picture of sexual freedom actually stifled life and led to greater pain.

As people who are oriented around God’s purposes of shalom, we recognize that God’s design for sexual intimacy was to occur in the context of committed trust and mutual vulnerability. However, the #metoo movements point out the tragic consequences for us when the spirit of sexuality is twisted for the self-serving purposes of the powerful. We also need to face the fact that the same destructive behaviour is present in the church. Tragically, a subsequent movement #churchtoo has confirmed how widespread abuse also took place at the hands of Christian leaders and other followers of Jesus. How can we be kingdom witnesses in light of this? Alongside pointing to shalom verbally, we also need to attend to the crisis within our own community to re-experience a renewed, shalom-saturated vision of sexuality. In the midst of the fallout of #metoo and before #churchtoo emerged as a movement, some women in

our congregation hosted a conversation circle for other women in our neighbourhood. In that context, the women in our congregation were able to acknowledge the reality of sexual abuse and its impact, but offer a more positive picture of sexuality as God intended us to experience it, rooted in right relationship with each other.

The reach of the *design* and *spirit* construct is not limited to this crisis but is immensely helpful to discern injustices in every aspect of life and can give God's people the picture of shalom which we can experience and embody in our witness to our neighbours.

Generosity and Vulnerability:

In the co-authored book *The Suffering and Victorious Christ*, Mouw and Sweeney identify a polarity between Christ as Victor and as the Suffering Servant. Mouw observes that our ontology is the starting point of whom we believe God is, which sets us on a trajectory for how we seek to be faithful in our way of life. The Calvinist emphasis on God's otherness, the uniqueness of Christ's sufferings and the grandeur of his post-resurrection and ascension transcendence, impairs the Transformationalist from also acknowledging Christ's vulnerability and suffering. This then disables us from acknowledging these same realities in our current condition.⁵⁶⁹ This 'blind spot' is reflected in our kingdom witness, as we tend to direct our energies to places of influence, rather than going to the places of overt vulnerability. As a corrective, Mouw calls Reformed believers to recognize how vital it is to allow a picture of Jesus as the Suffering Servant to animate our way of life and witness.

As we look at the life and ministry of Jesus, we see his generosity as an overflow of the abundant life he shared in fellowship with the Father, his words and actions are invitations for us to experience that same Spirit-saturated, abundant life. Moreover, when we look at the people

⁵⁶⁹ Richard J. Mouw and Douglas A. Sweeney, *The Suffering and Victorious Christ: Toward a More Compassionate Christology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013).

Jesus directed these invitations toward most often, we see that they were the vulnerable and the outcasts. What Jesus modeled so clearly has been a consistent call from God to his people—from the Mosaic law and the voices of the prophets, to the tangible deeds in the book of Acts, we recognize that as we attend to the vastness of God’s generosity towards us, his generous love will flow through us to those the Lord has put in our paths. This means God’s people will always be involved with the marginalized and vulnerable. The Transformationalists’ triumphal approach, of working for the King, has made it too easy for us to forget our King is also the Suffering Servant. There are, of course, many other ways God has revealed himself, but it is important to recognize that Christ as the Suffering Servant calls us as kingdom witnesses to orient our care around the vulnerable individuals in our midst.

There are consistent voices to come alongside the marginalized for God’s kingdom and witnessing to his shalom. In addition to establishing a strong diaconate in Geneva, Calvin challenged the decadence of the Roman Catholic bishop’s practice of holding so much wealth by expressing his concern with how God’s people manage their money: “The church has not gold to keep, but to distribute, to give support in necessity. What need is there of keeping what is of no benefit?”⁵⁷⁰ As well, Kuyper’s public theology was forged in a tumultuous time in the Netherlands where poverty in Amsterdam was overwhelming and the health and safety of workers were being jeopardized daily.⁵⁷¹ Our denominational roots for *Citizens for Public Justice* and *Christian Labour Association of Canada* find their roots here and it is easy for families of successful immigrant families to distance ourselves from the on-going work of frontline advocacy and journeying alongside the marginalized and the vulnerable.

⁵⁷⁰ Calvin: *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book IV, 1076.

⁵⁷¹ Kuyper, *The Problem of Poverty*, preface.

Generosity for the needy and the least of these is certainly a mark of our congregation.

The vision of shalom continues to call us further and deeper. Our offerings for benevolence draw on the long-standing rhythm of the church that the offering be used for the good of those in need within our congregation and beyond. Justin Martyr described this well:

To those who are absent a portion is sent by the deacons. And they who are well to do, and willing, give what each thinks fit; and what is collected is deposited with the president, who succours the orphans and widows and those who, through sickness or any other cause, are in want, and those who are in bonds and the strangers sojourning among us, and in a word takes care of all who are in need.⁵⁷²

Our congregation has people in need, as well those who are well to do, simply because they have stable housing and employment. Beyond the gathering of offerings, other expressions of sharing God's generosity include the weekly meal we enjoy with many who suffer from food insecurity, as well as the distribution of \$100+ Welcome Baskets to newly arrived refugee families. However, beyond the monetary actions, we also recognize the ongoing importance of mercy, justice and advocacy. James K.A. Smith notes how the offering (and, I would add, other tangible related expressions) are an outflow of kingdom economics rooted in God's generosity.

The liturgical practice of the offering indicates that Christian worship—which is a foretaste of the new creation—embodies a new economy, an alternative economy ... The Sunday offering in gathered worship is not disconnected from other systems of commerce, distribution, and exchange.⁵⁷³

In our post-Christendom world, it will be increasingly important to attend to the way our posture of generosity benefits those most vulnerable. This posture of generosity, alongside the postures of humility and hospitality, continue to call us forward to the future God has planned and is calling us to live into. This leads us to our fourth posture—the posture of imaginative hope.

⁵⁷² Justin Martyr as cited in Meyers, *Missional Worship, Worshipful Mission*, 181.

⁵⁷³ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 204–5.

D. Posture 4: Hope and Imagination—Seeing the world through the lens of God’s shalom

As we move forward in our understanding of a congregational kingdom witness hermeneutic, taking seriously our social and cultural context, our starting point is the eschatological reality that is breaking into this world. A theology of the new creation properly orients us to be more attentive to the *already* of the kingdom, which began when Jesus rose from the dead and will be completed when God makes the new heaven earth in which his children will live.

N.T. Wright argues that with this reality as our starting point we avoid three common pitfalls of evangelism: Gnosticism, individualism, and moralism.⁵⁷⁴ First, because God reaffirmed the importance of creation through the incarnation and then in the resurrection, it rejects the Gnostic contempt for creation and encourages engagement with creation. Second, evangelism is rightly understood as the announcement of the good news of the kingdom, which avoids any overly-individualized faith of “me and my salvation” and rather draws us into God’s purposes for the cosmos. Although a vital aspect of salvation is being restored to a right relationship with God, it is not exclusive. As Goheen writes, “Salvation goes much further: it restores the whole life of humankind and ultimately of the non-human creation. Biblical salvation embraces this grand scope.”⁵⁷⁵ Finally, because evangelism with new creation as the starting point draws believers into the lordship of Christ over every dimension of life, faithful living in the kingdom will better integrate belief and behaviour, both in word and in deed.⁵⁷⁶

Participating in God’s Mission with Imaginative Hope

⁵⁷⁴ N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*, (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 228.

⁵⁷⁵ Michael W. Goheen, *The True Story of the Whole World: Finding Your Place in the Biblical Drama*, Reprint edition (Grand Rapids: Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2009), 159.

⁵⁷⁶ Goheen, *The True Story of the Whole World.*, 228-9.

We are being drawn into God's mission, a mission whose source, sustenance and conclusion is in him:

It is thus by an action of the sovereign Spirit of God that the church is launched on its mission. And it remains the mission of the Spirit. He is central. It is the Spirit who initiates the first mission to the Gentiles and guides the missionaries in their journeys.⁵⁷⁷

David Bosch helpfully noted the difference between God's mission and our participation:

We have to distinguish between *mission* (singular) and *missions* (plural). The first refers primarily to the *missio Dei* (God's mission), that is, God's self-revelation as the One who loves the world, God's involvement in and with the world, the nature and activity of God, which embraces both the church and the world, and in which the church is privileged to participate. *Missio Dei* enunciates the good news that God is a God-for-people. *Missions* (the *missions ecclesiae*; the missionary ventures of the church) refer to particular forms, related to specific times, places, or needs, or participation in the *missio Dei*.⁵⁷⁸

Goheen has articulated the various approaches of churches to God's mission, outlining the distinctive approaches of the Protestant Ecumenical, Protestant Evangelical, Roman Catholic tradition, Eastern Orthodox, and Pentecostal traditions each with its unique approach.⁵⁷⁹ The CRC's approach to mission aligns mostly closely with the Protestant Ecumenical tradition, though as noted in Chapter One, it also has echoes of the Protestant Evangelical approach to mission as well.

Synergy with the Protestant Ecumenical tradition is exemplified with the CRC participation, with the World Council of Churches' approach to missions, particularly the CRC in Canada. The Protestant ecumenical approach shows an ongoing commitment to a holistic witness by addressing social, economic and political issues, which, although a commitment to

⁵⁷⁷ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 58-59.

⁵⁷⁸ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, New edition (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 10.

⁵⁷⁹ Goheen, *Introducing Christian Mission Today*, 165-85.

evangelism is expressed, social action has often “eclipsed a commitment to evangelism”⁵⁸⁰ because of concerns of “justice, peace, and the threat of environmental and ecological disaster.”⁵⁸¹ Goheen notes the vulnerabilities of this approach include: (1) giving priority of *missio ecclesiae* over the *Missio Dei*, where the world’s needs dictate the church’s agenda, and thus “marginalizes the church and downplays its distinctiveness”;⁵⁸² (2) given the widespread cooperation between faith-based and non faith-based groups, this approach risks “the problem of syncretism”⁵⁸³ as those who work towards contextualization, and (3) giving minimal attention to worldwide evangelism.⁵⁸⁴ Christian Reformed participation in this missional approach is marked by participation with social action organizations such as *Kairos*, *Citizens for Public Justice*, *Cardus* and *Christian Reformed Centre for Public Dialogue*; participation in ecumenical circles within the *Canadian Council of Churches*, and international ecumenical efforts; as well as through the denominational international relief organization *World Renew*.

As our Transformational tradition needs to attend to these strengths and vulnerabilities, we also need to pay attention to the fact that we are also distinct from those in the Protestant Evangelical Tradition. The focus of this second Protestant approach to mission, reveals a greater emphasis on evangelism. The *Lausanne* meetings in 1974, 1989 and 2010 emphasized: “the whole church taking the whole gospel to the whole world.”⁵⁸⁵ The emphasis of the evangelistic task is prominently on world evangelization through verbal proclamation.⁵⁸⁶

⁵⁸⁰ Goheen, *Introducing Christian Mission Today*, 167.

⁵⁸¹ Goheen, *Introducing Christian Mission Today*, 167.

⁵⁸² Goheen, *Introducing Christian Mission Today*, 167.

⁵⁸³ Goheen, *Introducing Christian Mission Today*, 168.

⁵⁸⁴ Goheen, *Introducing Christian Mission Today*, 168.

⁵⁸⁵ Goheen, *Introducing Christian Mission Today*, 169.

⁵⁸⁶ Goheen, *Introducing Christian Mission Today*, 170.

Priority for evangelism took priority over social concern, which Lausanne I sought to address. However, the vulnerabilities of this approach include an overly individualistic treatment of the gospel and viewing salvation as individualistic and solely based in the future, to the neglect of the “cosmic and corporate dimensions of the gospel.”⁵⁸⁷ While the CRC has not actively participated in the Lausanne Congress, the CRC was represented through the participation of its missionaries, Ruth Padilla-deBorst, Anne Zaki, and missiologist Michael Goheen.

As I seek to articulate a teleological vision towards God’s kingdom purpose in the world, the Ecumenical and Evangelical approaches both point out the vulnerabilities of the Transformational tradition, but also its strengths. In a sense, the Christian Reformed Church has been situated uniquely to glean the best of both worlds. Certainly, this tension has meant that leaders are pulled in a tug-of-war between two distinct approaches to global mission. This tension has also sought to ensure that in ecumenical circles, Christian Reformed believers seek to maintain the centrality of Christ and recognition of verbal proclamation are maintained. While evangelicals constantly argue for a commitment to a gospel that is also cosmic, the ecumenical approach often attends to how God’s kingdom is *already* being expressed in its current *not yet* contexts. The ultimate goal is to draw on the strengths of each while avoiding the pitfalls associated with each approach. Goheen summarizes: “If an evangelical stress on the individual proclaims a personal relationship with Jesus without a kingdom, an ecumenical emphasis on society offers a kingdom without the person of Jesus.”⁵⁸⁸

Imaginative Hope with the “Already” of the Kingdom

⁵⁸⁷ Goheen, *Introducing Christian Mission Today*, 170.

⁵⁸⁸ Goheen, *Introducing Christian Mission Today*, 241.

A significant aspect of Imaginative Hope involves recognizing how we view the world and what we believe is happening within it. In Luke 4:18-19, we see Jesus' self-understanding, as he recognized the centrality of his involvement in the in-breaking of the kingdom of God: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me." The Spirit-led work of Jesus paints a holistic picture of God's kingdom. He was not merely announcing the Good News; he was making visible the Good News of the Kingdom. In his ministry Jesus claimed that God's kingdom was *already* in their midst, and yet he also was pointing his followers forward to the fullness of the kingdom not yet complete. It is important to note here, that the incompleteness of the kingdom is not that Christ is incomplete, but rather his presence and God's reign are veiled.⁵⁸⁹

Regarding the *already* of God's kingdom, if heaven is where God's reign is complete and earth is the place which awaits its complete restoration, then already we witness in the life of Jesus pockets of heaven breaking into our experience on earth. Already heaven is emerging in our midst, as the two worlds are overlapping in Jesus and in the Holy Spirit.⁵⁹⁰ This conviction gives us, as kingdom witnesses, the motivation and urgency to participate in kingdom work now, not only because it is the right thing to do, but because we have been sent to carry on Christ's ministry. Jesus said, "you will do greater things than this" and while the 'things' Jesus was referring to are still a matter for debate, we can see that because God's people in each generation and in all places, the 'things' are greater quantitatively because the incarnational limits Christ took on in his person are no longer relevant, as his Spirit is poured out on all of God's people in all places.

Because the Kingdom of God is already partially revealed, our imaginative eschatological hope "must remain relevant to *this* world—and that means relevant to this world's cities and

⁵⁸⁹ Darrell Johnson, Advent Sermon on Revelation 22, Regent College audio.

⁵⁹⁰ N.T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone: Part 1, Chapters 1-12* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 12, 34.

their concrete social, racial, economic, and ecological problems.”⁵⁹¹ That is, we ought to emphasize the continuities between what is proclaimed in our hope and what we seek to do today because kingdom mission must be relevant to the times and places where God’s kingdom witnesses live.⁵⁹²

However, God’s kingdom is not yet in its fullness here. Goheen argues that the reason for the delay of Christ’s return is because God’s mission is not yet complete:

The meaning of this ‘overlap of the ages’ in which we live, the time between the coming of Christ and His coming again, is that it is the time given for the witness of the apostolic Church to the ends of the earth. The end of all things, which has been revealed in Christ, is—so to say—held back until witness has been borne to the whole world concerning the judgment and salvation revealed in Christ. The implication of a true eschatological perspective will be missionary obedience, and the eschatology which does not issue in such obedience is a false eschatology.⁵⁹³

Imaginative Hope in the “Not Yet”

I noted in Chapter Three how the Transformational approach tends to emphasize the Triumphant aspect of Christ the King to the exclusion of Christ’s passion and his suffering on the cross. To faithfully acknowledge the ‘not yet’ of the dialectic, we need train our eyes to recognize suffering as much as we train our eyes to see the goodness of God’s kingdom in our midst.

Ann Thakkar has argued convincingly that the Western Church tends to minimize, and in some cases, outright deny the reality and consequences of suffering.⁵⁹⁴ Suffering is not limited to

⁵⁹¹ Peter Goodwin Heltzel, *Resurrection City: A Theology of Improvisation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2012), 8. Heltzel cites Martin Luther King: “It’s all right to talk about ‘long white robes over yonder’...But ultimately people want some suits and dresses and shoes to wear down here. It’s all right to talk about ‘streets flowing with milk and honey,’ but God has commended us to be concerned about the slums down here, and his children who can’t eat three square meals a day. It’s all right to talk about the New Jerusalem, but one day, God’s preacher must talk about the New York, the new Atlanta, the new Philadelphia, the new Los Angeles, the new Memphis, Tennessee. This is what we have to do.”

⁵⁹² Goheen, *Introducing Christian Mission Today*, 27.

⁵⁹³ Goheen, *Introducing Christian Mission Today*, 50.

personal and familial problems but occurs on so many levels. Suffering also persists as a result of natural disasters, and increasingly through complex societal and political realities, often exacerbated by the North American lifestyle.

How do we rightly respond to the ‘not yet’ realities of our world and in our own lives? An imaginative hope which acknowledges the incomplete nature of God’s kingdom in our midst must begin with Christ. In Christ, God entered into the multifaceted suffering of creation. Jesus spent the majority of his ministry coming alongside people who were weighed down from the effects of suffering. In his ministry he advocated and challenged systems of injustice, protected the vulnerable and gave renewed dignity to those whose lives were spent in bondage to suffering. Indeed, he was much more—he was a friend, a teacher with a new authority, and a healer.

An imaginative hope will live in the midst of the tension between what is and what is yet to come, seeing things like physical healings, for example, as small inklings or a foretaste of the fullness of the healing to come in new creation.

In the previous section we applied *design* and *spirit* to a generous picture of life in light of injustices. This Transformational construct is helpful in not only resisting injustices, but also in pointing towards a new future. Although God has always been the same, the wonder of the Incarnation demonstrates the way God is moving all of creation toward wholeness, through what William Webb calls a *redemptive hermeneutic*, illustrated most clearly in the status and role of slaves and women included amongst God’s people.⁵⁹⁴ Webb points out that compared to the nations surrounding Israel, God’s law ensured (comparatively) some rights and protections to slaves and women. Following the thread further, God’s people practiced less severe punishment

⁵⁹⁴ E. Ann Thakkar, *Practices to Facilitate Faith Amidst Suffering* (D.Min. thesis, Vancouver, BC: Carey Theological College, 2015).

⁵⁹⁵ See William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics Of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006).

for slaves and abandoned the practice of polygamy. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Apostle Paul writes that in Christ the former distinctions of Jew and Gentile, men and women, slave and free no longer hold any weight. This redemptive hermeneutic, argues Webb, carries beyond the pages of Scripture towards a complete picture of shalom, illustrated through examples such as Wilberforce and his advocacy for the abolition of slavery or through many denominations affirming women into the full expression of leadership within the church.⁵⁹⁶

Imaginative Hope with Our Neighbours:

The posture of imaginative hope not only helps us recognize how God's Spirit is propelling us towards a future marked by a yet-to-be-realized shalom, as well as the ways God's design has become misdirected, it also helps us appreciate how to dialogue with our neighbours who might not have a positive view of the future. Ben Agger notes,

Postmodern consciousness is, if not pessimistic about the future, skeptical about millennial claims, such as about the inevitability of 'Progress.' This questioning, if not nihilist, as it too frequently is, can become a vehicle of sociological self-consciousness, as people ask whether their lives are meaningful—and indeed why their lives are the way they are, given over to many hours spent working and the rest devoted to inauthentic leisure activities such as spending and shopping.⁵⁹⁷

Holding out imaginative hope to our neighbours, prone to nihilism and distraction, is not easy. As a pastor in this context, I have learned, particularly in times of personal or collective crisis, nihilism can be suspended, and an openness emerges, enabling people to listen to a more hope-filled message. I am referring here to celebrations of life/funerals where the practice of imaginative hope can challenge the hopelessness of nihilism. Our first response when situations

⁵⁹⁶ Webb notes that this *progressive hermeneutic* does not apply in all situations and his interpretation of Scripture is that regarding same-sex orientation within Scripture, God's Word is static on the matter. A pastoral response to that matter is not as straightforward as he suggests, because this matter is not simply an issue to be debated but includes people who need to be loved. Nevertheless, I find his hermeneutical approach a helpful way to still approach the Scriptures as God's revealed Word and recognize a forward-movement towards shalom.

⁵⁹⁷ Ben Agger, *Postponing the Postmodern: Sociological Practices, Selves, and Theories* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002), 7.

such as these arise is to come alongside those in grief and offer comfort; that is, to be *with* our neighbours in the midst of their adversity. This is part of the world of grace which joins us to a common human story.⁵⁹⁸

The challenge for us as God's people is to recognize the times to listen and the times to speak. Anyone who has experienced crisis will know that what is most needed is the gift of presence. However, in the context of crises there can be occasions where a more hope-filled picture can be a balm. That said, we must still be faithful and not offer false hope. On the occasions of leading services for a neighbour whose faith background was uncertain, I could not with integrity promise their loved one had "gone to heaven." Instead, I focused my message on how each of us responds to this loss and to take this experience as a sober reminder of how we see the trajectory of our lives unfolding. Congregations may only be called on occasionally to lead services like this, but holding out imaginative hope to our neighbours is something each one can do when moments of openness present themselves in the lives of our friends, co-workers, or neighbours.⁵⁹⁹

4. Practices for the Two Natures of the Church:

The Transformational tradition has continually reinforced the Calvinist emphasis of the church's dual nature—who we are as the institutional church and the organic church.⁶⁰⁰ Bavinck described that this twin construct of the church is able to capture the who of God's intent for his people. The Institutional church, particularly in the rhythms of gathering for worship are where

⁵⁹⁸ Mouw, *The Challenges of Cultural Discipleship*, 142.

⁵⁹⁹ Even more, an openness extends to the places of suffering our neighbours recognize including reconciliation with indigenous Canadians, injustices around the world, as well as the ecological crisis. Looking at these same troubles through the lens of shalom, we can affirm our neighbours in their work of resisting the injustices.

⁶⁰⁰ See Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, 2009), 288; and "Common Grace" in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James Bratt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1998), 187-201.

God's people encounter God's transcendence and our response is to treasure the pearl of great price. The organic church, in which the worshipping community continues being the church, is where God's people bear witness to God's kingdom transformation. Here our response is to see our role as leaven for the glory of God.⁶⁰¹

Two particularly helpful insights are instructive as we explore the church's role as kingdom witnesses: (1) First, Bavinck says that the church must hold both the pearl and leaven, but "the pearl must be first"⁶⁰² which addresses a vulnerability for missionally-engaged congregations of being so absorbed in mission and witness that the role of worship is neglected, and (2) he says, "as an *organism*, [the church is] the leaven that uses special grace to enrich the nation's pre-existing common grace."⁶⁰³ So whether the congregation is gathered together as the institutional church or dispersed as witnesses of transformation our lives are lived before God. However, it would be a mistake to simply view mission as an add-on activity of the church. Like Israel, through election, we are by nature a people who steward a vocation of mission.

In Chapter Three, I cited Paul Hiebert's argument for being a centred-set community and suggested that the church's public presence ought to be more porous. Our Sunday morning worship services should seek, as an articulated goal, to be a centred-set expression where we recognize that the people present in our services are at varying stages in their beliefs and so in their capacity to be kingdom witnesses in their daily living. That said, I also suggested that there remains a role for a bounded-set function for the institutional church, which connects with Newbigin's distinction of dimension and intention. Michael Goheen summarizes that while

⁶⁰¹ James Eglington, "To Transcend and Transform" in *The Kuyper Center Review, Vol 3: Calvinism and Culture* ed. Gordon Graham (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 177.

⁶⁰² Eglington, *To Transcend and Transform*, 181.

⁶⁰³ Eglington, *To Transcend and Transform*, 180.

everything the church does has a missional dimension, some aspects of ministry give a more overt expression to mission. The difference is:

between mission as a *dimension* of the Church's whole life, and mission as the primary *intention* of certain activities. Because the Church *is* the mission there is a missionary dimension to everything the Church does. But not everything the Church does has a missionary intention'; certain activities can be considered to have a missional intention when they are 'an action of the Church in going out beyond the frontiers of its own life to bear witness to Christ as Lord among those who do not know Him, and when the overall *intention* of that action is that they should be brought from unbelief to faith.'⁶⁰⁴

There are indeed certain practices which more are specific to sharing good news with others and inviting them into the life of God. And there are also specific practices which seem focused only on the institutional church, but still flow into our church's missionary nature. For example, our elders have inherited a practice of visiting each congregant annually, which has been a way of providing pastoral care and encouraging spiritual maturity. However, when done well, even these visits feed into a dimension of being kingdom witnesses. Although Klaas Schilder rejected Bavinck's interpretation of common grace, he did understand how even elder's visits feed into the church's role of public witness.

Blessed is my *wise* ward-elder who does his home visiting in the right way. He [sic] is a *cultural force*, although he may not be aware of it. Let them mock him: they do not know what they are doing, those cultural gadabouts of the otherside!⁶⁰⁵

We do not often think about the church's two natures, but Kuyper recognized that there were *kairos* moments when we do well to think about them. I quote him at length:

Anyone entering a house in ordinary times is not thinking about the foundation on which it rests; and so also in Jesus' church there can be times when people dwell together and labour together, hardly bothering themselves about any principles. But in times like those we are now experiencing, now when in every area the foundations are being undermined, now when everything is pressing

⁶⁰⁴ Goheen as cited in John Stott and Christopher J. H. Wright, *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2015), 46–47.

⁶⁰⁵ Mouw, *The Challenges of Cultural Discipleship*, 133. Schilder is viewed by Christian Reformed people as a schismatic force in the Dutch Reformed churches which resulted in the Canadian Reformed Church.

down to the depths and people are proceeding restlessly to pry the deepest principles loose, now in these times it would be all too naïve, all too negligent, for people to sidestep the issue of principles any longer.⁶⁰⁶

I began Chapter 1 with an analogy of an earthquake shaking up what is familiar to us in the church and in the world. As we pay attention to the foundations which are being undermined in every area of life, it is vital to recognize that it is not enough to be reminded of our purpose and encouraged to embrace the postures of humility, hospitality, generosity and hopeful imagination. As we live out of who we are as God's kingdom witnesses, it is also necessary that we recognize the importance of reinforcing sustaining practices for who we are as the gathered church, as well as the sent church.

A. Communal Practices for the Gathered Church

Mark Lau Branson notes the importance of covenant communities sharing life together so that God's story continues to shape their individual and shared identities. Branson underscores the practices of worship and faith formation:

As communities initiated and continually shaped by the Holy Spirit, congregations are *people on the way*. They share a common memory (borrowed from texts and generated in their own common life), a common hope (both eschatological and as *chronos* imagery), and a present life of committed practices. They share relative intimacy, proximity, and permanence; and as those traits are reduced, there is often a sense that New Testament texts are somehow distant or irrelevant. A congregation's shaping takes place in the midst of societal and cultural and individual forces.⁶⁰⁷

Practicing Worship

At the time of baptism, each family with a new baby is given a Bible. If the child is the firstborn, they are given *The Jesus Storybook Bible*, which has a subheading *Every Story Whispers His Name*. We have sought to encourage that from infancy the children of our

⁶⁰⁶ Abraham Kuyper, *Rooted & Grounded: The Church as Organism and Institution*, Kindle Edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Acton Institute for the Study of Religion & Liberty, 2013), Loc. 722.

⁶⁰⁷ Branson, *Ecclesiology and Leadership for the Missional Church*, 112–13.

congregation are drawn into our generous God's story. It is our prayer that as the children are regularly immersed in the Story, participate in Communion and discover ways to serve, even at an early age, that they will become aware of how their stories are a part of God's Story. When the children reach an age where they seek to make a profession of faith themselves, we will also stand alongside and support them.

When we began serving at First CRC Vancouver in 2007, I did not have the same appreciation for rhythms of worship that I do now. I have grown to appreciate that liturgy need not be a stiff and rigid constraint on true worship (however, it does become that when removed from its teleological intent!). So now when I ask the congregation for their promise to help raise their child in faith, I remind us all that no one is just watching a baptism, everyone there is participating in the sacrament. And in a unified voice, we all join together saying, "we do, God helping us," from older kids sitting on the stage, other young parents, singles, middle-aged adults and even seniors declaring their desire to help raise the child in the ways of faith.

The purpose of our coming together as a congregation is to once again become re-storied into our God's world of immeasurable grace. Throughout the week we are confronted with other ways to find our value and worth, but for a little more than an hour on a Sunday morning we allow God's Word to recalibrate our internal GPS, as we encounter the Source of humility who "became nothing, taking the very nature of a servant." His hospitality draws us into communion with Father, Son and Spirit, whose generosity is "immeasurably more than all we could ask of imagine," and whose hope-filled knowledge of God's purpose for creation made him decide, "for the joy set before him, to endure the cross." In his second Cultural Liturgies book, *Imagining the Kingdom*, James K.A. Smith writes:

Worship needs to be an incubator for the imagination, inviting us into 'the real world' by bringing us aesthetic olive leaves from the kingdom that is coming,

helping us envision what it would look like for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. We will absorb this eschatological vision of shalom in ways that elude our awareness, and the Story will be incorporated into our bodies on an aesthetic register. Thus the whole of Christian worship must embody this guiding Story in multivalent ways so that it becomes part of our background and thus sanctifies our perception. Christian worship should send us out with new knowledge and information, as well as a renewed feel for the world, a transformed 'practical sense.'⁶⁰⁸

What an image! Afloat in the chaos of a post-everything world, as we gather together in worship, the Spirit gives us an eschatological olive leaf of God's in-breaking kingdom. This happens even when we are not aware, imparting courage and joy and a renewed vision to us.

We can see how worship accomplishes this. Like the olive leaf, worship forms "goods" as described by MacIntyre, which are core to our identity as a community. Through our cooperative practices a communal spirituality is formed in us, which reminds us of who we are and, more importantly, who God is.⁶⁰⁹ In this, we also rediscover the importance of communal worship, as the cooperative act of coming together is the heart of where the transformation takes place.

This is not, of course, how we always experience shared worship. When we get bored or the liturgy feels stale we often think that the problem is with the structure or the way it is being communicated. Church Planting consultant Stuart Murray describes frequent conversations with church planters who are quick to "dismantle inherited patterns of worship, then (usually two years later) re-appropriate many abandoned practices...[they] begin to appreciate why these have stood the test of time."⁶¹⁰

On the other hand, just because these practices have been handed down does not make them automatically right. Sin impacts tradition:

⁶⁰⁸ James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 178.

⁶⁰⁹ Simon Chan, *Liturgical Theology: The Church as Worshipping Community* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2005), 154.

⁶¹⁰ Stuart Murray, *Church After Christendom* (Milton Keynes: STL Distribution North America, 2005), 207.

If given too much weight, it can stifle the local gathering ... Tradition [emerged] often by critiquing what went before. It must be open therefore to further interrogation, arising from the Spirit's presence in new settings.⁶¹¹

If we have a negative association with a worship tradition we need discernment to avoid prematurely abandoning it. Similarly, we must avoid giving an unhealthy weight to a tradition of worship simply for the sake of nostalgia. Our expectations for how worship should *feel* and what should be communicated gets more complex when we add missional expectations to the dimension of the worship service. John Witvliet describes countless times when he has navigated conversations with churches who seem stuck because worship is seen to be in opposition to mission, and innovation is pitted against tradition. A way to move the conversation forward is to reframe our expectations: "What is needed is to envision worship services infused with mission, informed by traditioned innovation, and hold the theoretical along with the practical."⁶¹²

In our cultural context, where membership and affiliation are a fluid reality, mission has become an integral consideration for worship to serve as "public witness." Lois Barrett observed that in worship, "the public horizon declares God's reign in the world, sustains the worshipping community, and is the source of identity and purpose for the public life of the congregation."⁶¹³ Here the practice of worship is made visible to others and often accommodations are introduced to make what goes on in worship accessible and comprehensible to all.

It is a challenge to lead a congregation in our context. Some observations by Scott Frederickson aptly capture the difficulty. He says that there is pressure from within that the received tradition of worship is no longer adequate, and now there is an evaluative function built into each worshipper's "experience" and we hope to pass their internal evaluation so they will

⁶¹¹ Moynagh and Harrold, *Church for Every Context*, 365.

⁶¹² John Witvliet, forward in Meyers, *Missional Worship, Worshipful Mission*, viii-x.

⁶¹³ Lois Y. Barrett, *Treasure in Clay Jars: Patterns in Missional Faithfulness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2004), 100–116.

remain loyal. More than that, in addition to offering spiritual care and personal concern for our members, there is the added responsibility of doing the same for all visitors and neighbours.

There is also the increasing challenge that denominational ministries lack connection to people and their needs. He concludes, “This has led to a great change in the ecclesiastical landscape across all contexts and communities in North America.”⁶¹⁴

Fatigue quickly sets in if we give into the frenetic activity these expectations can create. Although we cannot fully escape this pressure, it can be freeing when we discover what the missional dimension can add, and what it cannot. Worship can give spiritual seekers a window into our God-defined world. Jim Kitchens argues:

Worship is our primary opportunity to offer people another perspective on the world, another way to imagine life: a way of life shaped by the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of the One we call the Christ. One hour a week may not be much to work with, but we have to make the best use of what people will, at least in the beginning, give us.⁶¹⁵

However, worship is also much more than a window for the spiritually curious to peek into. First and foremost, “worship is for God’s people an encounter with the Living God who loves us, and who offers those in Christ a destiny of unsurpassable riches and unspeakable gifts.”⁶¹⁶ Eugene Peterson continues,

But these are not things we can know from the outside. That’s where the false advertising comes in—when we try to talk about these things to the outside as if they are publicity to get people interested in God. They aren’t items of publicity; they are invitations to explore that which can be looked at from the outside, but can only be entered by the inside.⁶¹⁷

⁶¹⁴ Frederickson, *Missional Congregations in Context*, 58.

⁶¹⁵ Kitchens, *The Postmodern Parish*, 45. Kitchens notes “postmodern people are more interested in their experience of, rather than their understanding of, worship [so] we need to think about what experience we are providing them in our liturgies. 45.

⁶¹⁶ Eugene Peterson, *Soul Craft*, Disc 4.

⁶¹⁷ Eugene Peterson, *Soul Craft*, Disc 4.

It is in worship where first and foremost, we are transformed, where we are re-storied and reminded of the character of the Triune God. As we encounter the One who made us and entrusted us to be light to a dark world, we discover again that our mission originates in him:

God enters the world and in love and grace God sends Jesus, the Holy Spirit, churches, even kings and asses into the world so that the world will know and be drawn to life and allegiance.⁶¹⁸

Practicing Faith Formation

Alongside worship, the second vital communal practice I will explore is Spiritual Formation. The importance of discipleship and faith formation as a communal practice cannot be underestimated. However, its role is less defined and has more variance than our times of gathering for worship. I will use Mark Lau Branson's definition: "nurtured by worship, word and mission; it is shaped in festivals, small groups, spiritual friendships, and families; it benefits from pastoral care and private disciplines."⁶¹⁹ Shared spiritual formation at First CRC encompasses our worship services, our children's Sunday School and Catechism, Small Group meetings, as well as the spiritual retreats we have offered. Spiritual formation is nurtured personally by our members and lies behind our fellowship and pastoral care ministries.

It is in the role of faith formation where the Holy Spirit personalizes identities even more, as he attends to our blessed stories and also our broken stories, and sets within us the uniqueness of how we are being called as witnesses to his kingdom through our vocations, interests and the unique contexts we find ourselves.

Faith formation practices are shared practices, designed to supplement our personal nurturing of faith, although as central as those rhythms ought to be, it is alarming to learn of a significant drop-off in the personal practice of devotions and prayer. It is alarming because the

⁶¹⁸ Branson, *Ecclesiology and Leadership for the Missional Church*, 110.

⁶¹⁹ Branson, *Ecclesiology and Leadership for the Missional Church*, 110.

force of other influences numb our attentiveness to what is happening and to what we need to grow in our faith. Our appetites and desires, insecurities and aches, our drive towards productivity, even how we approach time and greet the day are malleable and when we are not intentionally being continually formed in faith we become misshapen and drawn away from the Story for which we were created.

In our small congregation we seek to support each person at each milestone of faith and seek to reinforce the communal nature of our life with Jesus. However, I also recognize that we could be better at clarifying the pathway towards faithful discipleship and reinforcing the linkages between our Children's Ministries and our Small Groups, particularly as they relate to our worship and the connection each of these have to the overall spiritual maturity congregants need to be equipped and willing to step into congregational leadership.⁶²⁰

An aspect of spiritual maturity uniquely pertinent for Reformed believers is the “common Anabaptist assertion that Reformed Christians were not as disciplined as they were, and that Reformed Christians too quickly entered into cultural involvement.”⁶²¹ Mouw draws on Klaas Schilder to serve as a corrective—a man who is often dismissed as too conservative for Christian Reformed believers. Schilder criticized other Reformed Christians for being too quick in their cultural involvement and inconsistent in discipline within the church. He calls for rigour in discipleship and rigour in cultural discernment for the people of God to “live out their obedient patterns of cultural life.”⁶²² While congregants might protest such an assessment, there is an element of truth in his words. As mentioned in Chapter 3, we recognize the challenge of walking such a fine line, but believe that God calls us to be faithful in both worlds.

⁶²⁰ See Moynagh and Harrold, *Church for Every Context*, 351.

⁶²¹ Mouw, *The Challenges of Cultural Discipleship*, 134.

⁶²² Mouw, *The Challenges of Cultural Discipleship*, 134.

Our moral identity as a church must consciously be given shape by who we are as disciples of Jesus Christ, not by who we are as members of society. The agenda of the church is set by the Christian story and not by any other story. Therefore the church's identity cannot be determined solely by the urgency of matters forced on us by the world...the church's identity is determined by what in essence it is. The church's character is seen in everything it is and does ...The church is moral by how it exists, by how it trains its members to exist and even by what it refuses to do.⁶²³

The spiritual formation I have in view here is holistic discipleship where each one, regardless of age, is continually learning to be formed into the image of Christ, in every dimension of their lives in order that they can pursue right relationships with God, each other, neighbours, and creation.⁶²⁴ To this end, the church must take the lead, which calls for a substantive shift in how the Transformational concept of sphere sovereignty is to be applied.

The concept of sphere sovereignty was introduced to ensure each aspect of life maintained its God-given autonomy and to protect one sphere from lording influence over another, such as happens when the state directs the church in how it ought to act. However, today the sphere of family seems a shadow of its former self and Mouw argues that:

the church must compensate for that weakness, at least as a temporary remedial strategy...[Because it and other spheres] cannot draw on the more robust worldviews and confessional identities that once pervaded the culture, the church needs to make a special effort to focus on areas of concern that are not, strictly speaking, items in its original sphere-portfolio.⁶²⁵

Mouw draws on the insights of Ronald Thiemann to argue for churches to have congregations operate as “schools of public virtue” to ensure that the community forms “the kind of character necessary for public life.”⁶²⁶ This learning must be personal, accessible training

⁶²³ Huebner, Harry, *Church as Parable: Whatever Happened to Ethics?* (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1993), 180.

⁶²⁴ Lois Thiessen Derkson, *Holistic Discipleship: Pedagogy Towards Wholeness*, MTS thesis Regent College, 2010, 1.

⁶²⁵ Mouw, *The Challenges of Cultural Discipleship*, 28–29.

⁶²⁶ Mouw, *The Challenges of Cultural Discipleship*, 32.

grounds for kingdom witnesses in the way Matthew Boulton described Calvin’s goal for the church: “The church [ought to be] a gymnasium, a training ground, a school, and community of preparation and practice enrolled (we hope and pray) in God’s sanctifying, transformative paideia.”⁶²⁷

Here we see potential connection to the church’s vision being supported and reinforced by covenanting practices similar to New Monasticism. Interestingly, the reason Reformed believers were historically resistant to monasticism was because of its exclusivity, yet as Calvin desired that all believers in Geneva lead lives marked with the same discipline modelled in the monasteries of his day.⁶²⁸

What this type of school of virtue ought to look like in First CRC’s context will demand careful thought and great effort. One such model is the *Leadership Development Network*, a BC-wide, three year training ground for lay leaders where there is intentional Scripture study, support and accountability, as well as connecting this learning to each person’s context. This model is deeply compelling, but at this point is limited in its effectiveness because of limited participation. But we are called to be formed by Worship and then embodying his Word at work in the culture with postures of humility, hospitality, generosity and hopeful imagination. This begins in worship, because as Smith argues, “Worship isn’t just something we do; it is where God does something to *us*. Worship is the heart of discipleship because it is the gymnasium in which God retrains our hearts.” And just as gyms are places of training, we carry this muscle memory into our kingdom living. May we be faithful in this call.

⁶²⁷ Boulton, *Life in God*, 229–30. See also Smith, *You are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016), 65.

⁶²⁸ Boulton, *Life in God*, 230.

Spiritual Formation deepens the life together of the congregation. Krieder's book, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church* serves as a reminder that throughout the history of the church, the rhythms of a worshipping community involve being with each other and taking care of each other. They were not called the family of God without reason.

The gift of being intergenerational means that there are a variety of experiences our various members are going through at anyone time. Some are welcoming infants into their families, others are going through crises, suffering and grief, some are feeling vitalized while others are preparing for their last moments in the old creation. As a people who are centred together on the practices of worship and faith formation, we discover how everything in our experience becomes the stuff of our faith. We hold a common confession and belief, and in our journeying together, we discover how grace permeates each of our stories. I have witnessed countless times when some in our community have been strong when others have been weak, some giving encouragement when others have faced times of despair. And I have marveled at the deep faith and courage still others have shown when confronted by the grave, acknowledging our true and final healing can and will only be when Christ returns to redeem what he made, loves and sustains. By God's grace, we are not alone in this life. These various experiences are what Mouw describes as the churches under the cross: "laughing and weeping as we wait for the New Creation."⁶²⁹

Through the practice of mutual hospitality our common identity is reinforced. With the practice of generosity, the practical needs of the vulnerable are attended to by others who recognized the blessings God had entrusted to them. But beyond hospitality and generosity, with shared lives there is also care. As we saw earlier in this chapter, each posture we explored first

⁶²⁹ Mouw, *The Challenges of Cultural Discipleship*, 68.

shapes and forms us as a community of faith. Then we are enabled to express this posture outwardly, a missional community. The two practices of worship and spiritual formation are central to the shared rhythms of the gathered church. And as we have noted, the shared practices feed directly into the communal practices of the sent church. In the words of Barrett in *Treasure in Clay Jars*, we are a congregation, given identity and purpose from our loving God. And when we discover what is happening in our practices of worship and spiritual formation, we discover how central they are to the *Missio Dei*—letting “God’s mission permeate everything... from worship to witness to training members for discipleship.”⁶³⁰

B. Communal Practices for the Sent Church

i. Practicing “Breathing”

The rhythms of gathered worship and scattering to our various places each week is like breathing. With worship we inhale—we are literally inspired by encountering God’s presence and being re-storied into his purposes. And then as we leave, going about our various activities throughout the week, we exhale this God-inspired life wherever we go.⁶³¹ This makes the last minutes in our worship service so important because they represent a moment of the church’s two natures overlapping, moving from institutional to organic. James K.A. Smith writes:

The ending of Christian worship, then, is a *sending*. Having encountered God in Word and sacrament, we are transformed and renewed and empowered by the Spirit to take up once again the original vocation of humanity: to be God’s image-bearers *by* cultivating all the possibilities latent in God’s creation, now renewing and restoring a broken, fallen world. Drawn into union with Christ, the ‘end’ of Christian worship is bound up with our sending for Christian *action*, rightly ordered cultural labor, the creational task of making and remaking God’s world.”⁶³²

⁶³⁰ Barrett, *Treasure in Clay Jars*, x.

⁶³¹ Mike Cosper, *Rhythms of Grace: How the Church’s Worship Tells the Story of the Gospel* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 35.

⁶³² Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 5–6.

This is a sending—not a moment where we take a deep breath ourselves to muster our own strength for the tasks ahead. Of course, much effort on parts will be required, but it is not only mustering our *own* strength. We do not manufacture God’s mission anymore than we make God come into our presence. The work is the Lord’s and our vocation is to midwife his mission by being attentive to the signs of his kingdom and describing the reality to those who are witnessing these life-altering events.⁶³³

As a way to deepen the attentiveness of what is happening at the sending, before I speak the words of benediction, I often invite the congregation to think about the week ahead—the things they anticipate as life-giving and life-depleting, as well as the people and places they will encounter. This brief exercise reinforces the confidence that God is going before us, that the stuff of life, work and home has value, and that we are once again entering into God’s mission as his kingdom witnesses.⁶³⁴ Following this, I have the privilege to proclaim God’s blessing, often the Aaronic blessing which invites those with the eyes to see God’s face shining upon us as his people who steward his message of life.

ii. Practicing Incarnational Living

Along with the practice of breathing –inhaling and exhaling, we also practice incarnation. David Bosch wrote that mission is “the good news of God’s life, incarnated in the witness of a community for the sake of the world.”⁶³⁵ Or in the words of Terri Martinson Elton,

The mission is that a communal, sending God calls and sends the church to be a witness to the reign of God, proclaiming and living this good news incarnationally. This is the church’s reason for being; this is the center to which the church clings,

⁶³³ Daryl M. Balia and Kirsteen Kim, *Witnessing to Christ Today* (Edinburgh: OCMS, 2010), 15.

⁶³⁴ I adopted this idea from Matthew Kaemingk, who shared it in a session “Connecting Your Work to Worship,” Calvin Worship Symposium 2016, Grand Rapids, Mi.

⁶³⁵ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 519.

for God has called the church to join in this mission of redeeming and transforming the world.⁶³⁶

Bolt cautions that incarnational language confuses Jesus' ministry as if the church is seeking to duplicate Jesus' healings, atonement, death, resurrection and ascension.⁶³⁷ This is not what I have in view here. With Jesus' physical presence now in heaven,⁶³⁸ the church is the Spirit-filled presence of Christ on earth—his body who are called to:

mirror not only [Jesus'] identification with culture, but also his mission in community within ordinary life, his community's Good Friday fragmentation and Easter resurrection, his letting go and sending out, and his completion of all 'places' when he returns...they bear the fingerprints of Jesus when they enact these themes.⁶³⁹

To understand the Incarnation in its fullest sense is to seek to understand the whole of Jesus' life where he limited himself to being in a particular place and a particular moment in time. For us, this means that practicing incarnational living means that we are called to be attentive to the particular context we have been placed, as we discover the importance of being kingdom witnesses for our neighbours, coworkers, family and friends.

Lamin Sanneh has noted how translation is a deeply contextual process, where the translator is looking for meaningful ways of explaining ideas and truths. Here the translator searches cultural concepts and communicates them on their own terms.⁶⁴⁰ Incarnational living seeks to do that work of translating the Good News to each unique context and the challenge is to be faithful to the Gospel while still being relevant to the culture, and without being

⁶³⁶ Elton, *Corps of Discovery*, 149.

⁶³⁷ Bolt, Nichols, and Taylor, *Bavinck on the Christian Life*, 80–81.

⁶³⁸ Jesus became a human being and when he retained his humanity with his ascended and resurrected body, God sent his Holy Spirit to maintain Christ's divine presence with us. Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 49 <https://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/confessions/heidelberg-catechism>

⁶³⁹ Moynagh and Harrold, *Church for Every Context*, 192.

⁶⁴⁰ Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989), 192–209.

syncretistic.⁶⁴¹ Sanneh is instructive here in noting the difference between *diffusion* and *translation*: Much of the global mission strategy is marked by diffusion as the missionary culture becomes the carrier of the message which perpetuates a colonial and proselytization approach, whereas a deeper conversion emerges through translation of the language but also the cultural concepts.⁶⁴² Though Sanneh draws on global missionary methods, these concepts impact what it means for God's people to bear witness to his message in this context as well. Given the resistance to overt evangelistic efforts in Vancouver today, it is crucial that evangelism is reimagined to "being present in people's situations and sharing our lives with them. Only then do we earn the privilege to speak to them about Jesus."⁶⁴³

There is an internal barrier each congregation must overcome to live incarnationally. It is the temptation to withdraw to a place where:

care is directed towards the 'faithful', largely by the provision of regular opportunities for worship. The justification for the life of the Christ is then found in itself, instead of in its mission in the world...[in this,] the local congregation is carrying the burden of a divine commission which it is not, in the present state of society, able to bear.⁶⁴⁴

Tim Dickau has advocated for how congregational leaders ought to lead by example which means that incoming clergy should choose "to live in the neighbourhood of the church building [as a way to declare] that they are willing to embrace this particular place, as an expression of the incarnation reverberating from Christ."⁶⁴⁵ My wife, Julia and I, have lived 600 metres from First CRC for eleven years. Many of our neighbours know us as the pastors of the church, even though they have never set foot in it. One such neighbour who passed away last

⁶⁴¹ Goheen, *Introducing Christian Mission Today*, 270.

⁶⁴² Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 33.

⁶⁴³ Goheen, *Introducing Christian Mission Today*, 244.

⁶⁴⁴ World Council of Churches, *The Church for Others, and the Church for the World. A Quest for Structures for Missionary Congregations*, (Geneva, WCOE Publishing, 1969), 29-30.

⁶⁴⁵ Tim Dickau, *Plunging into the Kingdom Way: Practicing the Shared Strokes of Community, Hospitality, Justice, and Confession* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 9.

year used to stop whatever haphazard bit of raking or sweeping he was doing to call out to me as I was heading his way. His distinctive, “Helllooo Reverend!” often reached me half a block away. When he died, his wife, who had also not previously set foot in our church, asked me to speak at his funeral service—a gathering of a few friends and family at the Legion Hall as people played billiards and other games. Into that tender situation, I was able to speak a word of grace. He loved our neighbourhood and took care of it the best way he knew how, and God loved him.

Practicing Shalom:

As we take seriously the practice of inhaling and exhaling our life in God and the practice of incarnational living, we are led into practicing shalom. The church holds Jesus’ ministry as our template and we see that his multi-faceted approach brings shalom, as he bore witness to the Father, modelling selfless love and service, standing up for justice, bringing healing and restoration, as well as reconciliation, freedom and peace. As the church, empowered by his Spirit, we envision this same wholeness in our community. Verkuyl has said,

a Kingdom-centered theology worthy of the name is concerned with every aspect of life and society. Often in the history of the Church and theology Jesus has been—and in some cases continues to be—proclaimed *without* His kingdom. In the face of proclamation, it should not come as a surprise to discover people attempting to find the Kingdom and salvation without Christ.”⁶⁴⁶

Pursuing shalom means setting an eschatological -shaped hope as the template for our lives, confident that Jesus’ work of redemption encompasses the whole of life. J. H. Bavinck said:

The gospel of grace presents norms for the reordering of all human relationships - it contains the seed of a new society. It gives us a new conception of state and it grants light upon social problems and upon the principles of science. The work of Jesus Christ cannot be split; we cannot share his redeeming grace without giving obedience to His royal word. It is not possible to be a Christian at home and to

⁶⁴⁶ Johannes Verkuyl, as cited in Goheen, *Introducing Christian Mission Today*, 95.

surrender the world about us to the destructive influence of sin. Whoever belongs to Him belongs to Him in the complete greatness of His work.⁶⁴⁷

Calvin provides us with an example of working towards shalom. In Geneva Calvin was concerned with town planning and sewage systems “out of his concern for the well-being of the social life”⁶⁴⁸ of the citizens and criticized the rich who were the source of oppression in the city saying:

If they were able, they would have a sun all to themselves in order to say that all the others have nothing in common with them...[The rich] would change the whole order and nature so they could swallow everything.⁶⁴⁹

The challenge for those who practice shalom is to first notice the consequences of individualism, consumerism, globalization, secularism and social disparity and inequity. It means being attentive to voices such as William Cavanaugh who observes that a mark of a consumer culture is the “ability to turn virtually anything into a commodity.”⁶⁵⁰ Even more, it also means listening to the Holy Spirit’s convictions pointing out the places where we are complicit in destroying shalom. The problem is not simply ‘out there’, as if we can blame others who have more power or more money for society’s ills. Rather, it means humbly identifying our own anti-shalom impulses and behaviour.

Despite our complicity, God still entrusts to each of us the mandate to cultivate and sustain creation. Holding before us a picture of shalom, which will be fully realized in the New Creation, we discover our task and calling. Klaus Bockmuehl wrote: “the cultural mandate

⁶⁴⁷ J.H. Bavinck, as cited in Goheen, *Introducing Christian Mission Today*, 229, 231.

⁶⁴⁸ Matthew Kaemingk, “Theology and Architecture: Calvinist Principles for Faithful Construction of Urban Space” in *The Kuyper Centre Review, Volume 3: Calvinism and Culture*, ed. Gordon Graham (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2013), 51.

⁶⁴⁹ Kaemingk, *Theology and Architecture*, 57.

⁶⁵⁰ Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed*, Loc. 395.

means house-holding or stewardship in creation, husbandry in nature; this is participation in God's own work of sustaining his world."⁶⁵¹

For us in Vancouver, it means incorporating the pursuit of *avad and shamar* in the midst of the city's concrete maze down the many avenues of God's call on his people. Like Jeremiah's letter to the exiles in Jeremiah 29, in order for us to bloom where we are planted, we need to seek the peace of the city to which we have been sent. And if we are to pursue shalom incarnationally, then we need to attend to the realities of the city in our midst. As the global phenomenon of rapid urbanization increases, it is vital that God's people are present and embedded in those places.

Roger Greenway noted that the missional presence of Christians in urban centres is:

an urgent and serious need [because] cities determine the destiny of nations, and their influence on the everyday affairs of individuals is incalculable. As cities grow in number, size, and influence, it is incumbent on those responsible for world evangelization [to make this a priority.]⁶⁵²

And Ray Bakke has said:

Mission is no longer about crossing oceans, jungles and deserts, but about crossing the streets of the world's cities. From now on, nearly all ministry will be cross-cultural amid the urban pluralism caused by the greatest migration in human history from Southern hemispheres to the North, from East to West and, above all from rural to urban."⁶⁵³

So, for us who live in this city, living well here means that we are attentive to all that is happening around us. We need to pay attention to Augustine's observation that each city "organizes its political affairs around its deepest love"⁶⁵⁴ while Kuyper observed that housing can be used to keep the marginalized on the periphery.⁶⁵⁵ This means that some will be called to the

⁶⁵¹ Klaus Bockmuehl, "Spirituality: Recovering Vocation Today" in *With Heart, Mind & Strength: The Best of CRUX, 1979-1989*, ed. Donald Lewis (Grand Rapids: Credo Publications, 1990), 84.

⁶⁵² Roger S. Greenway and Timothy M. Monsma, *Cities: Missions' New Frontier*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), xi.

⁶⁵³ Ray Bakke, *A Theology As Big As The City* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2006), 13.

⁶⁵⁴ Kaemingk, *Theology and Architecture*, 51.

⁶⁵⁵ Kaemingk, *Theology and Architecture*, 56.

role of advocacy or working with the political spheres in a socially responsible way. Others might support the work of justice more indirectly, having a passion for beauty, as that too reflects shalom. As Wolterstorff said,

The tragedy of modern urban life is not only that so many in our cities are oppressed and powerless, but also that so many have nothing surrounding them in which any human being could possibly take delight. For this state of affairs we who are Christians are as guilty as any. We have adopted a pietistic-materialistic understanding of man, viewing human needs as the need for a saved soul plus the need for food, clothes, and shelter. True shalom is vastly richer than that.⁶⁵⁶

We hold before us the conviction that we “have been called to provide our world with a preview of God’s coming kingdom...[which pulls us] forward by hopeful expectation of the kingdom to be revealed when Jesus returns.”⁶⁵⁷ This is where our inhaling in shared worship propels us into this work of witnesses.

Faith that burns within the walls of the church “shines out through its windows to areas far beyond, illuminating all the sectors and associations that appear across the wide range of human life and activity...Justice, law, the home and family, business, vocation, public opinion and literature, art and science, and so much more are illuminated by that light, and that illumination will be stronger and more penetrating as the lamp of the gospel is allowed to shine more brightly and clearly in the church institute.”⁶⁵⁸

One final note on practicing shalom. The manner we go about this practice is as important as the content of our efforts. Ephesians 6 reminds us that we are at war with the forces continually working against God’s vision for shalom, but in this war, we follow in the footsteps of the One who overcame power with love. Bavinck’s caution is fitting:

In this ongoing struggle which the gospel of Jesus Christ is called to continue to wage against sin, the church is permitted to use only those spiritual weapons consonant with its own nature. The weapons of coercion, power, riches, might, flattery, and hypocrisy are forbidden to her. The only legitimate weapons are

⁶⁵⁶ Kaemingk, *Theology and Architecture*, 59.

⁶⁵⁷ Michael Goheen, *The True Story of the Whole World: Finding Your Place in the Biblical Drama*, reprint (Grand Rapids: Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2009), 159.

⁶⁵⁸ Kuyper, as cited by John Hines, *Distinct Discipleship*, 158.

the Word and faith, truth and righteousness. These weapons alone are powerful for God.⁶⁵⁹

V. The Last Word: Where to next?

Our house is located at Trout Lake, near a very short section of Templeton Drive. The Grandview Cut prevents the road from going to the North. In Vancouver's earlier years, the road used to travel directly South, but when the park surrounding Trout Lake was expanded, the road was replaced with a walking path. An elderly man in our church who was born in a little house on the road that used to run past the lake has described how different the park looks compared to the one he knew as a boy. He used to play in the reeds in knee deep mud, to his mother's dismay. There were hardly any trees. Today, for us to travel through the park toward the old Copley Orchard on East 19th, we now follow the picturesque path that was created by city planners. There is no evidence that a street ever existed there and the park is filled with beautiful large oak, maple and willow trees that had not been there previously.

In this project, I have sought to follow a well-trod path by attending to our Transformational history, while recognizing the new social and cultural context that our congregation now finds ourselves in. Following the path has allowed us to draw on the wisdom of those who have gone before us with a recognition that the way we will journey now must look different because the landscape is different and the roads that travel there have also changed. It is my prayer that though different, the path remains faithful to the ways God is leading us to live as kingdom witnesses.

I conclude this project with a letter for First CRC of Vancouver:

⁶⁵⁹ Bavinck as cited by Bolt, Nichols, and Taylor, *Bavinck on the Christian Life*, 118.

Dear brothers and sisters of First CRC,

I am so thankful for you. For the journey we have been on together and for the glimpses of the kingdom in our midst! Your love and care for each other has been clearly on display and there are so many who have encountered Jesus' way in this place where we have been called.

When we initially accepted the call to be co-pastors at First CRC of Vancouver, I had no idea what a transformative journey our Triune God would have for us as a couple, and for me in particular. Just two years before we accepted the call, we had attended the CRC church-planter's assessment to discern what I felt was a deep call to engage in God's mission through church planting. At the assessment, we had to choose a specific neighbourhood and so we presented what a church plant would look like in the Trout Lake neighbourhood of East Vancouver. In the context of that presentation, drawing from all the fervour and idealism of a newly minted Regent College MDiv, I shared with fellow hopeful church-planters, "There actually is a CRC in this neighbourhood, but I could never work there...maybe work out of the building, but there would be way too much to do for it to become more missionally-engaged."

I'm humbled as I recall those words. On the church-planting front, I am not sure I had the temperament or the entrepreneurial drive to start a community from the ground up. Yet the church planter assessment was a gift to help me and us imagine what an outward-focused, kingdom-engaged congregation could look like. A greater gift is what I have, and continue to experience, at First CRC over these last eleven years. I was wrong in having prematurely written off the congregation as I soon discovered in the congregation's DNA deep care for each other which equalled a deep care for God's kingdom. You as a congregation have changed me and taught me a great deal. And, it seems that this pastor with a patient demeanour was better suited to work in an established congregational context.

In our journey together, the passion for participating in God's mission and kingdom did not lessen however. And while I have been corrected a great deal about my then-outsider conclusions about First CRC, one conviction has remained throughout—a posture towards outward kingdom mission is challenging to live into for an established Christian Reformed congregation. At the time, I believed the 'stuckness' was a wholesale resistance to innovation. We have learned together that change does not come easily in a context such as ours, because I believe that beneath that caution are deeper theological barriers that I have addressed in these pages which sometimes prevent faithful CRC congregants from fully embracing God's broader mission in the world. Some of this is due to how drastically the world outside the church has changed, but there are also parts of our tradition which I believe can create a logjam effect. In this project, I have sought to articulate those external social forces and internal theological factors as keys to unlock what is getting in our way from continually moving forward in a meaningful, God-glorifying way.

This project then is *descriptive* of what has been as it reflects the mutual learning we have shared since 2007 as we have witnessed Christ's renewing presence in our midst, and it is also my attempt at discovering our congregational voice and vision to continually become more un-stuck as we discern where the Triune God will be leading us in the future. As I look back, I am also reminded of the great many times where my impatience, lack of attentiveness or insensitivity have put up unnecessary barriers for others to experience the fullness of God's grace. Yet by God's grace, these years have been rich and mutually transformative, and devoid of significant controversy as we have patiently moved forward to better connect in our context. Through the rhythm of life together, we have learned, and continue to learn, the importance of humility, hospitality, generosity and imaginative hope. Some of our experiments did not

germinate, but we have also seen how some seeds have sprouted and matured and now give nourishment and beauty to our neighbourhood. In 2007, *Home Missions* asked CRC congregations, “If your church would close in your neighbourhood, would you be missed?” Today, we can describe many examples of how we would be missed because of the way our ministries have been addressing the needs of our neighbours.

But this project is also *prescriptive*—calling us further and deeper into what God has planned for First CRC. We have experienced the challenge of drawing our faith into conversations with our neighbours, and there are Spirit-led avenues for us to love our neighbours. May this prayer continue to invite us further and deeper to what God has in store:

For those of us and our neighbours who look for meaning in self-mastery, may we model what it looks like to learn to be mastered by Christ as an expression of our discipleship.

For those of us and our neighbours who are suspicious of institutions, may we recognize and name how this specific institution has been a stabilizing force in our neighbourhood because of the vitality of those within.

For those of us and our neighbours who are open to seeing a deeper goodness in the physical world around, may we model and describe our motivations to care for creation as we wait for the New Creation.

For those of us and our neighbours who work for justice, may we discern well and come alongside each other in times when the Spirit leads us to do so.

For those of us and our neighbours who are overwhelmed with suffering, may we open our eyes to see and have the courage to help carry each other’s burdens.

And in our decisions and our rhythms of living as the gathered and sent church, may we together witness to the cross and the crown of Christ's kingdom.

We have begun new ways of talking about our faith and church and our world. This is the work of re-appropriating: taking what has been handed down to us in faith and seeking to make sense of it in our social and cultural context. This process has helped us recognize the unique and good gifts we have been entrusted with and has also pushed us to wrestle with some of the challenging parts of our tradition's history. As we seek to adapt to a new reality, I will lean on Kuyper one last time.

In a tumultuous time for the church he encouraged his congregation to be faithful to the faith they had received. He said that appreciating the gift of faith handed down to them does not mean that church holds a faith frozen in time. Rather, development must take place in our confession, in our worship, in our governance, and in every activity of the church.⁶⁶⁰ I echo his conviction and trust our faithful God to continue drawing us deeper into his transforming life.

Imagine now, the places God has called you to be his kingdom witnesses. May this project be an inhale that inspires you to exhale the transformative presence of Christ:

As we each go to the places of our unique callings, may you remember that you do not go alone.

As you anticipate conversations with coworkers, neighbours and friends who are looking for meaning in other places, may you remember who you are as you point to Jesus in a winsome and humble way.

As you face the overwhelming fragmentation and loneliness, may you model a Spirit-led community and embrace the rich gift of mutual hospitality.

⁶⁶⁰ Abraham Kuyper, *Rooted & Grounded: The Church as Organism and Institution*, Kindle Edition (Grand Rapids: Acton Institute for the Study of Religion & Liberty, 2013), Loc. 744.

As you go into a world of need, may your work be rooted in the conviction that Jesus—the suffering servant and king—defines our reality as we witness his redemptive work breaking in around us.

As you go into a disorienting world, remember that God is our True North who will continue to direct our paths by instilling in us imaginative hope.

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APPENDIX: Small-group based Congregational Engagement Questionnaire:

Thanks to your small group for taking the time to consider this questionnaire!

As many congregants know, I am working on my Doctorate of Ministry (DMin) through Carey Theological College and I will be writing my thesis this year. The DMin program requires me to bring together scholarly research with the practical ways the ideas get worked out in the context of a worshipping community, and having Congregational input is a vital part of my research work.

Although this plays an important piece in my overall thesis, the primary reason you are being asked as a group to answer these questions is because I, along with First CRC's leadership, want to evaluate how well we all together understand the primary goals of who we are as a congregation in our times of being gathered, as well as who we are as we scatter each week to our homes, neighbourhoods, places or work, and other places where we spend our time.

Background to the DMin Project:

As Jesus' followers, we are all called to share the good news with those around us, but what does that look like? Our tradition has emphasized that our mission and outreach is not limited to spoken evangelism in helping people accept Jesus as their personal Lord and Saviour. While that is part of what we do, following the trajectory of Abraham Kuyper who believed Christ was setting to redeem every square inch of this universe, we also hold a holistic public theology that Christ is at work not just on rescuing our souls, but also restoring this world God made and loves, which includes all our relationships, societal structures, and the physical creation.

Abraham Kuyper and other neo-Calvinists worked in a largely-monoethnic, Christian-majority culture at the height of modernism where faithful followers of Jesus were to set up institutions to God's renewing work. We now find ourselves in a post-Christendom world that is culturally diverse, and a postmodern culture which is deeply suspicious of institutions. Which means that with all the changes, we cannot simply "copy and paste" everything Kuyper did into our current context. I am curious to see if and how that century old conviction of broad minded mission translates into our current cultural context, and how that might connect to our activity as the gathered church.

Instructions for your Small Group Input:

- In order to use your small group time most effectively, feel free to send these questions out to your small group ahead of time to invite personal reflection before coming together to answer these questions together.
- Begin by assigning a facilitator and a recorder. Recording this digitally would be helpful, but I will gladly receive handwritten input as well.
- Please answer after discussing each question. Some groups might take 30 minutes, others might choose to spend an hour or more on this. Your small group might want to discuss some of these questions more in subsequent meetings, but I ask that you answer these questions in one setting and have them returned to me by the end of June.
- In order to ensure each person has input on each question, spend a minimum of 10 minutes on *Questions 2-5* (use a timer if necessary), going around the circle and inviting each person's input. Various views should be recorded, and please note when a common theme emerges within your group.

The findings of this questionnaire will be very helpful for others in our congregation who are seeking to better understand the purpose behind our Christian living, and the role of First CRC's leadership to encourage, educate and equip congregants to this end. I very much look forward to reading your responses.

With gratitude, Pastor Trevor

Discussion Questions:

1. List how many respondents there are in your group, as well as the number of years each person in your group has been part of First CRC: (names are optional)
2. As a group, in one sentence summarize the following:
 - a. The primary goal(s) for First CRC as the gathered church is:
 - b. The primary goal(s) for First CRC as the sent/scattered church is:
3. Complete the Sentences.
 - a. When we are being well equipped to live as God's witnesses, describe what happens in... Our worship services, our small group meetings and/or other faith formation activities, Our shared outreach activities:
 - b. What are the barriers that might keep this from happening consistently?
4. Identify a challenge you experience in being a faithful witness in your home, neighbourhood, or workplace.
 - What do you want instead of the challenge/problem? (not just eliminating the problem, but thinking beyond the problem)
 - What would it be like if the problem were solved? What would you see, hear, and feel?
 - Imagine the problem is solved. What has been gained?
 - * If your group identifies multiple challenges, please be specific about the challenge and, if you have time, answer the questions for each challenge.
5. Think about the places of hurt, pain, disparity and injustice in your own neighbourhoods and in First CRC's neighbourhood. Now, imagine the places where we live and worship would be transformed by God's shalom (right relationships between us and God, each other, us and our neighbours, as well as us and our world).

Transformation is the hard, specific work of seeing that something that is wrong becomes right, something that is dark is brought to the light, something that is not yet is brought into being."
- Gil Rendle, *The Math of Mission*

What is a difference you believe God is calling us as a congregation to make within the next few years in your own neighbourhood?...In our church neighbourhood?

Describe what you imagine. Is it a personal change in attitude between people? A cultural change in how life is lived? A structural change around how property is used? (Answers will vary significantly here, but with each idea, please be as clear and specific as possible, regarding timeline and actual decisions.)