

Towards a Missional Ecclesiology

In the midst of significant social and institutional challenges, first in Brixton (London, England) and then in Sheffield (Northern England), the churches that I led not only grew numerically but also began to develop missional models of ecclesia that are now used in many other parts of the world.

In these missional contexts, my various staff teams and I first experimented and then applied the extended family models of ecclesia, which we believed most closely reflected the New Testament *oikos*. These led to what are now called Missional Communities in many parts of the Western Church. In those same British urban contexts; prompted by the impact of local social crises and my own reflections on the pre-passion mission narratives of the first disciples (Matthew 10, Mark 6, Luke 9 & 10), I discovered, taught and published 'The Person of Peace' strategy (Breen, 1991 (and 2015)), which is used around the world by many different missions organizations and in a wide variety of missional contexts.

At St. Thomas Church in Sheffield, by attending to this developing missional ecclesiology and praxis we saw the emergence of what has been termed a 'Minster Church' – combining both 'Roman' and 'Celtic' forms of ecclesia and mission first identified by John Finney in his book *Recovering the Past*.¹ It was here I saw an entire congregation released in mission across the city of Sheffield and beyond. Since then St. Thomas has become a model of the Missional Church Movement and a global center of training and vision for mission and discipleship.

Although these centers of mission have been the subject of much popular reflection and speculation, little has been attempted by way of scholarly analysis. In this paper, I hope to advance a method of critical reflection that will help Missional thinkers as they seek to strategize mission in other Western contexts and around the world. The fact that I have not been involved

in the leadership of either of these churches for more than a decade, means, I hope, that I have achieved the necessary distance for this reflective process to be of use.

Theologically I was formed by 1970s and '80s British Evangelicalism and as such I was profoundly influenced by a series of exceptional thinkers teachers and writers. This ensured that whatever praxiological solutions I would find to the complexities of the missional contexts to which I was assigned I would always start with asking how the proclamation of the gospel might be achieved or aided by any given strategy. One of the most influential voices to which I attended, among such greats as John Stott, Jim Packer, Michael Green and David Watson, was Dr. Anthony Thistleton and his 'Two Horizons' hermeneutic. This approach, (which appears to have influenced such contemporary theological luminaries as N.T Wright) suggests that we should seek to understand the social, cultural and religious context to which the text of Scripture is addressed as the first horizon of interpretation and the function of the text as it operates in our own social, cultural and religious context as the second horizon of interpretation in a comprehensive hermeneutical process.²

Whereas understanding the contexts to which the text of scripture was initially addressed was made possible by a host of scholarly and popular works, understanding the second horizon, the social, cultural and religious context to which we sought to address its message, proved much more complex and significantly under-resourced. Newbigin et.al. have demonstrated that the prerequisite for an effective proclamation of the gospel is, using the metaphor of the incarnation, the presence of the Christian Church within the wider community, but the local ecclesia cannot immerse itself into the fabric and daily intercourse of the wider social context if it does not understand it.

By auditing the local community needs in Brixton and asking a significant proportion of the local residents what they thought were the most important issues that the church should address as we sought to serve the needs the wider community, we ascertained that our work should begin among children, teenagers and single-parent households. We also discovered that although this very distinct urban community had many deeply problematic social issues—the highest infant mortality rate in Britain to name one—the vast majority of respondents rather surprisingly believed that trash and litter on the streets was the single largest social need.

We began our mission work, as best as we were able, with local initiatives in the schools and among young people, by offering a 'Care and Repair' service to single-parent households and a regular 'Praise and Litter March' through the community during the summer months.

In Sheffield, a few years later, working mostly among the large college population in the city, equipped with similar demographic and social surveys, I sought to extend the immersive model developed in Brixton. We invited a large group of young people, numbering between 12 and 35 people who reflected St. Thomas Church's principal audience, to join the staff team. By attempting to connect the daily lives of these young to the central issues of relationship and responsibility—often framed around the parallel biblical themes of covenant and kingdom—we began to discover what we needed to do to be effective in this largely unreached population of young people. The methodology led to many significant discussions and insights and a fairly continuous examination of the sociological, cultural and demographic resources available, as well as a review of many popular cultural artifacts that seemed to reflect the zeitgeist of this community. As we embraced our missional context, reflected in these young people's lives, a missional momentum emerged that proved highly significant and effective. In a few short years

St. Thomas Sheffield grew to be the largest church in England with a membership largely comprised of previously unreached Generation Xers.

As I have reflected on these remarkable times the question that has often exercised me is: what were my team and I actually doing as we attempted to think and act in this way? Clearly intuition was involved, but this is not particularly transferable or scalable and so usually cannot be repeated. And so, if our experience was to be of any benefit to other missional leaders, answering this question in a more specific, concrete and transferable way had to be attempted.

Until recently most of my attempts at crafting this answer have proved frustrating. I had no real framework beyond the most basic analysis for my practice in Brixton and Sheffield. But recently, with the help of Prof. Rick Richardson of Wheaton and Trinity, I have discovered what I believe may be the beginnings of an answer: I now describe my social and cultural field observations and their application to local mission as an attempt to engage ‘the sociological imagination.’

Following the recommendation of Richardson, I first encountered this concept a few years ago in the writings of sociologist Christian Smith. Much of Smith’s work has focused on the moral and social lives of contemporary American young people. Anyone reading Smith’s work can be left in no doubt that he intends to make sociological observations that lead to qualitative statements about the lives of American young adults. Unable to content himself with scientific descriptions alone, Smith raises concerns with which he believes all of us should be wrestling. And he draws his authority to do this from ‘the sociological imagination.’ For him this way of seeing can help to explain our world, our lives and the lives of others, as he says: “The sociological imagination seeks to understand the *personal experience of individual people*, on the

one hand, and *larger social and cultural trends, forces, and powers*, on the other, by *explaining each in terms of the other* (author's emphasis)."³

Smith's work, building as it did on the largest ethnographic survey ever attempted of the youth of America, required robust analytical tools; so, he activated 'the sociological imagination'. With this, he contends we are better able to understand the larger context of American life by observing it through the smaller frame of individual lives. Conversely, we are also better able to interpret the experience of individual Americans by observing them through the larger context of American social history. For him this provides the sociological clarity he seeks. In his footnote on the subject Smith cites C Wright Mills and his summation of the topic as "the intersection of biography and history" remarking that:

Mills meant that people need to develop the ability to see that our individual biographies are profoundly shaped by our social, cultural, and institutional environments – that our "personal" and "private" experiences are embedded within and profoundly shaped by our place in history and society. That is the general perspective that underwrites all sociological analysis and explanation.⁴

For Smith, clarity in understanding our social context can only be arrived at by using the twin lenses of the macro-social sweep of social and cultural history that encompasses each of our lives and the micro-social narrative that is particular to each of us.

After a decade of reflection on my work in England, I am now convinced that I was using 'the sociological imagination' at an intuitive level. With this in mind and enlisting the help of a variety of scholars I have now begun to teach a form of 'the sociological imagination' as an intentional process and as a method of accessing the lessons of my work in Brixton and Sheffield. I have been greatly encouraged by the expressed results of my students.

As mentioned earlier, 'the sociological imagination' first emerged, in the work C. Wright Mills. He was writing in the exciting and unsettling world of postwar 1950's America where the

rapidly changing social conditions were causing what he called ‘earthquakes of change.’⁵ To this Mills offered ‘the sociological imagination’ as a way of embracing disruptive change and at the same time interpreting the trends of the day and preparing for the future. Like many in his day he believed the world was ramping up towards a Third World War. Even given this overshadowing prospect, when Mills spoke of a social and cultural earthquake he had a broader perspective in mind. He wrote: “The very shaping of history now outpaces the ability of men to orient themselves in accordance with cherished values. And which values? Even when they do not panic, men often sense that all the ways of feeling and thinking have collapsed and that newer beginnings are ambiguous to the point of moral stasis.”⁶

For Mills, seismic change was causing even the familiar points of orientation to move on the moral map of society. The shaking of the cultural landscape was causing upheaval at every level; familiar ways of thinking and reflecting on the human experience needed a radical makeover. It appeared that something was needed to anchor our perceptions of the world and our reflections upon our own place within it. Responding to this and predicting that this new world of continuous upheaval would see the emergence of an age of information Mills continued:

What they need, and what they feel they need, is a quality of mind that will help them use information and to develop a reason in order to achieve lucid summations of what is going on in the world and of what may be happening within themselves. It is this quality, I’m going to contend, the journalists and scholars, artists and publics, scientists and editors are coming to expect of what may be called the sociological imagination.⁷

Mills believed that ‘the sociological imagination’ was not restricted to the ratiocinations of the Academy. When this imagination was made available to all, he believed it provided what was needed to guide the new world emerging from the rubble of seismic social and cultural change. He arrived at this position before Western culture was struck by the shockwaves of the Monterey and Woodstock music festivals, Beatlemania or the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Dr.

Martin Luther King Jr., a man landed on the moon, the Watergate scandal, defeat in Vietnam, the OPEC crisis of the 1970s, the emergence of Punk or Rap music, and Reaganomics or the fall of the Berlin wall. With almost prescient insight, Mills suggested a way to understand the world through a period of history that was so tumultuous it might otherwise have been interpreted as chaos.

By developing 'the sociological imagination' Mills offered sociology a way out from the dialectical standoff of the early 20th century, he was charting a new course of scholarly inquiry. For him 'the sociological imagination' offered an alternative to the 'Grand Theory' proponents who saw the macro-social context as the definitive viewpoint on the one side and the proponents of what he called 'Abstract Empiricism' which focused solely on empirical data on the other. Mills offered a third way: 'the sociological imagination' was the *via media* between the two scholarly positions. Now the arc of collective history *and* the details of individual biography could be held together. By recognizing the interplay between history and biography 'the sociological imagination' would arrive at the promised goal of cogent sociological analysis and what in another branch of the social sciences—anthropology—would be called a 'thick description.' As Mills put it:

We have come to know that every individual lives, from one generation to the next, in some society; that he lives out a biography and that he lives it out within some historical sequence. By the fact of his living he contributes, however minutely, to the shaping of this society and to the course of its history, even as he is made by society and by its historical push and shove. The sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society. That is its task and its promise. To recognize this task and this promise is the mark of the classic social analyst.⁸

We can see why Christian Smith, standing as he does so many years after C. Wright Mills' initial publication, is able to say with such clarity and authority that 'the sociological imagination' is central to the task of sociology. Mills has imbued all the social sciences with an

insight that, when carefully applied, can be used to great effect. The demonstrable usefulness of this interpretive framework throughout recent history has meant that any and all social commentators can use ‘the sociological imagination’ with confidence as a central tenant of social and cultural interpretation; hence its usefulness in our missiological reflection on the contemporary challenges of proclaiming the gospel.

Delving further into Mills’ use of ‘the sociological imagination’ we begin to see why this methodology, when applied correctly to the task of contextualizing the Christian gospel, can be so helpful. Mills suggests that this kind of imagination gives us a particular kind of capacity:

For that imagination is the capacity to shift from one perspective to another – from the political to the psychological; from the examination of a single family to comparative assessment of the national budgets of the world; from the theological school to the military establishment; from the considerations of an oil industry to studies of contemporary poetry. It is the capacity to range from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self – and to see the relations between the two.⁹

We are set free to embrace the insights of Emile Durkheim and Victor Hugo, Karl Marx and Charles Dickens, Jack Kerouac and Bob Dylan, Christian Smith and Bono. Each has a valid contribution to a comprehensive sociological analysis. Each has their value, and by the use of ‘the sociological imagination’ each offers insight to the other. By the use of this interpretive tool we can grasp what is going on in the world with which we seek to communicate as we define the intersection between biography and history. In fact, Mills would contend only with the binocular vision of the large and small picture will we gain the insight we desire.

During my years of experimenting with the intuitive use of ‘the sociological imagination’ in the various urban context in which I worked, I noticed that I would regularly have moments of insight or apprehension that seemed almost revelatory. My natural English diffidence kept me from sharing these more widely because I assumed my Anglican stable fellows would consider

me ‘beyond the pale.’ You can imagine my surprise when I discovered that Mills had predicted just such things occurring when the sociological imagination was activated.

The sociological imagination is the most fruitful form of this self-consciousness. By its use men whose mentalities have swept only a series of limited orbits often come to feel as if suddenly awakened in a house with which they had only supposed themselves to be familiar. Correctly or incorrectly, they often come to feel that they can now provide themselves with adequate summations, cohesive assessments, comprehensive orientations. Older decisions that once appeared sound now seem to them products of the mind unaccountably dense. Their capacity for astonishment is made lively again.¹⁰

In Brixton working within geographical parish boundaries that included a high-security prison built during the Victorian period as a penitentiary for London prostitutes, I came to the realization that many of the single mothers, who formed the larger part of the population of the parish, felt and functioned like the female inmates of a prison. As the history of the parish connected with the biographies of individual parishioners the awareness grew that the whole parish in some way functioned as women’s prison where single women often raised children alone and in terrible need. Whether this represented in the words of Walter Wink an ‘unmasking of the powers’¹¹ I did not know, but the proclamation of ‘liberty for the captives’ and ‘release for the prisoners,’ both extensive themes across the metanarrative of Scripture, seemed to be particularly effective in the lives of my parishioners.

In Sheffield, where years of industrial decline had led to high levels of unemployment and urban depopulation, fear—represented in various forms of individual and collective anxiety—seemed to be the order of the day. When the hugely popular ‘Blair Witch Project’ film came to the movie screens (1999 Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sanchez) of our city it was a simple task to inquire of the Gen Xers of my congregation whether they felt as though they, like the characters in the movie, were like young people lost in a forest surrounded by uncontrollable malevolent

forces that were pitted against them. Hearing the clear affirmative led me to the proclamation of a Gospel of ‘perfect love that casts out fear’ (1 John 4:18).

In both Brixton and Sheffield, the unveiling of the personal responses to the social, cultural, and religious contexts through the application of ‘the sociological imagination’ led to the communication and application of ‘Christus Victor’ as the preferable model of the atonement for evangelistic proclamation. Whether intuitively or intentionally grasped, the sociological imagination proved to be an excellent tool in the contextualization of the Christian message in my own work. Moreover, given that it so neatly matches Anthony Thistletons’ ‘Two Horizons’ hermeneutic, makes me find it even more compelling. The suggestion that clarity in biblical interpretation is found in combining both the large and small picture seems so nicely balanced with that of ‘the sociological imagination’ that it suggests both a fruitful scholarly pursuit and a praxiological usefulness.

Interestingly this binocular approach has emerged in other scholarly disciplines in recent years. Using a combination of scientific inquiry and historical and cultural interpretation Iain McGilchrist, speaking from the perspective of his own discipline of neuroscience, has postulated that we will better understand the world if we hold together the brain’s left hemispherical capacity to categorize and right hemispherical ability to contextualize. This is only possible, he contends, if we come to find a point of balance between the acquired skills of the left and right sides of the brain. McGilchrist argues that the hemispherical dominance asserted by the left—with all its empirical and syntactic abilities to categorize—has made it impossible for many in the contemporary world to fully grasp the meaning of life. Only when we hold together the large and small pictures offered by both sides of the brain are we likely to more fully understand our world and our place within it.¹²

By the use of an ancient tale told about a king and his vizier, McGilchrist suggests that the reason our world is so captive to the scientific and empirical and is so often devoid of the mystical and spiritual is because ‘the king,’ the right hemisphere offering the wisdom of contextualization, has been usurped by the left hemisphere, the vizier offering only syntax, data and category. As such we are ‘ruled’ by ‘the emissary’ rather than ‘the master.’ As McGilchrist puts it: “At present the domain – our civilization – finds itself in the hands of the vizier, who, however gifted, is effectively an ambitious regional bureaucrat with his own interests at heart. Meanwhile the master, the one whose wisdom gave the people peace and security, is led away in chains. The master is betrayed by his emissary.”¹³

Only when we hold together the small pictures of our left hemisphere and the big pictures of our right hemisphere do we have the ‘necessary distance’ to grasp and understand our world. Such a perspective does not control our value system but simply offers a more complete interpretation of the world by which we arrive at an ethical framework. As McGilchrist says:

By standing back from the animal immediacy of our experience we are able to be more empathetic with others, who we come to see, for the first time, as beings like ourselves ... , we learn to take another’s perspective and to control our own immediate needs and desires. If this necessary distance is midwife to the world of Machiavelli it also delivers the world of Erasmus.¹⁴

Kevin Vanhoozer suggests an integrated and holistic approach that fits well with what McGilchrist posits. He asserts that as missionaries to our culture we cannot detach the contextual frame of the great commandment from categorical demands of the great commission. If we are to obey the great commandment as we fulfill the great commission we must express our love for our neighbor by doing our best to understand his or her social and cultural context. He says: “For I cannot love my neighbor unless I understand him and the cultural world he inhabits. Cultural

literacy – the ability to understand patterns and products of everyday life is thus an integral aspect of obeying the law of love.”¹⁵

Although Vanhoozers’ concern is largely found in the reading of cultural texts,¹⁶ and so strictly falls within the remit of Christian anthropology, his observation of the broader cultural context is particularly helpful in uncovering some parts of the historical component of the sociological imagination. When this is connected to the biography of individuals who participate in this arc of history we can discover significant insights.

The importance of the connection between history and biography was brought home to me as I began to develop the ‘Person of Peace’ strategy during my time in Brixton. Several teenagers in my congregation came forward to tell me of their sexual abuse at the hands of a member of staff. The implications for the pastoral work within the congregation were enormous, requiring painstaking and heartbreaking work. But my concern was that the consequences for our local mission would also be significant. Mission always requires the consent of those we are seeking to reach and in such circumstances that consent could no longer be relied upon. These tragic local biographies set against the larger backdrop of the history of a community that, along with many other urban locations across Britain, had seen generations of hardship and disadvantage lead people to treat institutional religion as irrelevant. Such a history, along with these biographies, seemed to only offer failure for our missional and evangelistic progress. As I considered this specter, I asked myself whether the church universal had ever succeeded in its mission in circumstances as difficult as those that we faced. I reflected that the pre-Constantine Early Church had clearly not only survived, but prospered during intermittent periods of severe public persecution. There was also the news freshly emerging from China that gave a similar picture of growth in the face of politically sanctioned persecution.

I decided that I needed to look again at the strategies of evangelism taught by Jesus and practiced by the New Testament church. It was in this search that I discovered strategies of evangelism in Matthew 10 and Luke 10 given to the 12 and the 72 who were being sent into hostile environments with the task of seeking particular individuals who were both welcoming to the missionaries and warmly disposed to their mission. I realized that even if the surrounding community became effectively closed to us as a church, God could still be working in spiritually open individuals whom it was our task to find—individuals described in Matthew as ‘worthy persons’ (Matthew 10:11) and in Luke as ‘persons of peace’ (Luke 10:6). And so, the history and biography of the sociological imagination connected to the two horizons of biblical interpretation and provided a startling solution.

A similar process occurred in the emergence of missional communities. First in Brixton and then in Sheffield we sought to apply the framework of what we believed was a foundational New Testament strategy operating through the extended family household or *oikos*. Our initial experience with small groups was that, like the Western nuclear families on which they appeared to be modeled, they were able to do little more than survive in the urban environments in which they were set. Although there was a clear missional impulse in the leaders of these groups, there was almost no physical or emotional capacity available to take on the task. They were in the words of our popular axiom ‘small enough to care but not big enough to dare.’

The young adults in Sheffield in particular were finding their own solutions to the challenges and privations of modern urban life. They were building communities out of friendship groups and among their siblings that were larger than the nuclear families in which they were nurtured. On closer examination, these groups looked more like the extended family *oikos* of the New Testament than the missional small groups that we were attempting to use in

our community outreach. The enormously popular television programs *Friends* and *Seinfeld* had, it appeared, captured the Zeitgeist of the generation: Where families had failed, communities of friends could still succeed.

Again, the backdrop of cultural history connected to personal biography to give us the context for these crucial insights. By simply combining small groups into what we at first called Clusters, later Missional Communities, and today call Families on Mission, local small group leaders felt empowered to fulfill their Missional vision. The two horizons of our chosen hermeneutic and the intuitive grasp of the sociological imagination had done the trick. The rest, as they say, is history.

David Bosch suggested that the mission of God is the prior condition of Christian theology—missiology is the ‘mother of theology’—and therefore needs to be reimagined in its relationship to the other academic disciplines of the church.¹⁷ Although I have great sympathy and appreciation for the work of David Bosch I wonder in the light of my experience whether this analysis is overly simplistic. Based on my missional thinking and practice, I would say that theology and mission have a more complex and dynamic relationship. At times, one appears to lead, then the other. Sometimes theology appears to give birth to missional activity and at other times it appears that mission gives birth to theological reflection.

When I ask, ‘was my desire to understand God’s mission in Brixton and Sheffield shaped by my theology or was my theology shaped by my appreciation of my engagement in God’s mission?’ I find myself caught in an insoluble conundrum. It would be like entering the court of Rameses in Exodus 2 and asking whether Jochebed was the mother of the adopted prince or the handmaid of Pharaoh's daughter. Although she looked to be simply a servant, she was both the

mother of Moses and a servant to Pharaoh's daughter. Likewise, my experience of the relationship between mission and theology is that it is a case of 'both and' not 'either or.'

But this is perhaps to be expected. The reflexive process, empowered by both hemispheres of the brain working together, allows for the appreciation both of missional context and of theological category, and the ratiocination prompted by holding together the 'two horizons' of the metanarrative of Scripture and the active engagement with the Word of God in the contemporary context, seems to all lead in the same direction of intellectual inquiry. Until otherwise instructed, I will continue to hold that my practice of mission and theology, history and biography, context and category and biblical metanarrative and contemporary message are indispensably and interchangeably connected in the emergence of effective missional models and practice.

¹ J. Finney, *Recovering the Past - Roman and Celtic Models of Mission* (London, UK: Dartman Longman and Todd, 1986).

² A. C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons - New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein* (Carlisle, UK: The Paternoster Press, 1980). Kindle loc. 128.

³ Christian Smith, *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), iBooks loc. 19.

⁴ *Ibid.*, iBooks loc. 1137.

⁵ C.W. Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2000), iBooks loc. 16.

⁶ *Ibid.* iBooks loc. 19.

⁷ *Ibid.* iBooks loc. 21.

⁸ *Ibid.* iBooks loc. 24.

⁹ *Ibid.* iBooks loc. 30.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* iBooks loc. 32.

¹¹ Walter Wink, *Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Powers that Determine Human Existence* (Philadelphia, USA: Fortress Press, 1986).

¹² I. McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (London, UK: Yale University Press, 2009).

¹³ *Ibid.*, Kindle loc. 493.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Kindle loc. 632.

¹⁵ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Everyday Theology: How to Read Cultural Texts and Interpret Trends* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), Kindle loc. 241.

¹⁶ Ibid, Kindle loc. 466.

¹⁷ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology and Mission* (Durban: Orbis, 1991).