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Sharing Witness Along the Way: Engaging the Lived Theology of an Urban Congregation in Evangelical, Public, and Missional Strands

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SHARING WITNESS ALONG THE WAY:
ENGAGING THE LIVED THEOLOGY OF AN URBAN CONGREGATION
IN EVANGELICAL, PUBLIC, AND MISSIONAL STRANDS

by

SCOTT J. HAGLEY

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ABSTRACT

Sharing Witness Along the Way: Engaging the Lived Theology of an Urban Congregation in Evangelical, Public, and Missional Strands

By

Scott J. Hagley

This ethnographic phenomenology explores the lived theology of an urban congregation as it engages with civil society. Drawing methodological considerations from Jen-Luc Marion, Paul Ricoeur, and James Clifford, the research journey attends theologically to the sociality embodied both within the congregation and with its neighborhood for the sake of participating with this congregation in bringing to discourse its lived evangelical, public, and missional theological strands.

Drawing upon Charles Taylor’s use of moral frameworks in relationship to narratives, practices, and goods, the evangelical strand explores intimacy as a strongly valued good. Theologically, such a good makes possible James McClendon’s vision of a community of watch-care that bodies-forth a politics of forgiveness rooted in the Gospel. The evangelical narrative names intimate, authentic, and face-to-face relationships as participating in the Gospel of reconciled relationships. But such a narrative also excludes, for it understands Christian identity in relationship to firm boundaries.

The public strand narrates the congregation’s perduring presence in and with the public life at its margins. Drawing upon McClendon and Miroslav Volf, the researcher shows how the congregation innovates with the theme of embodied witness to demonstrate generative reciprocality in the congregation’s public life. Its public life at the margins both bears witness-to and bears witness-with its neighbors in the generation of a
common life. Innovating with David Tracy's 'mutually critical correlation,' the congregation's embodied witness is a 'mutually critical participation' in and with public life. But such reciprocal witnessing is experienced by the congregation as a loss of its evangelical-intimacy narratives and thus its public life is often considered non-theologically.

The missional strand disclosed to the congregation both this lack of theological attention and an emergent metaphor of 'sowing' by which the congregation articulated its trust in God's faithfulness in its present liminality created by the public strand. As such, the missional strand demonstrates the possibility of genuine theological innovation on the part of the congregation to recognizing the gift of the 'other' and stranger in its midst, the gift of a public life on the way to God's future in Christ.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In reflecting on the past few years and this project, I am overwhelmed by a deep sense of gratitude. God has given me so many partners and teachers in this journey; I am thankful for each of you—for your gifts of conversation, presence, support, critique, example, lived hope, faith, prayers, and grace. The intellectual and spiritual journey bodied-forth in this work is not possible without such family, friends, colleagues, and teachers.

To my parents—adult converts to an active, evangelical faith—I am thankful for the way in which you modeled and nurtured an intellectually-serious faith. As long as I can remember, you created space for both my mind and heart to grow together. This is a gift—a heritage—I can only hope to pass on to my own children.

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To my colleagues, I am thankful for the hours of conversation, debate, and work together; for meals we have shared with our families, Twon Hall, and feedback on my work. You are friends and teachers. You have each enriched my life, work, and ministry.

To Midtown Baptist, I am thankful for your open posture, hard work, and willingness to engage in this project. Your life together and partnership with the neighborhood proclaims the Gospel in word and deed. Thank you for your important, reflective, and generative theological work. Thanks—also—to my friends at Southside Community Church. This course of study would not have been pursued if it was not for your help and encouragement in prayerful discernment many years ago.

And last—but certainly not least—to my wife Maribeth, I am so grateful for your support, encouragement, and selflessness. You have worked to support our family and helped to make a vague sense of call and a nudge from the Spirit a concrete reality—without losing your sense of humor or of your own vocation as a mother and educator. You are a wonder to me. I am so grateful that I get to walk with you along the way. I cannot think of a better traveling companion. And to my girls—Hannah and Isabelle, who have not known dad without a paper to write or a book to read—I am thankful for the way in which grace often breaks-in through you in the shape of an invitation to dance, an urgent request to draw an animal, or an imaginative project provoked by your fertile minds. I cherish your laughter, art, song, dance, play, and faith; finally, we can say together that ‘daddy’s paper’ is done.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .......................................................................................................................... ii

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ...................................................................................................... iv

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW..............................................................1

The Research Question ................................................................................................. 1
Some Preliminary Considerations of Methodology ....................................................... 5
Narrative Strands and Theology .................................................................................. 6
Three Narrative Strands for Midtown’s Lived Theology ............................................. 14
Overview of Argument ................................................................................................. 27

CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY.........................................................................................31

Framing Question ........................................................................................................... 31
What is Theology ........................................................................................................... 33
I: The Christological Warrant and Truth ........................................................................ 35
II: The Trinitarian Warrant and Revelation ................................................................. 52
III: The Trinitarian Warrant and Mission ..................................................................... 60
IV: The Warrant of Christian Experience in Scripture .............................................. 65
Theology and Local, Concrete Communities ............................................................... 67
Theology and Social Science ....................................................................................... 70
An Account of the Research Design ............................................................................ 96
Conclusion .................................................................................................................... 104

CHAPTER 3: AN ACCOUNT OF LIVED PUBLIC THEOLOGY ........................................105

Introduction .................................................................................................................... 105
Overview of Chapter ..................................................................................................... 108
A Word About Method ................................................................................................. 110
The Practice of Public Worship and Public Theology ................................................ 112
Singing ............................................................................................................................ 113
Greeting ........................................................................................................................ 129
Preaching ...................................................................................................................... 141
Conclusion: Informality and Action .............................................................................. 150
Informality: Intimacy and Hospitality ......................................................................... 151
Theories of Practice ...................................................................................................... 153

CHAPTER 4: THE EVANGELICAL STRAND: INTIMACY AS GOOD ......................156

Introduction .................................................................................................................... 156
Goods, Narratives, and Practice .................................................................................. 157
To Maribeth:

Sharing friendship, partnership, love, and life along the Way
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

The Research Question

Midtown Baptist Church\textsuperscript{1} is located in a central neighborhood of a major Midwest metropolitan area. Like any vibrant urban neighborhood, it is a space perennially in transition. It boasts a fairgrounds and liberal arts private university on its northern edge, while two major thoroughfares mark its Southern and Western boundaries. Not surprisingly, the northern part of the neighborhood houses young professionals and blue-collar families, a mix of parks, coffee shops, and small ethnic restaurants. The southern end, however, bears the marks of transition in the neighborhood. Whole blocks remain undeveloped, with warehouses and lots empty from long-lost car dealerships and factory work. Across a busy intersection from the church, a four-block stretch has been re-developed into a series of strip-malls. Large parking lots serve a mix of foot and car traffic toward two major food chains, a Walmart, and a host of other stores. Coffee shops and storefront businesses are notably absent. A shimmering-green storefront complex with few windows is on the same block as Midtown. It is now mostly vacant, housing only an emergency pet care service. Once, it contained an Applebees, jewelry store, and a number of other businesses. It does have a car ramp, however, and Midtown worshippers can park in it for free on Sunday mornings.

\textsuperscript{1} All names and places are changed to protect the identity of the congregation and those who participated in the study.
The parking ramp is just a block and a half walk to the north of Midtown. Between Midtown and the ramp is Bethany Lutheran Church. Bethany is a smaller congregation than Midtown. Despite their close proximity, Bethany and Midtown partner in only a couple activities. In the fall, they host a neighborhood block party together; they barbeque burgers and hot dogs, play music, and set up a bouncy-castle. It is usually a good draw for the immediate residential neighborhood and it mixes the two congregations. Bethany also helps Midtown with ‘Family Assistance,’ a month-long ministry to homeless families which turns the church into an overflow shelter for the county. It is a resource-intensive service, and Bethany provides volunteers for Midtown.

On a typical Sunday morning, a sign directs Midtown worshippers to a vacant, commercial parking ramp one block north. The parking ramp greets worshippers with booming chords of classical music reverberating throughout the concrete structure. In warmer weather, the corner just beyond the ramp is already busy with bus and foot traffic by 10 am on a Sunday. The crowds at this particular corner often over-represent the African American, immigrant, and student populations of the neighborhood. The contrast between the activity on the street and the booming Bach concertos in the parking ramp perhaps offers a metaphor for Midtown Baptist. Fifteen minutes before Sunday morning worship, the congregants streaming into the church building appear older, whiter, and much more culturally monotone (that is, Swedish Baptist) than the eclectic crowds of people going about their Sunday-morning business on the other side of the parking ramp.

Like many ageing and urban churches throughout North America, Midtown faces the
distinct challenge of embracing and nurturing its European-Christendom heritage in a post-Christian, transient, vibrant, and culturally-eclectic neighborhood. At first glance, it is a Bach *concerto* performed in a hip-hop world.

But this tells only *part* of the story. Midtown started in the nineteenth century as a Swedish-Baptist immigrant church. Midtown’s annals boast not only a strong Swedish tradition, but also an intentional commitment to their urban neighborhood. In the middle of the twentieth century, the church responded to changing family structures by providing high-quality, low cost daycare—an organization that exists and serves neighborhood families up to the present. In the past two decades, Midtown has broken with its Baptist ranks\(^4\) to join the area Council of Churches in order to better participate in cooperative work for justice, reconciliation, and peace. This has resulted in Midtown’s participation in the ‘Family Assistance’ ministry to homeless families mentioned above. Despite Midtown’s age, traditional worship style, and ethnicity, it remains a socially-engaged church deeply involved in its urban context.

Thus, Midtown is a socially-conscious, engaged, and active congregation. It has a history of seeking the welfare of the neighborhood in the name and hope of Christ, and it continues to engage in partnership with civil society organizations to this end. Midtown’s posture could be described, at some level, as ‘public church’\(^5\) or in ‘public companionship’ with other congregations and civil society organizations for the sake of

\(^4\) Not that Baptists are officially opposed to the Council of Churches, just that they typically do not participate in mainline-ecumenical organizations. Midtown is the only Baptist member of its local council of churches.

fulfilling its sense of call in, to, and with the neighborhood. It is also a congregation that self-identifies as evangelical and can be placed within the “legacy” popularly called ‘evangelicalism’ in North America. This study seeks to describe, interpret, and narrate Midtown’s living journey or pilgrimage on the way to an evangelical and public theology for the sake of God’s mission. The original research question for this study was articulated in this way: What are the contours of an evangelical, public, and missional theology that are generated by a local congregation as it engages with civil society? The question focused research on congregational practices of ministry and engagement as a site for generative theological work regarding the public church dimensions of missio Dei for an evangelical congregation. As such, the research method was designed to create spaces within the congregation for conversation, reflection, and discernment regarding their practices of ministry and life together in light of God’s presence and activity in their community. Drawing upon the research practices of ethnography and the posture of Jean-Luc Marion’s phenomenology, this ethnographic phenomenology invited the congregation into the process as partners in the research journey.

Due to the ethnographic phenomenological method that I followed, the narrative strands that were generated exceeded the original research question as it was stated.

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7 I will outline what I mean by evangelicalism at the end of chapter two. Douglas Sweeney prefers to talk of evangelicalism as a ‘legacy’ because it is so difficult to draw boundaries around. See Douglas A. Sweeney, The American Evangelical Story: A History of the Movement (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005).

8 Thanks to Gary Simpson for helping with language here.

had initially framed the question in terms of the ‘contours’ of Midtown’s theology, which
implies spatiality and the mapping or outline of a fixed set of views. However, the
research process solicited layers of stories as the congregation narrated their lived or
embodied theology. Moreover, as the research progressed, earlier narratives were
problematicized by the congregation and sometimes innovated in light of communicative
reflection on passages of Scripture and ministry practice. This has impacted both the
writing of this document and how I would write ethnographic phenomenological research
questions in the future. Thus, although the original research question anticipated
contours, what emerged were indeed ‘narrative strands’ and I will therefore give an
account of Midtown’s narrative strands. ¹⁰ The research question, then, for this
ethnographic phenomenology is: What are the narrative strands of an evangelical, public,
and missional theology that are generated by an evangelical congregation as it engages
with civil society?

Some Preliminary Considerations of Methodology

The paragraphs above deserve some preliminary parsing before I outline the
argument of this work. In what follows, I will address three immediate concerns. First, I
will provide an initial account of the metaphor ‘narrative strands,’ and demonstrate how it
is that this metaphor will function in relationship to the larger work; that the evangelical,
public, and missional dimensions of Midtown’s practice and theological reflection will
each account for a separate narrative strand of Midtown’s lived theology. Second, I will
address initial concerns regarding my role and work as a theologian and researcher in the
midst of the congregation; for how is it that the telling, gathering, and interpreting of

¹⁰ Ibid.
stories within a congregation is theology? Or, asked another way: what kind of ‘product’
is being generated here in this dissertation? Third, I will provide an introduction to the
three strands being studied: the strands of evangelical, public, and missional theology.

Narrative Strands and Theology

In *Time and Narrative*, Paul Ricoeur articulates a narrative vision of human
experience in space and time. Ricoeur begins his work by comparing Augustine’s
reflections on the problematic of time. He sets Augustine’s argument that the creaturely
limitations of human life render our experience of time a set of fleeting, discordant
moments alongside Aristotle’s concept of *mythos* (emplotment) in which Aristotle argues
that the creative act of writing a plot is *mimesis* (imitation or participation) of lived,
temporal experience. For Ricoeur, these two thinkers articulate two parts of the way in
which humans experience—and then interpret—existence in time with all our limitations
and possibilities. Since a text is both a written discourse and/or meaningful human
action,¹¹ Ricoeur’s work is really an attempt to articulate how it is that we might
understand our experiences as *meaningful* and our present as related to our past and
future. The “narrative mode” of human meaning-making, Ricoeur argues, is a three part
process: (1) narrative prefiguration or an encounter with a text/action, or experience, (2)
emplotment/mythos or creative construction—a narrative rendering of the encounter, and
(3) the “refiguration” of one’s world through the reception of the textual encounter.¹²

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¹¹ Paul Ricoeur, “Imagination and Discourse in Action,” in *From Text to Action: Essays in
Central Problem of Hermeneutics,” in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language,

According to Ricoeur, narrative is both the way in which we make sense of our discordant experience of time and functions as an imitation of temporal existence in an alternative world.

Drawing upon Ricoeur, the importance of narrative for my work can be described at two different levels. At the first level, narrative provides a way to make sense of the intention of the research question to attend in a theologically generative way to a congregation as it engages civil society. As such, the research journey attended to the practices, narratives, and goods constitutive of Midtown’s life. In chapters three and four, I will provide a thicker description of this fluid set of relationships, but here it is enough to say that because the research is concerned with theology embodied in meaningful action, it attends to the stories that render Midtown’s action meaningful as such. Interviews, focus groups, conversations, and observations attended to and traced the various narratives that shape, identify, and articulate Midtown’s own theological journey out into its neighborhood in mission. Thus, at one level, this study is built around a cluster of narratives that have emerged in relationship to both Midtown’s journey-in-mission and the action-reflection research journey itself.

The writing of this document provides a second level for understanding the narrative shape of this project. By finding some sort of coherence in a series of encounters, conversations, and observations I have constructed a narrative of the research journey in this space organized around the three terms of interest in my research question: evangelical, public, and misional. That is, the narratives gathered and interpreted in relationship to Midtown’s goods and practices have been organized into what I will call three narrative strands for the sake of understanding Midtown’s life and theology. I use
the term ‘narrative strands’ because complex and interesting stories often have different strands, or threads, that weave in and out of the others. Sometimes different strands help interpret and resolve the other, but this does not need to be the case. Some narrative strands are left open or never fully incorporated into other parts of a story. This is not just true for fiction, but also for the narrative accounts of our own lives. This is what makes MacIntyre’s account of the narrative “unity of a human life” untenable.\textsuperscript{13} Our ‘discordant’ experience of time cannot be gathered together without remainder; for we experience ourselves as simultaneously a character in a number of different narrative strands. This is one way of understanding the problematic at work in \textit{Oneself as Another}—how to make sense of self-constancy amidst the problematic of our experience in time.\textsuperscript{14} ‘Strands’ is the metaphor employed in this research process to allow open space for Midtown’s complexity while also providing flexibility to make connections where relevant. As a master-metaphor for this project, then, ‘narrative strands’ creates a sense of flexibility and fundamental openness, a metaphor for an open future and the fragmentary nature of human experience and knowing. Chapter four will outline the narrative strand of Midtown’s evangelical-pietist lived theology; chapter five will account for the narrative strand of Midtown’s public theology while chapter six explores the missional strand as a congregation ‘on the way’ of the resurrected Christ in order to consider how the three strands interweave and innovate one another.


\textsuperscript{14} See Ricœur, \textit{Oneself as Another}. 
The second concern that emerges, then, is in relationship to my role as the researcher/theologian. How is it that the gathering, telling, and interpreting of stories within a congregation is theology? In chapter two, I will account theologically for my research method, but the question I need to address here is slightly different than methodological. What is the ‘product’ generated by this three-stranded narrative account of Midtown’s lived theology? This can be answered in two different ways. First, as the researcher, I led a process that involved participant-observer texts, interviews, focus groups, congregational journals, and many conversations. The ethnographic phenomenological commitments of the method cultivated spaces within the congregation for communicative theological discernment around issues of congregational practice and identity. As such, the role of the theologian in this study is initially as a participant-observer and facilitator of discernment through asking questions and deep listening.

It is my assumption that asking questions, initiating shared conversation, and attending to answers is theological work. Ricoeur emphasizes the role of the reader in relationship to a text as necessarily circular and constructive, with the reader moving between a “wager” or guess as to the meaning of a text given in various clues that arise and then attempting to validate the guess through attending to the whole.\(^{15}\) This movement between constructing (guessing) and judging (validating) seeks to make sense, to generate “the best overall intelligibility from an apparently discordant diversity.”\(^{16}\) Ricoeur’s theory of interpretation follows from two interrelated convictions; first, he states that the distanciation of texts from their author/context gives the reader only ‘clues’

\(^{15}\) Ricoeur, “Metaphor and the Central Problem of Hermeneutics.” 175.

\(^{16}\) Ibid.
for meaning rather than some fixed discursive space that can guarantee 'correct'
interpretation. Second, he draws upon a theory of metaphor to argue that the meaning of a
text is found in “plenitude”—that a text means all that it can mean.\textsuperscript{17} This is why Ricoeur
can assert that “the totality of references” opened up by a text (plenitude) projects a new
world (distanciation) for the reader.\textsuperscript{18} Reading, then, involves the reader in constructing
meaning in such a way that a text “discloses” meaning—a new or possible world—out in
front of the reader. Wagering and validating, then, opens the way for understanding or
appropriation.\textsuperscript{19} The reader reads the text, but the text also reads the reader by opening up
new possibilities for being-in-the-world.

The role of the theologian as participant-observer and facilitator of conversation
can be understood analogically to Ricoeur’s reader. The congregation appears to the
theologian as both an ‘event’ in terms of living practices and as a distanciated text. For
when the researcher begins to ask questions and record conversations, writes participant-
observer essays, and tries to understand the narratives and practices of the congregation,
the eventfulness of congregational interaction becomes distanciated. The social activity
of the congregation becomes a kind of living text with a similar problematic for the
researcher as the text for the reader. The problem of circularity and construction, of
wagering and validating are present here. It is at this point that the role of the researcher
as theologian can be clarified; for the shape of my particular question regarding the
evangelical, public, and missional contours (now narrative strands) of Midtown’s lived

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 176.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 177.

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 178-81.
theology prejudice the kinds of ‘clues’ that I look for and also the kinds of questions I ask.

Moreover, Ricoeur’s account of understanding and interpretation can be framed eschatologically, in that theological understanding both anticipates the plenitude ‘out in front’ of the community of inquiry and invites a kind of ethical posture that embodies the eschatological horizon through practices of open-ended discernment. Both Moltmann and Pannenberg argue for the participatory and eschatological shape of theology. That is, they see theological claims as fragmented and anticipatory, and as such, participating in God’s future (with, of course critically different understandings of what this ‘future’ entails). They emphasize that although now we see in part, we participate in the anticipation of the fulfillment of time, or, as Moltmann would argue, the coming God. For theological work is always in anticipation of plenitude, of the unimaginably more. In a similar vein, Graham Ward uses the term “eschatological remainder” to discuss an eschatological and ethical-political theology that emphasizes both the continuity—that we now live in a “messianic time”—in relationship to the discontinuity—the ‘more’ of the “politics that is to come.” For Ward, this eschatological remainder names the space for Christian faith, hope, and love. That is, the ‘otherness’ of the text and the plenitude of meaning assert the possibility of newness, of reading/research as a kind of participation-in and with a disclosive future. Christian eschatology helps the theologian to name the theological possibility of such practices. Under these frameworks, the theologian works

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to cultivate a process open to the discernment of God's future both in terms of research ethics (the choice of a phenomenological method, as will be discussed in the next chapter) and the theological strands of interest. Moreover, both these commitments emerged within the research journey recorded in these pages. The central theological theme, which I frame in chapter four as a theology of social embodiment, was disclosed within the research journey as the questions of text, researcher, and congregation articulated both the problem and the theological resources available.

The second space for the theologian in this research is in the process of writing this account. That is, the research did not just generate conversations, but rather a particular text—this one. For Ricoeur, a text is disclosive, in that it opens up new possibilities for being-in-the-world. The final 'product' of this work as it appears in these pages becomes such a text. It is a theological narrative, an account of a particular congregation and the frameworks within which it lives. It is the narrative construction of a particular world which may create new possibilities—not just for Midtown, but for other congregations and theologians.

This leads to another question: how do I account for my agency, as a theologian, in this writing project? Two different responses are needed here. First, as a research project that draws upon ethnographic methodologies, the three narrative strands included here could be understood as ethnographic essays. James Clifford argues that the ethnographic writer constructs a contact zone between cultures and discourses.²² By this,

Clifford means to emphasize that the ‘insider’s view’ is not possible for the ethnographer; nor does the essay ‘represent’ the group being studied. Rather, an ethnographic essay is an interpretation of an interpretation that brings the interests and concerns of the ethnographer (and the community for which the ethnographer writes) into a kind of conversation with the people about whom the ethnographer writes. A similar dynamic takes place in these pages. This is a close and attentive reading of Midtown Baptist Church in relationship to Midtown’s evangelical, public, and missional narratives. These pages also tell a story of research in which Midtown works as a partner alongside me in the research journey.

A second way to understand my agency as a theologian is to note that I have brought Midtown’s narratives into conversation with other historical, philosophical, and theological frameworks in order to better understand Midtown’s life and the theological possibilities opened up. In particular, I use the three narrative strands of James McClendon’s Baptist theology in rough correspondence with the evangelical, public, and missional strands of Midtown’s lived theology. I do this for two reasons. First, McClendon’s strands for his own narrative theology—community of watch-care, embodied witness, and the God-given way—do correspond with the three strands developed here, for this project shares in McClendon’s concern for attentiveness to embodied sociality in Christian theology and ethics, and so it is not surprising that there are overlapping concepts in both accounts. Drawing upon McClendon helps to articulate a thicker theological account of Midtown’s life and ministry in a way that is more

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consistent and disciplined. And second, McClendon seeks to write a distinctly Baptist theology, so he also provides a theological voice from a shared tradition. This is not to say that Midtown fits exactly what McClendon is doing, however. As the argument progresses, I will show several places where Midtown significantly innovates with McClendon's theological frameworks. In addition to McClendon, I also draw upon numerous other frameworks such as the correlationalist and ecclesialist forms of public theology and the *missio Dei* theological framework from missiology where appropriate. Not surprisingly, we will discover that these theological frames provide both new possibilities for Midtown's understanding of God's activity and presence in their midst, while also noting the ways in which Midtown innovates these theological themes. One would expect nothing less from such a conversation at the 'borders.'

Three Narrative Strands for Midtown’s Lived Theology

A brief introduction needs to be provided for the three narrative strands that structure this inquiry: evangelical, public, and missional. We will explore each in turn.

**Evangelical Theology**

‘Evangelicalism’ is a notoriously hard term to define. Scholars who work historically often connect the modern evangelical movement associated with Billy Graham, Carl F. Henry, and *Christianity Today*, to fundamentalism at the turn of the Twentieth Century.\(^{24}\) In this telling, the fundamentalist-modernist controversies at the beginning of the Twentieth Century drove a wedge in the evangelical faith, pushing some groups toward theological liberalism and others into a fossilized, fundamentalist

\(^{24}\) For the classic articulation of this view, see George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).
orthodoxy. The 'great reversal' that marked the fundamentalist turn inward toward an exclusive concern for the salvation of souls over and against societal reform began to be challenged in the ministry of Graham, the work of Henry, and institutions such as Fuller Seminary. Modern evangelicalism, then, is the re-emergence of an activist and revivalistic faith that can be traced back to the eighteenth century and the first 'Great Awakening.' This modern evangelicalism is said to maintain the fundamentalist concern for protestant orthodoxy (particularly in maintaining a commitment to Scripture) and personal evangelism while retrieving the reform-minded revivalistic activism of the nineteenth century.

But this particular historical narrative is not universally supported. Some, such as Randall Balmer, understand evangelicalism as a nearly incoherent expression of American 'folk' religion, a diverse "patchwork quilt." Its populist overtones and appeal can be seen in the revivalism of the nineteenth century and its more recent right-wing institutions such as the Moral Majority. But it is certainly not a static entity, which is why Timothy Smith calls evangelicalism a "kaleidoscope" to suggest both diversity and dynamism in evangelicalism. Others, such as Ernest Sandeen, tell a particularly theological history. Sandeen traces a millennial and biblicist thread through the

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29 By 'biblicist,' I mean a particular kind of theological prolegomena in relationship to the Bible. Evangelical theologies (and moral-ethical reasoning as well) that are biblicist tend to begin theological
various manifestations of evangelicalism. Still others have attempted theo-historically integrated explanations, such as David Bebbington’s “quadrilateral.” For Bebbington, evangelicalism can be defined as: “conversionism, the belief that lives need to be changed; activism, the expression of the gospel in effort; biblicism, a particular regard for the Bible; and what may be called crucicentrism, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Together they form a quadrilateral of priorities.”

Although Bebbington’s definition helpfully integrates historical concern with key practices and beliefs, the term remains notoriously hard to define; Bebbington’s definition could fit numerous groups of Christians throughout history and is not particularly focused on explaining evangelicalism in the United States. Douglas Sweeney, in an attempt to find common ground in these various approaches, considers modern evangelicalism a “legacy” or a movement that is rooted in a branch of protestant theology concerned for the authority of scripture (sola scriptura) and substitutionary atonement “with an eighteenth century twist.” This is a simple though significant way of integrating the various approaches outlined. For in the eighteenth century, both the reformed-fundamentalist-anti-modernist (marked by Charles Hodge and the Princeton school) and the holiness-populist-revivalist (the voluntarism and revivalism of the nineteenth century) streams of the evangelical legacy find their roots. I assume that

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something like Sweeney's integration of both the reformed and holiness streams of American religion best account for the diversity that is contemporary evangelicalism.

Public Theology

For heuristic purposes, I will outline two different forms of public theology. The first I will call 'correlational.' This is the view most commonly associated with public theology. The second, I will call 'ecclesial,' which is a way of doing public theology that rejects many of the working assumptions of the correlational position. The ecclesialists often form a theological vision rooted in virtue ethics, and share similar assumptions to Midtown. Both these positions will be drawn upon again in chapters five and six.

Correlational Public Theology

Max Stackhouse attributes the term 'public theology' to Martin E. Marty's 1974 Journal of Religion essay that analyzed Reinhold Niebuhr's life and work. According to Stackhouse, Marty placed Niebuhr within a strand of American Protestant ethics characterized by the "close interaction of religious insight, philosophical reflection, and social analysis." The term articulated the way in which Niebuhr and a host of others refuse to let theology remain an internal conversation about Christian identity or personal beliefs. Rather, theology's concern for "the way things are or ought to be" is a significant resource for making sense of and ordering our common lives. Stackhouse credits David Tracy next, as bringing the term into sharper focus and connecting it with the work of

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33 Stackhouse, "Public Theology and Ethical Judgment," 165.

34 Ibid.
Niebuhr’s Catholic contemporary, John Courtney Murray. For Tracy, the problem of the ‘publicness’ of theology in a pluralist society is essentially one of exercising the proper judgment for the kind of ‘public’ being addressed. The theologian—like any person in our differentiated and pluralist modern society—speaks to and from a variety of publics. Thus Tracy begins his work with a descriptive account of the three publics in which and to which the theologian addresses—society, academy, and church.\textsuperscript{35}

Tracy’s initial assumption is that “[b]eneath all forms of pluralism, external and internal, lies a common commitment among theologians to genuine public discourse.”\textsuperscript{36} For the very universalist truth-claims of theology—that God creates, sustains, and redeems the world—demand “a fundamental trust in and loyalty to the world in all its ambiguity...[that] every theologian affirm the world and thereby pay legitimate demands for justice in society and for intellectual integrity in the academy.”\textsuperscript{37} A vitally theocentric theology can do no other; for the “all-pervasive reality of God” is what compels theologians to attempt publicness.\textsuperscript{38} Tracy is certainly not alone in this concern. Theological projects such as Jürgen Moltmann’s\textsuperscript{39} and Lesslie Newbigin’s\textsuperscript{40} have begun with similar assertions. The synoptic gospels tell a parallel story by placing an imperial word—\textit{euangelion}—into Christ’s mouth at the forefront of his ministry. Tracy’s

\begin{footnotes}
\item[^{35}] David Tracy, \textit{The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism} (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 1-46.
\item[^{36}] Ibid., 5.
\item[^{37}] Ibid., 49-50.
\item[^{38}] Ibid., 51.
\item[^{39}] Jürgen Moltmann, \textit{God for a Secular Society: The Public Relevance of Theology} (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999).
\item[^{40}] Lesslie Newbigin, \textit{The Gospel in a Pluralist Society} (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1989).
\end{footnotes}
contribution is the way in which ‘rational discourse’ and ‘public’ function in relationship to each other and his theological project. For theology to participate in the three ‘publics,’ it must work between an interpretation of its context/world and an interpretation of its tradition/church. The kind of discourse that theology generates, then, is mediatory conversation, in that it finds overlapping space between “tradition and situation” or “church and world.”\textsuperscript{41} Tracy claims that this kind of mediation is accomplished by establishing “mutually critical correlations.”\textsuperscript{42}

But for Tracy, this is not a unique practice for theologians; it is also the kind of discursive practice that constitutes our ‘public sphere’ or common life. That is, ‘public’ is constituted by a particular kind of ‘mediating’ conversation where a common life can be constructed and sustained. In this, Tracy agrees with Habermas’s assessment of modernity’s systemic communicative distortions and call for public reason expressed in a kind of communicative ethics.\textsuperscript{43} Tracy ‘sets the table,’ so to speak, for the contemporary conversation regarding public theology. That is, it is assumed to be a critical and correlational rational discourse; one that exists at the boundaries of both theological investigation and moral-ethical public conversations. As such, it brings theological resources to help “interpret and assess the reasonability and coherence of both faith and aspects of modern life.”\textsuperscript{44} As \textit{public}, it is concerned with the shape of common life. As

\textsuperscript{41} Tracy, \textit{The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism}, 79-80.

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 80.


\textsuperscript{44} Stackhouse, “Public Theology and Ethical Judgment,” 167.
**Ecclesial Public Theology**

The ecclesial approach to public theology emerges from a direct critique of the social theory embedded in the correlational approach. The critique tends to fall into one of two different criticisms. The first comes from a suspicion of civil society constructs and their relation to ‘liberalism’ in general or the ‘nation state’ in particular. That is, it understands the ‘mediatory’ hopes of correlational public theology as caught up in legitimization of the nation state and the general moral incoherence of liberalism. The second questions the *discursive* aims of a correlational approach, identifying any appeal to the common rationality of the public realm as potentially flattening the particularities of Christian theology. As I will show below, both criticisms lead to an appeal to the Church as a rival (or at least ‘distinct’) public, with its own formative practices, narrative, and social theory. That is, although they critique correlational public theology, I consider it another approach for public theology because it is still interested in how theology constitutes a common public life. It’s just that the ‘public’ in this view is always an ecclesial one. I will now take each criticism in turn.

Stanley Hauerwas is an outspoken critic of all things ‘liberal’ for the sake of a ‘politics called the church.”⁴⁶ What this means, however, can be difficult to discern. For Hauerwas, ‘liberalism’ embodies several distinct things: the Enlightenment conception of

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⁴⁵ Ibid.: 165, 67.

the individual as rational and free, the coercive visions of consumerism made possible by economic liberalism, and the way in which liberal democracy forms its Christian citizens into an uncritical acceptance of both. At another level, Hauerwas simply uses ‘liberalism’ to account for the present state of ethical incoherence; for modernity undercuts formative and coherent moral traditions with the promise of a ‘naked’ public square or ‘freedom’ from the constraints of tradition. In light of this criticism, Hauerwas sees little purpose in Christians seeking to ‘play’ on the terms created by democratic liberalism. In Hauerwas’s view, two rival narratives and formative practices are set alongside each other. For Christians to seek ‘mediatory’ public space for the ‘common good’ means some sort of loss of particularity. They are to seek the public good, to embody the peace of Jesus’ kingdom, but they are to do so from within their own framework. That is, Hauerwas hopes to construct a coherent ethical counter-community whose life together will be a public witness. At issue is whether ‘public’ constructs such as ‘civil society’ can form genuinely Christian communities. But Hauerwas is somewhat vague (or diffuse) on his particular criticism of civil society as the social theory for public theology.

The work of William Cavanaugh is more direct here. For Cavanaugh, public theology that relies upon the discursive terrain of civil society is simply not public enough. Cavanaugh argues that civil society as a social theory assumes both the

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48 What Cavanaugh calls ‘civil society,’ however, is not recognized by most civil society theorists. He relies upon Harry Boyte, who constructs a counter-theory to civil society in favor of a ‘commonwealth politics.’ Cavanaugh’s criticism, then, is not against civil society per se, but rather against visions of religious life that conflate citizenry and religious practice. This is not what civil society theory does. However, Cavanaugh articulates a common argument among the ecclesialists, which merges common public action with state co-option. For a view of civil society in relationship to Christian practice, see Gary
primacy and legitimacy of government, as well as the generalizing effects of civil society action upon governmental and economic systems. That is, civil society is parasitic upon the nation state in such a way that ‘public identities’ forged there are as a citizen. Therefore, church-in-civil society constructs offer Christian symbols, narratives, and practices in service to the stability of the state.

Under such an arrangement, the public claims of the Christian faith, then, are not public enough—for they get subsumed in the legitimizing narratives of the state. Besides co-opting Christian practice for the sake of civil society, the “price to the church of admission to the ‘public’ is a submission of its particular truth claims to the bar of public reason, a self-discipline of Christian speech.”  

Cavanaugh’s concern is for the church to be public rather than engage publicly. By this, Cavanaugh calls for the bold assertion of Christian truth claims amidst the disciplines and practices of Christian preaching and sacramental life. Public action and Christian formation/worship were never meant to be separate. Cavanaugh calls for churches to be public spaces for the formation of a Christian identity rather than simply ‘places’ co-opted as a voluntary association.  

Cavanaugh offers an alternative social theory: the Church is a ‘free public space’ which

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50 Cavanaugh, “A Fire Strong Enough to Consume the House: The Wars of Religion and the Rise of the State,” 118-20. Drawing from Michael de Certeau, Cavanaugh differentiates between ‘places’ and ‘spaces.’ A ‘place’ is an abstraction, when one thing is ‘placed’ next to another as on a map. The church, according to Cavanaugh, has been ‘placed’ in civil society in a similar way. ‘Public engagement’ is some kind of extension beyond the church and outside of a particular Christian identity. Cavanaugh claims that the church needs to recover its sense of public space—that Christians through their practices and stories create ‘itineraries’ rather than ‘maps’: “To speak of the church as public space means, then, that Christians perform stories which transform the way in which space is configured” (119).
itself re-orient, and forms persons in a particular narrative identity. It is the res publica (following Augustine) in tension with civitas terrena. Hauerwas’s project shares a similar ecclesial focus which accompanies his rejection of social theory that sees ‘public’ as some kind of ‘shared’ space between the traditions and narratives of a particular community.

The second line of critique against correlational public theology is raised in regard to the way in which public theology understands ‘shared rationality’ to adjudicate between competing claims. The criticism can be formed in at least two different ways. Some theologians follow the more radical insights of hermeneutic philosophy and express skepticism that any such rational ‘space’ exists. Christian discourse is incommensurable with other such discourses. According to Barry Harvey, the very orientation of public theology as ‘reasonable’ public ‘dialogue’ plays into modern liberal arrangements and institutions. As such, public theology confines “the habits and relations of Christianity within the contours and dynamics of modernity.” Still others see in the turn to ‘public rationality’ a crucial ‘give-away’ in that God-language is irreparably altered by what is publicly reasonable. Exploring the work of Max Stackhouse, Philip Ziegler makes this case. Ziegler notes the way in which Stackhouse’s concern for public rationality confines talk of God to ‘natural’ orders. Ziegler says:

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51 Here Cavanaugh is playing off the work of Harry Boyte. See Sarah M. Evans and Harry C. Boyte, Free Spaces: The Sources of Democratic Change in America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).


[In Stackhouse] talk of God is always closely associated with talk of the static structural elements of the really real, that is, with metaphysical and moral centers, contexts, principles and standards whose function is steadily determinative for human life.\(^5^4\)

Thus, Ziegler notes that the “canons of rationality determined by the academy” alter God-talk so that what emerges is a kind of theological ‘stasis’ unrecognizable in church communities, and sentences in which God rarely functions as the subject of an action verb.

**Missional Theology**

Finally, we will introduce *missio Dei* and the ‘missional church’ conversation as themes relevant to this study. In 1983, Bishop Lesslie Newbigin published *The Other Side of 1984: Questions for the Churches* in England as a part of the British Council of Churches to initiate a year-long discussion program.\(^5^5\) Newbigin, a British missionary to India, initiated with this monograph sustained and disciplined discussion regarding the missionary challenges facing post-Christendom western societies. But more importantly, Newbigin’s analysis brought the *missio Dei*—the missiological and theological critique on the colonialist missions project—to bear on churches in the West.\(^5^6\) In the late 1980s, the Gospel and Our Culture Network formed in North America to continue Newbigin’s trajectory in the North American context.


The GOCN gained significant visibility with the creation of a book series and the publishing of *Missional Church* in 1998, a collaborative project that diagnosed the “crisis” in North American Christianity as rooted in “who we are and what we stand for.”

The real issues in the current crisis of the Christian church are spiritual and theological. Building on Newbigin’s focus on *missio Dei*, the authors propose a renewed theological vision for the church rooted in the Triune God’s missional nature.

This theological move means that rather than holding missions as an appendage—one activity among many—for the church, the church is understood as a people sent by God. Mission, then, becomes the activity and life of God, in which the church is called and sent to participate. The missional church conversation has grown significantly since *Missional Church*, with several new monographs and a new series by Eerdmans.

Two significant theological implications flow from the *missio Dei* narrative strand in relationship to this project. First, *missio Dei* emerges from Trinitarian theology, which is significant for the methodology that is outlined in chapter two. It will be enough here

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to point out that the initial missiological-theological reflection on the *missio Dei* at the International Missionary Council (IMC) conference in Willingen in 1952 correlates with a revival in Trinitarian theology in the West through prominent Protestant (Karl Barth) and Catholic (Karl Rahner) theologians. Following in the wake of Barth and Rahner, Western theology has rediscovered the central significance of Trinity for understanding both God and world. By retrieving Eastern sources, late-twentieth century theologians have leveled significant critique toward the Augustinian psychological Trinity and argued for more social conceptions of the divine life. For Moltmann, Jenson, Pannenberg, Boff, and LaCugna this move has provided the resources to articulate the central significance of the cross in the life of God.  

No longer is Trinity something that describes God’s *interiority* as do the psychological paradigms. Rather, Trinity describes the *ek-static* life of three divine persons in communion and encountered in the biblical narrative and life of the Church. Rahner’s methodological “rule,” it turns out, has radical consequences. Second, in light of this Trinitarian reflection, the cross becomes an event of suffering love brought into God’s life through Jesus Christ.  

This theological turn to a more social understanding of Trinity has implications for an understanding of revelation and human history, which is reflected in the use of phenomenology and ethnography. So also, it has significant implications for anthropology and eschatology, as I will argue in chapter six.

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61 Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*. 
Having provided an introduction to the narrative strands of our study, I will not provide an overview of the argument that will unfold in these pages.

**Overview of Argument**

By attending to three narrative strands of one evangelical congregation, I am constructing a very particular kind of theological text. I am working locally and inviting a Baptist congregation to partner with me in thinking theologically about their life, faith, and practices. This is not a work concerned with evangelicalism in general, nor does it attempt to wrap up all the varieties of evangelical experience. But the focus of the project does not limit (at least at the outset) the implications or relevance of this kind of study. Besides the importance of the narrative material outlined above, these three narrative strands also help to articulate a set of moral-theological frameworks as they are lived at Midtown Baptist Church. And it is frameworks, according to Charles Taylor, that orient persons and communities in moral space and which make human agency intelligible; to know who or what one is means to know where and how one is located. By articulating these frameworks, the text brings them into broader theological discourse for the sake of both Midtown and other congregations. It is my intention that something like Tracy’s ‘mutually critical correlation’ can take place in these pages as I tell the story of

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62 Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989). “To know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand. 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 and oppose. In other words, it is a horizon within which I am capable of taking a stand” (27). These ‘horizons’ determined by ‘strongly valued goods,’ are not personalistic and individual, but rather socially-constituted and public. By attending to the moral space of this one congregation, I am attempting to discern and articulate this moral space, this ‘framework’ that is socially constituted, and by doing so, to understand it and place it in conversation with other frameworks. This is the kind of public activity that Bernstein’s truth-seeking, phronetic communities engage in, which I will argue in the next chapter. See Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983).
Midtown's theological journey into its neighborhood alongside the research journey and the broader theological frames used that emerge in the process.

What are the contours of a public, missional, and evangelical theology that are generated by a congregation as it engages in civil society? In the next chapter, I argue theologically for such a project; that since theology is cultural production it is necessarily caught up in the practices, language, and moral frameworks of particular communities. Moreover, the doctrines of the Incarnation and Trinity, as well as the experience of the church in mission all point toward a vision of theology oriented toward the local, the concrete, and the en-fleshed. I argue that theological engagement must take the Incarnation seriously by taking Christian communities seriously. This approach to theology, then, asks for other intellectual partners to help attend to life lived in all its richness. I turn to both phenomenology and ethnography to make a case for the particular methodological shape of this project: a theology that is oriented philosophically by a phenomenological posture and informed methodologically by the concrete practices of ethnography.

The third chapter is structured by an ethnographic account of Midtown's public worship in which Midtown's 'informality' is thematized. Midtown's practices of singing, greeting, and preaching suggest informality in at least two ways. At one level, Midtown's informality points toward intimacy as a good for the congregation, which structures chapter four and the evangelical-Pietist narrative strand. And at another level, Midtown's informality points toward a 'come as you are' ethos that I call the good of hospitality.

In chapter four, I explore the good of intimacy and identify two conventional narratives that reinforce intimacy as a strongly valued good for relationship with God and
one another. I argue that the good of intimacy, with its deep connections to Pietism and revivalism, constitutes the evangelical strand of Midtown’s lived theology. And it is in considering this strand in light of this good—and the boundaries it constructs between personal and community interiority-and-exteriority—that Midtown’s central theological problem is disclosed: If intimacy guides Midtown’s expectations for divine and human relationships, how is God accounted for in Midtown’s lived, embodied, sociality? I begin to answer this question in chapter four by exploring how the good of intimacy can lead to a sense of the Gospel embodied in McClendon’s community of watch-care.

In chapter five, I explore the good of hospitality and the way in which Midtown’s ministry teams move ‘off script’ from the conventional intimacy narratives when accounting for the tensions and ambiguities in their practices of ministry. I suggest that these reflections point toward hospitality as another good embodied in the practice of the congregation. Throughout this chapter, then, I account for the public strand of Midtown’s lived theology and demonstrate that its practiced hospitality generates a public life at the margins of Midtown’s intimate family. Since Midtown has little theological language for this public life, it functions through a kind of practical atheism. I close this chapter by bringing ecclesialist public theology and McClendon’s notion of ‘embodied witness’ into conversation with the correlationalist vision of ‘mutually critical correlation’ and Miroslav Volf’s understanding of reciprocity. Midtown, it seems, embodies some combination of each but presently lacks theological language for it.

In the sixth chapter, I consider the metaphor of ‘sowing’ as it emerges within the research to characterize Midtown’s relationship with both God and the neighbor. This metaphor, I argue, both names and shows the possibility that Midtown’s present liminal
journey can be named and understood in light of God’s call and mission. I call this theological possibility Midtown’s missional strand, and I argue that the missional strand can help to bring the evangelical and public strand into a more generative relationship. The final chapter will provide a short set of concluding reflections on the method as well as questions for further study.
CHAPTER 2
METHODOLOGY

Framing Question

The question that frames this chapter is: How can the ethnographic phenomenology used in this particular study produce a telling of (or testimony to) the evangelical, public, and missional strands of Midtown’s lived theology? The short answer is that it doesn’t—at least not in the sense that it produces a particular theology with universal implications. In the end, this is an ethnographic phenomenology of a particular congregation that attends to and attempts to make sense of particular phenomena—a congregation deeply engaged in the public-social concerns of a particular neighborhood. But the moral-theological space inhabited by this congregation is not its own. Nor is it particularly local. It inhabits and draws strength from numerous and contradictory traditions, from Swedish-Pietism to North American liberalism, from conservative fundamentalism to activist revivalism. As such, careful attenuation to this particular congregation and the framework it inhabits can help make sense of the various traditions and streams constructing frameworks for other evangelical congregations in the United States. This is what James Clifford has in mind when he argues that ethnography can function allegorically,\(^1\) or what Clifford Geertz means when he argues for local

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1 Clifford, “On Ethnographic Allegory.” Allegory is “any story [that] has a propensity to generate another story in the mind of the reader (or hearer), to repeat and displace some prior story. To focus on ethnographic allegory…draws attention to aspects of cultural description that have until recently been minimized. A recognition of allegory emphasizes the fact that realistic portraits, to the extent that they are
knowledge. This is not an attempt to speak for all evangelicals, but it is an attempt to pay attention to the theology lived by a particular congregation as a way of doing evangelical public theology that works “for, with, under, and against” evangelical congregations.

Having provided some context and intentions for the study, a few comments need to be made regarding methodology, and why this is a theological work and not social science and theology, or simply congregational studies. I will offer two arguments for the theological nature of this work. The first is explicitly theological: that Christian theology itself—having something to do with the Triune God—points toward the concrete, the local, the ‘real’ world as the site and horizon for its work. The second is primarily philosophical: that such a theology invites a disciplined attentiveness to the lived life of communities. I will trace certain developments in the phenomenological tradition to point to the possibility of drawing upon social science strategies for such attending in a way that does not rule out the theological. Together, these arguments point toward the design of the research project, which I will then articulate in the final section of this chapter. In the end, this research project works on two levels. As research, it seeks to understand and generate an evangelical public theology; as a project, it attempts to embody a particular approach to theology.

In this chapter, I outline the methodological concerns of the project. In the first section, I argue for a way of doing theology that attends to lived life in Christian

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communities by drawing upon theological and philosophical sources while also accounting for how this might be an evangelical theology. In the final section, I outline the design of the research project, which I call an ethnographic phenomenology.

What is Theology?

Since I want to argue that evangelical experience is to be taken seriously as a site for theological reflection, I knowingly bring issues of hermeneutics and perspective into theology. From where does theology speak? Graham Ward begins his work on theology as cultural production with this question. Although Ward sets up a meta-theological discussion, his work is, in the end, theological. The first chapter levels a subversive critique on claims to theology’s locus ‘from above’ by exploring Karl Barth’s theological project in terms of cultural production. Ward seems to be saying that even if Barth’s theology testified to the otherness and form-breaking Grace of the self-revealing Word, the very discourse that it provoked took place within pre-existing cultural forms such as communities of discourse, practices of academic writing, teaching, debate, preaching, and of course language borrowed and adapted from other theological/philosophical systems of thought. Ward then attempts to understand the processes of cultural production as it relates to the social imagination, and what the conditions of possibility are for transformative cultural movements—as what happened in and around Barth’s theology.

Ward’s project highlights the challenge I am attempting to meet theologically in this work. The seeming ubiquity of cultural studies, linguistics, and philosophical hermeneutics can push theology into a self-reflective hall-of-mirrors where it is easier to

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work meta-theologically or in terms of a fundamental theology than it is to actually attempt to say something about God. The cultural specificity of the theological work can overshadow it to the extent that self-reflective cultural analysis is all theology—as a cultural production—ever generates. Similar to works with extensive philosophical prolegomena to ground dogmatic projects so now we draw attention to the specific cultural production of particular Christian communities and practices in a way that emphasizes locality and imminence, but remains fairly agnostic about God. This, of course, does not describe the full extent of Ward’s project; I mean to point out how Ward’s account of theology as a cultural production can be a significant theological move, one which has its roots in missiological and Trinitarian reflection.

Ward helps us to articulate how it is that there is no such foundation for theological truth, nor any particular clearing from which one can stand to survey the socio-cultural-ethical landscape so as to distinguish, critique, or make judgments about the whole. If culture, language, and communities of discourse name our situation as humans, then claims to truth—theology included—are conditioned by this human situation. We can no longer lay claim to the ‘whole,’ which can be experienced by theology as a threat. One might ask what purpose systematic articulations of the faith serve if such articulations are doomed by a pervasive ‘local’ flavor at the outset? But this sense of threat exposes the false ideational bias for theology; for theology is not a science of organizing biblical propositions, nor is it a philosophical school built around the conception ‘god.’ If it is Christian theology, then it must bear witness to the God revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. It is reflection upon a set of encounters with a person, and the communities that emerge in light of this encounter.
So why is this present work and its use of ethnographic phenomenology—where the life of a particular congregation is attended to and reflected upon—a work of theology? I want to suggest four theological warrants\(^5\) for working ‘from below’—that is, attending to concrete communities and experiences—in order “to understand God truly”\(^6\): (I) The question of truth in theology as it relates to Christology and the Incarnation orients theological discourse around a concrete person, history, and set of events, (II) in which God identifies Godself in and through the differentiated passionate activity of Father, Son, and Spirit, (III) while also inviting concrete, historical others into God’s promised future for the sake of the world, (IV) as demonstrated by the experience of the church in mission and the generation of the Scriptures by the early church, for “mission is the mother of theology.”\(^7\)

I: The Christological Warrant and Truth

The question of truth in theology. If we concede that theological discourse is a cultural production located within finite human horizons and situated within particular communities, this acknowledges a crisis for theology as it is typically understood. For

\(^5\) Warrants are a stage in the construction of a ‘practical syllogism,’ which infers the connection of the data to the claim. This is a form of argument that uses concepts like ‘coherence,’ ‘fit,’ and ‘possibility’ to make judgments regarding claims rather than the pure ‘force’ of deductive logic. Exercises in ‘practical reason’ often have too many moving parts, too many claims and forms of data that are open to question to rely upon rigid rules of logic for its validity. But this does not make practical reasoning illogical, just messier. I draw upon ‘warrants’ in this sense, as a way of connecting biblical-historical-philosophical data to the claim that theology works ‘from below’—that is, with concrete communities of practice. For a discussion of warrants and practical reasoning, see Stephen Toulmin, *The Uses of Argument*, Updated ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).


this concession chastens theology by challenging any objective claims to universality, to frameworks that build upon some understanding of the ‘whole’ of reality and/or ‘foundation’ for truthful knowing. This chastened theology can be accompanied by what Richard Bernstein calls the “Cartesian anxiety”—the fear that without the possibility of making ‘objective’ knowledge claims, relativism will subvert truth. But—as Bernstein shows—this does not need to be the case. Human knowing is certainly fragile and constituted by particular communities of discourse and their concomitant tradition(s), but judgments can be and are made every day in and by such communities that allow for some kind of integrity in the life of the community, a more truthful existence. There is no secure foundation for such knowledge—nor even an ‘objective’ method to deliver it—and this means that all communities of discourse must exercise judgment according to their own assumptions and frameworks while also having to account for the otherness of different frameworks and/or experiences that subvert or question their account of things. The question, though, is whether making conditioned judgments for the sake of “a more truthful account of our existence” articulates a robust understanding of truth.

8 Bernstein, Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis, 16-22.

9 Ibid., 44-93. ‘Judgment’ is a key category for Bernstein. The first two parts of the book develop an argument for judgment (typically a ‘practical,’ ‘political,’ and ‘ethical’ term) as a key factor in even scientific knowing. He argues that such a reality does not point toward the ‘relativist’ side of the objective-relative binary, but rather toward an altogether different paradigm; even if knowing always involves judgment and theory-choice, these judgments are continually subjected to new ‘data’ as encounters with other paradigms, perspectives, and experiments can ‘bite back’ at the initial conclusions drawn. Here Bernstein subverts the ‘incommensurability thesis’ along the lines of Clifford Geertz’s anthropology to point toward the possibility of a genuine encounter with an ‘other’ to challenge existing concepts, paradigms, etc.

10 Hauerwas, A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic, 10. Although Hauerwas is not concerned with knowing as such, his work also seeks to articulate the formational importance of ‘practical reason’ in Christian communities.
In the book of John, Jesus announces “I am the way and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (Jn 14:6). Although the task of theology can be described as “faith seeking understanding,” we must recognize that for Christian theology, truth is in relationship to a person—Jesus of Nazareth who died on a Roman cross and who was raised from the dead by God. In his life, death, and resurrection Jesus announces and bears witness to the evangel—the nearness of the Reign of God (1 Cor. 2:1-3). And after Easter, Jesus himself becomes the evangel as the apostolic testimony claims “God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:36). In the Easter community, claims about God and God’s Reign are reinterpreted in light of Jesus’ person and work. That is, the New Testament presents a Christ-centered hermeneutic of several key Jewish symbols related to God’s promised salvation and blessing. New Testament writers identify the earthly Jesus with the eternal Logos (Jn. 1) or the eikon of the ‘invisible God’ (Col. 1:15). So also, if Christian theology seeks to ‘understand God’ and as such to make truthful statements about God, it must be properly Christological in at least two ways: (i) theology must work from the concrete and the local toward the universal rather than the other way around, and (ii) it must be incarnational, in the sense of saying ‘yes’ to the aporia of the Incarnate Son and crucified


12 Hans Schwarz, Christology (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 2-3. Schwarz begins his work on Christology noting, with Bultmann, the shift from the ‘proclaimer’ becoming the ‘proclaimed’ after Easter.

God. Saying ‘yes’ to the mystery that two natures dwell in one person with integrity in respect to both Christ’s humanity and divinity.

Despite Christological works that might suggest otherwise,\(^4\) there is a basic movement in Christology from the concrete and historical to the universal and eschatological.\(^5\) The early church—and Christian tradition since—has understood its ongoing encounter with the risen Christ to reveal something meaningful about God and God’s promise of salvation for the world (1 Cor. 15; Heb. 9-11). The claims that Christians make in light of Jesus Christ are certainly ‘universal’ or even ‘metaphysical’ in the sense that they are claims about the universal future for the world (the resurrection of the dead, the new heaven and new earth, etc.), and about the God who is ‘all in all’ and the Creator of heaven and earth.\(^6\) And yet these claims are not the property of the church, nor are they given a priori and deductively ‘applied’ to the concrete communities who have encountered the Risen Christ. They are, rather, claims that can only be made by

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\(^5\) Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, 141. Moltmann critiques approaches to Christology that begin with the universal—whether it is the Greek movement from the One God to God’s revelation in Christ, or more modern Christologies that begin with the human situation as such. For Moltmann, neither approach is forced to address the following statements: (i) that it was YHWH, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who raised Jesus from the dead and (ii) that Jesus was a Jew. If these two statements are taken seriously, then the “path of theological knowledge leads irreversibly from the particular to the general, from the historic to the eschatological and the universal” (141).

\(^6\) Merold Westphal, “The Importance of Overcoming Metaphysics for the Life of Faith,” *Modern Theology* 23, no. 2 (April 2007): 272. I agree with Westphal, who argues that even though Millbank is right to insist on a theological ‘overcoming’ of metaphysics, that Christian theology will always argue for certain beliefs that are, in the end, ‘metaphysical.’ The question is ‘what kind of metaphysics does theology generate?’ Westphal draws upon Marion to articulate a more humble, apophatic, and fluid (ungrounded) kind of metaphysical claims for theology.
attending to the testimony of and about an historical man upon whom the Spirit rested.\(^{17}\) Apart from Christ’s cross and resurrection ‘in history’ the new creation which the church proclaims is a fanciful dream or a vague utopian hope (1 Cor. 15). Moltmann argues this forcefully.\(^{18}\)

For unless the church can say ‘this same’ Jesus who lived as a first-century Jew, who proclaimed the nearness of God’s reign and demonstrated God’s invitation to table-fellowship among sinners and cast-aways, who was rejected by his own people, forsaken by God, and killed ‘outside the gates’ on a cross is ‘the same’ Jesus who was raised in power and who ascended into glory, then the church simply has no good news to proclaim.\(^{19}\) For the present experience of life does not suggest a coming salvation, and the finality of death does not contain in itself the promise of a future resurrection. Fanciful claims about a God of the resurrection threaten to be swallowed up in the cross of present experience unless we can say ‘this one’ who was born from a woman, lived, suffered, was rejected, died, and was buried is the ‘same one’ God has claimed as Son in the resurrection. The latter claims about God’s future only have meaning and content in light of the concrete life and story of Jesus of Nazareth. For Moltmann, the Christological controversies have at their root an inability to hold a robust “open dialectic” within the “radical discontinuity” of a crucified Messiah and Lord, which can only be resolved

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\(^{17}\) See Michael Welker, *God the Spirit* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994).


\(^{19}\) Indeed, for Moltmann, this tension or “continuity in radical discontinuity” (199) between the “experience of the god-forsakerness of God’s ambassador... an absolute *nihil* embracing also God” and “the appearance of the crucified one as the living Lord... the experience of the nearness of God in the god-forsaken one... a new totality which annihilates the total *nihil*” is absolutely central to the Easter message and must not be resolved by surrendering one to the other (198). See Ibid., 197-202.
eschatologically. The eschatological and universal of Christian theology—Christian claims of a new creation and the resurrection of the dead—can only be made by attending to these events of cross and resurrection and the testimony that the ‘same one’ who suffered was also glorified.

This movement in Christology from the concrete to the universal imbeds the theological task in the uncertainties and ambiguities of particular cultures, languages, practices, and horizons. This places Christology in a perilous position, for it can easily move either into an abstract, docetic Christ or Christ’s Sonship can disappear into anthropological concerns. Thus, this basic Christological move from the concrete to the universal must work within the dialectic of Chalcedon and the theological category of incarnation.

Kathryn Tanner demonstrates this risk. She has worked extensively at the borders between cultural studies, hermeneutics, and theological discourse. Against a pluralistic theological liberalism (Gordon Kaufman is her primary target), she undercuts any notion of the universal human situation to which such theologies appeal. Anthropology certainly claims that culture is a human universal, but it does so in order to enable attention to the particularities of specific cultures and communities. If theology is also a cultural production, it must also be seen in relationship to particular communities

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20 Ibid., 201. That is, the resurrection “points back to the promises of God and forwards to an eschaton in which his divinity is revealed in all. It must then be understood as the eschatological coming to pass of the faithfulness of God, and at the same time as the eschatological authentication of his promise and as the dawning of his fulfillment...Jesus identifies himself in the Easter appearances as the coming one, and his identity in cross and resurrection points the direction for coming events and makes a path for them” (201).

21 Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology*, Guides to Theological Inquiry (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).

22 Ibid., 61-92.
and a particular way of life, rather than some kind of universal 'grasping' for meaning embedded in the human situation as such. At this point, Tanner seems to throw her project in with the post-liberals. But her understanding of cultural studies also works against the post-liberal notion of a distinctly Christian kind of cultural-linguistic formation in the church. For Tanner, the post-liberals require the identity ‘Christian’ to be bound in some sense over and against that of ‘world’ or ‘secularity.’ But the very resources of linguistic and cultural studies that demand an approach to theology that attends to formation in concrete communities also subverts any sense of stable boundaries and/or identity. Meaning-making is simply too fluid and formational practices too sloppy to make stable declarations about what constitutes the ‘inside’ of a Christian culture and what is ‘outside.’ Rather, Tanner argues that Christian communities (and theology) are always “parasitic” upon cultural forms, in that Christian communities are always working with (and subverting) borrowed cultural materials. The best one can hope for is a particular Christian “style” of “referring all things to God.”

At first glance, Tanner seems to demonstrate the Christological trajectory suggested above. She makes an argument for Christian theology as a cultural production, that emerges from within concrete communities working within a limited horizon and with limited (though changing/fluid) cultural materials—and yet it attempts to point toward the largest possible ‘horizon’ in that it attempts to ‘refer’ these particular localities ‘back to God.’ Christological reflection in the New Testament and in Trinitarian

23 See Ibid., 120-55.
24 Ibid., 113.
25 Ibid., 146.
controversies of the early church also has this particular ‘style’ of referring particular events, experiences, and stories ‘back to God,’ in a way that trusts that God has identified Godself in and with these events. As we will demonstrate below, this style of theological reflection is inseparable from Trinitarian reflection; God as Triune means that God is not revealed self-referentially, but rather in and through historical events and communities within the economy of a Triune set of persons.

But Tanner does not follow the Trinitarian trajectory outlined below. She does not take her best insights far enough because she fails to work with a robust doctrine of the incarnation. Rather than assert a Chalcedonian logic\(^ {26} \) when working with concrete communities and the ‘style’ of theological work, she appeals to a theology of the free Word of God—for Tanner, it is openness to the “free Word” that makes Christian identity an ongoing task.\(^ {27} \) The force of this particular theological argument is to consign Christian theological production to the margins of any truth claims. It is the possibility of this free Word that holds open Christian identity and which also stands as an immediate relativizing critique. Tanner radicalizes theology with postmodern cultural theory, and then she is careful to distinguish God from anything this theology might produce. But—for a work that turns to the concrete and away from ideational views of culture and theology—this is a sleight of hand. Tanner rightfully makes strong claims for concrete cultural particularity, but her theological arguments fail to do the work such claims require.

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\(^ {26} \) Admittedly, ‘Chalcedonian logic’ is a slippery term. I will articulate what I mean by this below. What I am really after is a ‘radicalized’ Chalcedonian logic, one which makes it possible to say ‘crucified God’ and ‘incarnate Son.’

\(^ {27} \) Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology*, 150-55. I am indebted to John Ogren for the argument that follows.
Stanley Hauerwas critiques Tanner for her lack of concreteness.\(^{28}\) And this is perhaps the place where his criticism is valid. Rather than turn to the incarnation—'the Word became flesh and dwelled among us'—she opts for a more abstract notion of the "free Word of God."\(^{29}\) Something of the scandal of John's prologue is lost and the Chalcedonian aporia is traded for a free-flowing Word that may or may not be implicated in the specific, the concrete, the human, the historical. She certainly protects 'God' from being ossified into a theological idol, but she also relieves the scandal of an Incarnate God. By not pointing toward the Chalcedonian aporia, she has failed to match her radically concrete view of culture with theology. I propose that a Christologically-shaped theological project will follow Tanner's impulse toward the concrete and local as a site for theology. And it will do so more radically, in that the contours of Chalcedonian Christological reflection affirm the integrity (unmixed) of two natures in the one person (unseparated).\(^{30}\) The 'dialectic' or the aporia between the two statements must not be resolved, but rather radicalized, in that each of the two natures maintain their integrity (unmixed) without making Jesus anything other than a genuine human being (unseparated). As such, God is identified with the life, crucifixion, and resurrection of a first-century Jewish man. The Scriptures call this man named Jesus "the eikon of the

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\(^{29}\) Tanner, Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology, 150-55.

\(^{30}\) Richard A. Norris, ed., The Christological Controversy, Sources of Early Christian Thought (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 1-5. Norris's introduction emphasizes the way in which Chalcedon articulated certain limits and tensions for talk about Christology without clear resolution. This strikes me as similar to Moltmann's insistence upon an open dialectic for Christology. So also, it seems that this Chalcedonian dialectic is the basic shape for theology, which is what George Hunsinger argues that Barth learned from Martin Luther in terms of a basic theological strategy for dialectically relating freedom and grace, saint and sinner, cross and resurrection. See George Hunsinger, Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 279-304.
invisible God" (Col. 1:15) whose “equality with God” (Phil. 2:6) is poured out for the sake of humanity rather than grasped.31 This ‘yes’ to the integrity of both natures—God and man—often rests uncomfortably within theology, in that ‘God’ is identified and reveals Godself in and among the ambiguities and limitations of human cultures, languages, histories, and communities. This is what Christology, when it attends to the incarnation, asserts—the kind of theological project it envisions and creates space for.

However, Chalcedon cannot be conceived apart from the broader Trinitarian discourse in the early church. So also, this Christological-Incarnational warrant points toward a broader Trinitarian one; for Christology makes the scandal of God’s identification with human history explicit in the most graphic way possible on the cross. But when we ask what difference this Jesus makes for God, we move into the larger story of Jewish and Christian Scriptures, and we see that the Triune God lives as communion in which others are implicated and (perhaps) constitutive of the Triune life.32 In short, we see that the Christological style of working from the particular and concrete that is embedded in the scandal of the incarnation runs throughout the Christian tradition; and that particular communities, practices, relationships, and experiences are precisely the space in which we might hope to encounter and understand God more truly.

However, before moving to the Trinitarian warrant, I must say something about truth and theology. We might phrase the question in this way: given this Christological-Incarnational warrant for theology, how is it that theological discourse relates to our


32 Pannenberg, Systematic Theology. This is a question throughout Pannenberg’s Trinitarian discussion, in which the Reign of God is given by the Father to the Son, and back from the Son to the Father.
concern for truth? Thus far, I have used the phrase “to understand God truly” as a way of articulating the task and aim of theology, and I have introduced Richard Bernstein’s account of the Cartesian Anxiety associated with the charge of relativism when speaking of truth.\textsuperscript{33} In the objectivism-relativism binary, relativism is a real problem. Descartes’ work cannot be distanciated from his historical situation in the midst of decades of religious war. For Descartes and the modern world, if truth is to have any meaning or hope for humanity, it must transcend social location, culture, and religious dogmas. This means that for him it must be objectifiable and universal, and it must be accessible by methodological rigor. The objectivism-relativism binary holds that if this kind of truth is inaccessible—for which historical consciousness, philosophical hermeneutics, cultural anthropology, and other postmodern developments provide a convincing set of arguments—then perspectivism and relativism reign and truth becomes meaningless in our discourse, judgments, and knowledge. For Bernstein, this does not have to be the case. He draws upon Gadamer to articulate the way in which truth is disclosed in and in-between communities of discourse. He finds that Gadamer moves from a universal frame for hermeneutics (that all understanding/inquiry is hermeneutical, historical, linguistic/symbolic) toward the need for claiming inquiry as an exercise in \textit{phronesis}—that is, a discursive exercise of judgment between universal claims and concrete particulars—rooted in particular communities of \textit{praxis}.\textsuperscript{34}

However, Bernstein finds that Gadamer drops the theme of truth in an almost systemic manner and that he (surprisingly) works with an unhistorically-retrieved

\textsuperscript{31} Bernstein, \textit{Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis}, 1-19.

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 118-50.
Aristotle. That is, Bernstein understands Gadamer as drawing from Hegel a sense of truth as "unconcealment" and from Heidegger a sense that truth is not only the asking of ultimate questions, but also "the sense of what is now feasible, what is possible, what is correct here and now." With these conceptions, it is Aristotle who most clearly provides a way to work with tradition and the demands of the practical without setting aside concern for truth. Aristotle's phronesis located within communities of praxis allows us to think of "discursive truth which needs to be justified or warranted by argumentation." However, Gadamer fails to account historically for the exercise of phronesis but rather cut-and-pastes it into modern life as a criticism of scientism, positivism, and techne. The concise critique and lingering question that Bernstein is left with is: what are the modern conditions necessary for this adaptation of phronesis?

Bernstein's answer to this question involves his own attempt to mediate between Arendt, Rorty, Gadamer, and Habermas in order to articulate the possibility for a particular kind of public conversation regarding truth at the boundaries between various truth-seeking communities. He concludes by emphasizing the central themes of dialogue, conversation, undistorted communication, communal judgment, and the type of rational wooing that can take place when individuals confront each other as equals and participants. We have been made aware of the practical and political consequences of these concepts—for as we explore their implications, they draw us toward the goal of cultivating the types of dialogical communities in which phronesis, judgment, and practical discourse become concretely embodied in our everyday practices.

35 Ibid., 152.
36 Ibid., 153.
37 Ibid., 150-64.
38 Ibid., 223.
The Christological-Incarnational warrant developed above can point theology in a direction similar to Bernstein. If theology is implicated in the limitations of the cultural-historical, and if Christian theology follows a Chalcedonian style in moving from the concrete-historical to discern a more true understanding of God, then whatever theology means by truth cannot be objective and universal in the Cartesian sense. It is a kind of discourse that is located somewhere, whether that is the academy, the congregation, or someplace else. This research project attempts to demonstrate the congregation as an important community of praxis among whom such phronetic theological truth claims are disclosed and generated. The Trinitarian and missional warrants below will make this case more directly.

Moreover, if truth is personal and in terms of Christian theology a person we encounter—the risen Christ—then we must extend Bernstein’s insights for the sake of the theological task as it relates to truth. Metropolitan John Zizioulas attends to this question of truth via Christology. In his chapter “Truth and Communion,” he traces the way in which Christological-Trinitarian developments among the Greek Fathers generated a distinctly Christian understanding of truth in which truth becomes “the life of all that is.” As life, Zizioulas helps us to talk about truth in a way that underscores the relational/personal, eventful, and eschatological nature of truth along with the fallibility, provisionality, and emergent character of truth claims.

Zizioulas argues that the Christian view of truth draws upon and subverts both the Greek and Hebrew conceptualities. For the Greeks, truth is cosmological, in that it

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corresponds to unchanging being or source.\textsuperscript{40} In this conceptuality, history and contingent existence pose a problem, for how can historical existence be said to correspond to the unchanging, pure being? Christology is a problem for the Greek view of truth. The Hebrew view, however, understands truth in relationship to history, in that history is salvation-history, the story of how God has acted and the space in which God promises to act on behalf of God’s people.\textsuperscript{41} But the Christian witness to the resurrection of Christ creates problems for such an historical understanding of truth in the sense that the resurrection is without any historical precedent, manifesting, in a certain way, the “end of history...here and now.”\textsuperscript{42} Zizioulas articulates the problem the Greek Fathers faced in the Christological controversies as this:

How can we hold at one and the same time to the historical nature of truth and the presence of ultimate truth here and now? How, in other words, can truth be considered simultaneously from the point of view of the ‘nature’ of being (Greek preoccupation), from the view of the goal or end of history (preoccupation of the Jews), and from the viewpoint of Christ, who is both a historical person and the permanent ground (the \textit{logos}) of being (the Christian claim)—and all the while preserving God’s ‘otherness’ in relation to creation?\textsuperscript{43}

Zizioulas traces out an answer to this set of questions through Irenaeus, Athanasius, the Cappadocians, and Maximus the Confessor. It is Irenaeus who first connected being with life, in that Christ is the truth of the “incorruptibility of being” rather than simply the mind: “Christ is the truth not because he is an epistemological principle which explains the universe, but because he is life and the universe of beings finds its meaning in its

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 69.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 68.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 70-71.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 71-72.
incorruptible existence in Christ.\textsuperscript{44} Athanasius’s reflections on the ontological primacy of the Father-Son relationship (‘has the Father ever been without the Son?’) began to testify to a vision of God in which communion is more fundamental than will or action.\textsuperscript{45} That is, if we follow the Johannine testimony that connects truth and life in Jesus Christ, and if we follow the Johannine Trinitarian discourse (‘I and the Father are one…’) along with the Trinitarian reflection of the early church, we are led to consider truth, life, and communion together with being. In Christ the Father is revealed to be the Father of the Son, and the initiative of this Logos in becoming flesh is seen as responsive to the love of God for the world. Creation is not simply a collective bystander, but rather differentiated persons\textsuperscript{46} who receive and respond to the Word-made-flesh, in such a way that “the whole of creation and history” might be said to have been taken up into Christ.\textsuperscript{47} These reflections come to fruition in the work of the Cappadocians, who bring the relational term prosopon into the more ontologically-oriented hypostasis. As such, Zizioulas wants to argue that this “ontology derived from the being of God” means that relationality

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 80.

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 85-86.

\textsuperscript{46} I realize that here I am straying significantly from Zizioulas’s argument. Zizioulas tends to work ecclesiocentrically, in that the church includes and overcomes the world. God heals and redeems the world in the Eucharistic community. Zizioulas’s understanding of this Eucharist—which manifests the Catholicity of the church in the office of the Bishop (which is also analogous to and contingent upon the way the Deity of God is revealed in the monarchy of the Father)—means that despite his ‘congregationalism,’ he still talks about the church as a single acting subject in and through the office of the Bishop. I follow Volf’s critique of Zizioulas both in terms of providing theological ‘space’ for differentiation among persons, congregations, church, and world and in critiquing the Orthodox insistence on the monarchy of the Father. See Miroslav Volf, \textit{After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity}, Sacra Doctrina (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 73-117.

\textsuperscript{47} Zizioulas, \textit{Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church}, 80.
(understood as *communion*) is constitutive of being: “To be and to be in relation becomes identical.”

At least two significant questions remain in light of Zizioulas’s argument for a Christian conceptuality of truth as life: What kind of relationality? And also, what can we say about truth and knowledge in light of being as communion? In response to both questions, Zizioulas wants to emphasize that *communion* does not negate genuine otherness or difference but rather the inverse. He argues that the apophatic tradition calls into question the more static notion of truth and knowledge in terms of sameness by emphasizing the otherness of God and the fluidity of relationship with this God who is personal and not this or that concept of being. Then he looks to Maximus the Confessor’s distinction between essence and energy, in which *ek-static love* bridges the ontological difference between God and world rather than ‘nature’ or ‘essence.’ What do we mean when we say that Jesus is the ‘way, the truth, and the life’? We confess that truth is *personal*—in the sense that it is disclosed in and by the communion generated by *ek-stasis*, by love—and *event-ful*—in that its disclosure is contingent upon real, concrete communities. For being itself is irreducibly relational, and it is Jesus Christ who embodies truth as communion.

There are, of course, great differences between Zizioulas’s project and Bernstein’s. For Bernstein, the question of God is not even considered. Yet, his project is thoroughly ontological and relational in a way that picks up on similar emphases for

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48 Ibid., 88.

49 Ibid., 89-98.

50 Ibid., 89-90.

51 Ibid., 91.
Zizioulas. It is critical for Bernstein to demonstrate the ontologico-universality of hermeneutics and tradition. Through his careful appropriation of Thomas Kuhn’s work with scientific paradigms and his mediation between Gadamer and Habermas, Bernstein insists that human knowing/living/thinking/truth-seeking is hermeneutical and rooted in historically-continuous traditions. In this way, knowing is irreducibly social, and is disclosed out in front of a community rather than inside an individual head (or heart). Moreover, Bernstein emphasizes the way in which ‘reality bites back’ upon truth-seeking communities in such a way that genuine encounters with that which is other can lead to crisis and revisioning of the tradition, method, and/or truth claims.

Thus, I am arguing in this project that the theological task is ‘to understand God more truly.’ What I mean by this is that truth and understanding are to be understood as relational/personal, event-full, and eschatological. As such, truth-claims are both fallible and emergent. God is not a set of ideas, metaphysical system, or anthropological-cultural construct. Rather, God is “whoever raised Jesus from the dead having before raised Israel from Egypt” and who continues to sustain and prepare the world for God’s promised future. This means that theology must attend to and discern God’s work in and among the concrete communities in which God continues to reveal Godself. This

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52 If truth is related to the Resurrected Christ for Christians, then it must be eschatological. It must be in relation to the ‘coming one.’ As such, the contingencies of the present make any claims inherently fallible, for truth-claims await their future. This is essentially the position that both Moltmann and Pannenberg draw upon as well. Although, for Pannenberg, truth (as eschatological) is still related to a coherence view of truth, since ‘the whole’ is proleptic reality impinging on the present. For Moltmann, eschatology is more focused on the new that arrives in the ‘coming one.’ Either way, both views emphasize truth as both fallible and eschatological. See Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 48-61.


54 Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*. I am particularly influenced by the way in which Moltmann connects the resurrection to themes of promise and the ongoing participation of the church in God’s mission.
does not limit theology to congregations, for the Christian tradition contains many examples of God's work and presence among those who are strangers and marginalized by the Christian community. But congregations—as the local, concrete manifestations of 'church' in the modern world—do seem to be a prime logical locus for such theological reflection. The next warrants will make this case more specifically by considering Trinity and mission.

II: The Trinitarian Warrant and Revelation

The differentiated personhood of Father, Son, and Spirit in the history of Jesus Christ suggests a relational, historical, and eschatological view of revelation, for the God revealed in Scripture is not revealed only with reference to Godself but rather in the exchange between multiple actors in salvation history. At one level, Trinitarian reflection on the narratives of Father, Son, and Spirit can invite a kind of Hegelian metaphysics, where the one-ness of Father, Son, and Spirit is theologically secured at the outset and so salvation history becomes the ongoing revelation of what the theologian knew all-along. This approach helps theology to identify history as revelatory and

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56 See Keifert, "The Return of the Congregation: Missional Warrants."

57 The renewal in Trinitarian theology has borne a great deal of fruit in terms of re-considering theological anthropology (imago Dei), the doctrine of creation, the passio dei, the missio dei, and revelation. I think the last two are most significant for this present project because they address deep concerns within the evangelical tradition and because they point toward the possibility of a theology in, with, and among the congregation. I will outline what a Trinitarian doctrine of God means for revelation in this section, and turn to the missio dei in the next.

58 I have in mind here attempts to work with Trinitarian sources that prioritize God's unity by repeating the phrase 'one ousia, three hypostases' without seeing the modalist tendencies inherent in prioritizing the ousia over the hypostases. In the evangelical tradition, this is done most prominently by Carl F. Henry, who sees in late twentieth century Trinitarian theology a lapse into 'Process theology.' See Henry, God, Revelation, and Authority, 141-213. I call this a 'Hegelian' tendency not because Henry and
creation as participating in the life of God, while also giving Trinity the kind of programmatic status it deserves in theology. However, it fails to integrate the most profoundly upsetting insights of the Scriptural narrative of Father, Son, and Spirit; for the Scriptural testimony resists systematization and rather emphasizes real ambiguities and differentiation in Father, Son, and Spirit.\(^59\) That is, Trinitarian theology helps to articulate the ways in which the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who raised Jesus from the dead is identified in matrices of relationships, historical events, and communicative testimonies.\(^60\) God reveals Godself, but rarely self-referentially.\(^61\) God’s revelation, then, others make an explicit appeal to Hegel but rather that they make a rational, systematic claim of unity at the outset by which the details of salvation history must fit accordingly. I have learned from Pannenberg (who is not immune to ‘Hegelian’ charges of his own) the importance of making God’s unity eschatological, which makes theology an anticipatory participation in God’s future. See Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology,* 47-61; 340-47.

\(^{59}\) Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology,* 340. “Only at the end of history will the God who is hidden in his overruling of history and in individual destinies finally be universally known to be the same as the God who is revealed in Jesus Christ... In the contradictions of historical experience the unity of God is hidden, the unity of the God who works in world history and the God whose love is revealed in Jesus Christ.”

\(^{60}\) Besides Pannenberg, several other influential theologians critique a self-referential view of revelation by way of Trinitarian theology. In all these approaches, relationality pushes the doctrine of God into a more responsive, social, and open framework. They each provide, in their own way, a critique of what Zizioulas calls the “closed ontology” that a monist, self-referential, theology generates. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church,* 70. Most influential for this project are: Jenson, *Systematic Theology.* Jenson works with a narrative approach that I will draw upon below. Also, Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God.* For Moltmann, Trinitarian theology opens up the *passio dei,* and so he reverses the usual question ‘what does God mean for the world’ in order to ask ‘what does the world mean for God.’ I also find Walter Brueggemann’s Old Testament theology to be incredibly helpful here. Although he does not work from a Trinitarian perspective, he demonstrates the centrality of themes of partnership and narrative identity throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. For Brueggemann, God is identified primarily in and through active verbs in which God acts in history and through which God seeks out and invites ‘partners’ in God’s historical-redemptive-revelatory activity. See Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005).

\(^{61}\) A note needs to be said here about Exodus 3:14. In Carl F. Henry’s work, it is a programmatic ontological statement relating to both God’s being and revelation. For Henry, this is a foundational statement that identifies God as an ‘object’ whose self-sustaining existence means that we can know objective things about him. See Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority,* 43ff. But this is clearly an interpretation of the text that does not account for context. Pannenberg refers to Gerhard von Rad’s linguistic analysis to translate the text “I will be who I always will be” (205) Given the context of this text in the calling of Moses, it is clear that God’s identity is revealed and will be revealed in God’s promised
must be understood in terms of an open ontology, where the theologian is participating in what can only be complete, can only be known, can only see as ‘whole’ eschatologically. God does reveal Godself, but we can only know “in part” as we yearn for God’s promised future (1 Cor. 13:9).

Real differentiation exists in narrative accounts of God in a way that resists systematization. For example, when Jesus receives John’s baptism, the Father announces his pleasure with “my Son” and the Holy Spirit descends in the shape of a dove (Mt. 3:13-17; Mk. 1:9-13; Lk. 3:21-22). One can read this narrative as Trinitarian, where Father, Son, and Spirit share in a moment of affirmation and responsiveness to the other. But John’s baptism and Israel’s historical situation are also actors in the narrative. For the Son seeks John’s baptism and thus identifies with a repentant and expectant Israel while the Father claims this Son and the Spirit visibly rests upon this Jesus who participates in Israel’s repentance. This is not simply a narrative that demonstrates three hypostases in the doctrine of God. It is also a soteriological narrative, in that this first century man from Nazareth who is associated with a Jewish renewal movement is both claimed by God— anointed as a beloved son—and unambiguously receives the Holy Spirit. As the Trinitarian life of God is revealed, it is also opened up (or perhaps poured out) as God identifies Godself with this man, and so also sinful, exilic Israel.

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future; for the sign given to Moses is “when you have brought these people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain” (3:12). Later in his argument, Pannenberg writes: “In the Bible the divine name is not a formula for the essence of deity but a pointer to the experience of his working” (360). See Pannenberg, Systematic Theology, 205, 360.

62 Moltmann, Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology. See also Pannenberg, Systematic Theology. Although Moltmann and Pannenberg disagree on the way this future functions in theology, they both argue for the basic eschatological shape for theology.

63 This was pointed out to me by Gary Simpson in a conversation, September, 2009.
Indeed, this theme runs throughout Scripture in various forms. Robert Jenson argues that Scripture narrates the *dramatis dei personae*—the drama of the characters of God.\(^{64}\) A narrative needs multiple agents, which is what Scripture affirms with regard to Father, Son, and Spirit. In the Trinitarian narratives of Jesus the Son, we see Father, Son, and Spirit as persons who create and respond to the plot\(^{65}\)—salvation history—together. Rather than suggesting three gods, the Scriptural narrative points toward God’s unity revealed in God’s economy of salvation, in which the Father hands his Kingdom over to the Son in the Spirit so that the Son and Spirit can hand it back to the Father in the eschaton.\(^{66}\)

This means that Trinitarian theology considers how this differentiation in salvation history is a part of the life of God, and what the world means for God as well as God for the world.\(^{67}\) This is an exercise that is inseparable from concrete, local

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\(^{64}\) Jenson, *Systematic Theology*.

\(^{65}\) It is important to note here that by emphasizing ‘agents’ in relationship to ‘narrative,’ that this construction of personhood vis-à-vis this account of agency identifies personhood as both *actio* and *passio*. The agency of each, as Triune, necessarily impacts the others. This is what Pannenberg picks up on in the handing over of the Kingdom, and what Moltmann wants to emphasize in his account of the *passio Dei*.

\(^{66}\) Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 329ff. Pannenberg rejects any notion of unity rooted in ‘essence’ or ‘attributes’ or the priority of the Father because they fail to properly account for the differentiated agency of Father, Son, and Spirit in salvation history and because they fail to account for the way in which the deity of the Trinitarian persons is contingent upon the other. Pannenberg writes: “Even in his deity, by the creation of the world and the sending of his Son and Spirit to work in it, he has made himself dependent upon the course of history. This results from the dependence of the Trinitarian persons upon one another as the kingdom is handed over and handed back in connection with the economy of salvation and the intervention of Son and Spirit in the world and its history” (329).

\(^{67}\) Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 200-78. Moltmann works out this question of the *passio dei* in both *The Crucified God* and *Trinity and the Kingdom*. For Moltmann, the cross of Christ must be understood in terms of the Sonship of Jesus, in which the “cross stands between the Father and the Son in all the harshness of its forsakenness” (246). The cross, then, is a Trinitarian event and as such “all human history” with its death and ambiguity is “taken up into...the Trinity, and integrated into the future of the ‘history of God’” (246). Even though Moltmann’s work results in a particular panentheistic perspective which can be controversial in Christian theology, his basic instinct toward the way in which Trinitarian reflection must consider the way in which *world* impacts *God* is certainly correct and shared by Robert Jenson—who rejects Moltmann’s panentheism. See Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 179-93.
encounters with God in communities of faith and practice. For as soon as we pay attention to the action and passion of Spirit and Son in relationship to the Father, we recognize the asymmetrical action and passion of creation and humanity in this drama. The baptism, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus make this explicit, but from Israel’s earliest testimony, God is not identified purely self-referentially but rather as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Nor is God identified only by reference to the experiences or encounters of individuals, but also in socio-historical events such as the creation of a people Israel and her Exodus and Exile. Through Scripture, the revelation of God is ‘from above’ and beyond human understanding (Isa. 40:12-13; 55:8). And yet, God’s revelation is received in the context of existing cultural forms, as the inspired authors of Scripture exemplify in borrowing (and subverting) particular words and literary genres. Such a view of revelation discloses the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses as intentionally entangled in the untidy and ambiguous nature of human history. This God invites Jewish idolators to compare the impotent, deaf, and blind creation of their hands to YHWH’s demonstration of his lordship on history (Isa. 44:6-28). And yet, God seeks and calls “partners” for God’s creative and redemptive work in history. To blind-and-deaf Exilic Israel, he sends his “shepherd,” the Persian emperor Cyrus who will “accomplish all that I please” (Isa. 44:28). God continues to call prophets, who hear God’s voice and see God’s work and who bear witness to God’s promise of universal

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68 Jenson, Systematic Theology, 63. “God is whoever raised Jesus from the dead, having before raised Israel from Egypt.”

69 Brueggemann, Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy, 407-12. Brueggemann develops this theme of “Yahweh’s partners” around the statement “Yahweh is committed to Yahweh’s partners in freedom and in passion” (410). He identifies four primary partners from the OT texts: Israel, human persons, the nations, and creation.
justice, righteousness, and knowledge of God through the faithful witness of a concrete people and the distinct shape of their life together.

The suspicion throughout the Jewish Scriptures becomes more explicit in the gospels. The everlasting God has committed Godself to the world. God has taken upon Godself the full responsibility for Israel’s covenant for the sake of blessing all nations. God ‘stoops’ and ‘stays’ with this people and this history, recreating them even when they are banished and in exile. As such, God has committed Godself to history, a concrete people, and concrete religious practices. God’s “let us make humankind…” (Gen. 1:26) is not simply an act of power but also of self-limitation, suggesting that this God is not a single actor on a bare stage. In Mary’s womb and at the baptism, ministry, and crucifixion of Jesus the curtain is drawn back to reveal the differentiated action and passion of Father, Son, and Spirit acting in a way that includes and even invites human participation. The Triune God shares the stage with all who share in the passivity of Mary’s faith—‘yes, let it be unto me as you have said’—as well as those who conspire against it with all kinds of accusations—‘crucify him.’ What can make sense of this? Simply the testimony ‘God is love.’ To love and be loved is to live in a matrix of giving and receiving. It is to affect and be affected. The Scriptures tell us that the Father loves the Son in the Spirit, and the Son returns this love in such a way that includes the world.

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70 Henry, God, Revelation, and Authority.


73 Moltmann, The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God, 57-60. See also David S. Cunningham, These Three Are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology, Challenges in Contemporary Theology (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 248-52.
God's self-limitation is the self-limitation of love, which displays itself fully in the cross and is claimed by God in the resurrection.

The Trinitarian controversies in the early church rightly saw that what was at stake is the doctrine of God's immutability in relationship to the cross of Christ. For if such giving-receiving could be granted for God in se, what difference does salvation history make for God's internal life? What, exactly, took place in God at the foundation of the world, in the incarnation, at the baptism, or at the cross? What difference does Jesus make to God? Rather than making this a philosophical question, I want to suggest that this concern is a missiological one. For Athanasius, Trinitarian theology—even if it destabilized concepts of immutability—was necessary to defend the faithfulness of God and the trustworthiness of the Gospel. The Greek mind was not too far removed from the capricious polytheistic pantheon that often mirrored the brutality and volatility of nature. A Jesus who was not fully God would endanger the whole Christian promise of salvation. How could the Son be trusted if he, too, shared in the created order? Similarly, how could the Son offer salvation—participation in the divine life—if he simply maintained the divide between Creator and created? The hope of the gospel was at stake.


76 Rusch, ed., The Trinitarian Controversy, 96-129. In Book I of Orations Against the Arians, Athanasius critiques the Arian use of 'unoriginated' as a way of referring to God, drawing upon Scripture to demonstrate the relational terms 'Father' and 'Son.' For Athanasius, naming God as 'unoriginate' is to make his existence contingent upon that which is originated, rather than by God's own existence in the relation of Father, Son, and Spirit. Thus, although Athanasius still defends his own position as defending the immutability of God, it is a very different kind of immutability, that might better be called 'faithfulness' in that it is an immutability of relationship, which sets the stage for reflections on the passio dei throughout Christian history.
And this was worth defending even if it raised a somewhat unacknowledged challenge to the classical doctrine of immutability.

This present research project follows Hegel’s impulse toward history and concrete communities as *revelatory*, as something to do with God. However, the Scriptural testimony of the Triune God and the Christian experience of mission suggest something far more humble, local, and messy for theology than a synthesized system emanating from a monist God. The local congregation does not contain or expose the universal, but is a concrete participant in the story of God’s ongoing care for the world. The point is that Trinitarian theology and mission theology demonstrate that we understand God more truly as we attend to the concrete and particular—even if this means that we discover local, peculiar, and surprising (or even contradictory) Christian experiences and frameworks. For theology participates in the eschatological promise of God’s mission; like the communities it emerges from, learns with, and critiques—it always ‘knows in part’ and ‘looks as through a glass darkly’ (1 Cor. 13:9-12). Such is the human situation, and such is the situation claimed by God in the incarnate Christ.

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77 See Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*, 77-78. John Zizioulas argues that the concept of *revelation* tends to undermine historical existence because it “unifies existence, through an idea or a meaning that is singular and comprehensive” whereas history “presents existence in the form of fragmentations and antinomies.” And, “if an interest in truth as revelation eclipses an interest in truth as history, it inevitably results in the human mind becoming the ground of truth, the crucial bond between truth and creation.” This, undoubtedly, is what plagues many ‘conservative’ evangelical theological projects which work with a kind of ‘revelational positivism’ and tend to produce Biblicist and propositional systematic theologies. It is a supreme irony that a certain kind of Biblicism (with its hermeneutical naivete) makes the ‘human mind’ and not ‘God’s word’ the “crucial bond between truth and creation,” but I think Zizioulas is right. I wonder if it is such a view of revelation that precludes the absence of a conservative evangelical voice in the present renewal of Trinitarian theology. I think Millard Erickson is right in this regard, that attention to biblical inerrancy (among other doctrines) has hindered conservative evangelical engagement with Trinitarian theology. See Millard J. Erickson, *God in Three Persons: A Contemporary Interpretation of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), 14.
III: The Trinitarian Warrant and Mission

Because God has raised Jesus from the dead, the human situation claimed by God in the incarnate Christ is marked by promise. The resurrection of the dead—a Jewish apocalyptic hope—is made manifest in Christ, announcing a new creation in the midst of the cross of human history. And the risen Christ ‘goes ahead of us’ (Mk. 16:7) as we bear witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ crucified and risen (Acts 1:8) and anticipate Jesus’ coming, the universal eschatological manifestation of this promised new creation (Acts 1:11; 1 Cor. 15:35-56). As such, the present human situation is one of mission as participation in God’s promised future. And since this is a future for all creation, God’s mission exists at the boundaries between social groups, languages, and communities. The resurrection hope of a new humanity finds its promised future as the Holy Spirit creates communities in which in-group divisions such as ‘Jew and Gentile’ or ‘male and female’ fade away, or when communities bear witness and discover Christ across geographic or cultural boundaries (Gal. 3:28). The Scriptures record the early Christian experience of the gospel in terms of its boundary-crossing, missional imperative. In some ways, the story of the early church can be read as missional translation of the gospel, or as a story of following (or discovering) the Holy Spirit across social, religious, and cultural

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78 Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, 139-239. Moltmann, better than anybody, connects mission, resurrection, and eschatology through the theme of promise. In his framework, historical existence is properly historical only as mission, which lives in light of the contradiction between the “present promise and hope” and the “unrealized future of the promise” (224-225). He writes: “The promissio of the universal future leads of necessity to the universal missio of the Church to all nations. The promise of divine righteousness in the event of the justification of the godless leads immediately to the hunger for divine right in the godless world, and thus to the struggle for public, bodily obedience...The Christian consciousness of history is a consciousness of mission...” (225).
boundaries with great ambiguity and inconclusiveness. Another way to say this is that as the Holy Spirit breaks into human history for the sake of God’s promised future, the Spirit seeks, enables, and creates partners for the sake of God’s world. This participation or partnership is called *mission*.

The latter half of the Twentieth century has generated a great deal of reflection on the *missio Dei*, which is shorthand for thinking ‘Trinity’ and ‘mission’ together. Since the Willingen International Missionary Council (IMC) conference, *missio Dei* emphasizes that *mission* describes the life of God—Father sending Son and Spirit—rather than an activity of the church. Drawing upon Trinitarian reflection that thinks Trinity in relationship to salvation history, it emphasizes the way in which the Triune Life loves, includes, and reconciles the world. Or as Catherine LaCugna has articulated, the God revealed in Scripture and testified to in Christian experience is *God for Us*. As such, *missio Dei* de-centers the church and critiques colonial, empire-building missiological

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82 See LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*. 
activity. It claims that God has not abandoned the world, and yet it does not assume that this means God has any special allegiance to existing church and mission-agency projects. Missio Dei, then, critiques all positions that might fuse God-and-church by placing the emphasis on God’s promised future for the world. And yet, it also compels and invites the church to learn, seek, pray, and listen for how it is that God’s promised future might be breaking through in its present setting. Thus, mission as participation in God’s promised future, makes discernment one of the primary practices for Christian communities, while also underscoring the otherness of God and God’s mission. The church properly lives as church ‘between Gospel and culture.’

Much of the missio Dei discussion, however, has neglected to place the late-twentieth century Social Trinitarian projects into fruitful conversation with concern for congregations and mission. Rather, they have largely followed Lesslie Newbigin’s sending and monarchial Trinitarian vision in order to emphasize the church as the recipient of God’s sending activity, in that the Father sends the Son and Spirit who in turn send the church into the world. But this fails to follow the relational ontology emphasized above, and tends to either place the church in the same colonial relationship with regards to ‘unchurched,’ ‘heathen,’ or ‘secular’ peoples or bypasses the church.

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85 This is an argument I have made elsewhere. See Scott J. Hagley, “Improv in the Streets: Missional Leadership as Public Improvisational Identity Formation,” Journal of Religious Leadership 7, no. 2 (Fall 2008).
altogether. A relational, social Trinity pushes us to consider what the world means for God. So one might wonder, then, what difference does the world make for the church?

Mission history suggests that the world makes a profound difference for the church—and sometimes even for the sake of the gospel. Lamin Sanneh traces the way in which the gospel lives at the boundaries between cultures, in a way that transforms the ‘sender’ and the ‘receiver.’ When the gospel is translated rather than just disseminated, ‘Christian’ cultural forms from the sending church are relativized while ‘pagan’ cultural forms in the receiving culture are de-stigmatized. Although there is a transfer from one setting to the next, it is better read as an exchange, or perhaps some kind of ‘mutually-critical dialogue.’ Even the social sciences were theologically implicated in mission; for in missionary literature—especially among evangelicals—linguistic, cultural, and anthropological studies were thought to be simply instrumental for the dissemination of the gospel. Tribal languages were transliterated into systems of writing so that the Scriptures could be translated. Cultural practices were attended to so that the ‘deep structures’ of this or that tribal ‘worldview’ could be discerned and the Christian gospel addressed to it. But these human sciences did not only play an instrumental role. Kwame Bediako considers the missionary work of translating ‘God’ into tribal African languages to be a profound moment of theological discernment; for it effectively names

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86 See our argument in Hagley et al., “Toward a Missional Theology of Participation: Ecumenical Contributions to Reflections on Trinity, Mission, and Church.”


88 Ibid., 1-7.

God’s African history before the missionaries. The missionary work with language and cultural forms could not be extricated from acts of theological discernment in relationship to concrete people groups and the work of God in their midst. The study and interpretation of cultural-linguistic forms was theological, even if it was not fully declared as such. Of course mission history is full of colonial ‘dissemination’ examples of mission that attempt to transfer cultural forms as the gospel. But these attempts—if they included the translation of Scripture into the vernacular—were often undercut by their own sensitivity to cultural-linguistic realities on the ground.

Thus, the church is changed as it participates in mission, in that its gospel is renewed and expanded. In mission, the church encounters God as stranger, as Other, as one who goes before them and meets them at the boundaries. The above example drawn from the modern missions movement also reflects the experience of the early church, in that the Christian scriptures emerged from and were shaped by the experience of the church in and at various social, relational, and communal boundaries. “Mission,” as Martin Kähler is often quoted, “is the mother of theology.”

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91 For Moltmann, mission is the ongoing historical encounter with the ‘coming One.’ The church lives into an open future, marked by the irresolvable dialectic of cross and resurrection. See Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*. A similar, less eschatologically-robust argument is made by Guder in regards to evangelism. He argues that the church’s tendency is toward ‘gospel reductionism’ which is only countered as the church participates in mission. The church must continue to encounter the gospel afresh and be ‘evangelized’ by it in order to bear witness to it. He states that “evangelizing churches are churches that are being evangelized.” See Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, 26.

92 See Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger: A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism*.

93 See Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006). Although I am suspicious of Wright’s optimism regarding the ‘grand narrative’ of Scripture, his work rightly demonstrates a ‘missional hermeneutic’ in which Scripture is to be read as a missional text and also understood as emerging from and within mission. He describes the
The experience and reflections of the early church in mission have not only produced the Scriptures, but also demonstrate the kind of theology proposed and attempted in this project. In Luke 4, Jesus returns from his temptation in the desert “filled with the power of the Holy Spirit” (v. 14) to his home synagogue in Nazareth. As was his custom, Jesus stood up and read from Isaiah 61: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (18-19). This is deft storytelling by the author, for Luke has already connected Jesus with the so-called ‘servant songs’ in Isaiah and followed the other synoptics in describing the concrete descent of the Spirit at Jesus’ baptism. In making these connections, Luke is participating in the historical-interpretive work of the early church; for upon one concrete human life—Jesus, son of Mary from Nazareth—God’s Spirit rested. Luke’s narrative recognizes in Jesus the Isaianic hope that “the Spirit of the Lord shall rest” upon one from the “stump of Jesse” who will judge righteously and act faithfully to bring about the universal renewal of creation and extend the knowledge of God (Isa. 11:1-9). For the Lukan community, Jesus is the servant who is “a light for revelation to the Gentiles” (Lk. 2:32; Isa. 49:6) full of the Spirit who not only gathers the crowds to himself, but who also sends them out in the Spirit to the ends of the earth.

Luke—as with the biblical testimony in general—works in two directions at once. On the one hand, the Lukan community is trying to grapple with their present set of experiences among a growing Gentile movement that claims a crucified Jew as its savior. It is a first-century history; Luke “investigates” and writes for a (presumed) benefactor so that he might “know the truth” (Lk. 1:1-4). On the other hand, the Lukan community sees that the present set of events reveals something about the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as something in continuity with the history of the Jewish people that has universal importance—to the ends of the earth. The Lukan community thus makes sense of its own life in terms of the biblical story and the God identified in and with this story. As such, Luke shares with the biblical tradition a concern for concrete history. For God is not only accessible in the inner depths, but also revealed in the plight of a people and a renewed creation. Whatever might be made of Luke’s embellishments or suspect sources, the very form of Luke’s story communicates that the concrete history of Jesus and the ekklesia—this public gathering in his name and through his Spirit—clearly matters for Luke and the Lukan community. The reality of the one Jesus calls Father and the transforming, creative, and surprising power of the Spirit whom Jesus both receives and sends—this is the ‘truth’ that Luke hopes to communicate by attending to Jesus’ ministry and post-resurrection mission among the gentiles. Why should modern theology not share in Luke’s concern for the concrete? This is the way in which the Biblical writers seem to work. Scripture attends in content and form to the stories of particular persons and communities. Nowhere is this more significant than in the gospel narratives. The history of a particular person at a particular time is told and reflected upon with great care. Because of this, the Scriptural tradition sustains a great deal of diversity and ambiguity.
This experience of the church-in-mission and across cultural boundaries, as well as the theological discernment involved even in social science work among the missionaries helps to underscore the point Ward makes at the beginning of this section: theology is a cultural production and thus it speaks ‘from somewhere’ and receives cultural meaning in relationship to other cultural forms and beliefs. I am drawing upon social science with this understanding of theology. I am asking both where it is that this particular congregation is located and what it is that they are generating in terms of public theology. This kind of project runs the risk of becoming some form of cultural commentary, or a positioning of theological discourse within social science frames. But it does not need to be. This can be a project of understanding God more truly, an exercise in theological learning and wisdom in and with this congregation.

Theology and Local, Concrete Communities

The theological sketch above leads to at least four meta-theological reflections. (1) Theology, inevitably, speaks from somewhere/someone and is thus a cultural-hermeneutical construction. This does not doom theology to theories of ego-projection but rather affirms the radicalized Chalcedonian character of theology. That is, the gospel of God continues to be communicated in human language and translated across cultural forms, taking up new human practices. As the eternal Word took up residence in a frail infant, as the beloved Son received John’s baptism for repentance, so also the articulation and understanding of the Christian faith—God talk—takes root in and emerges from the concrete concerns, experiences, and practices of particular communities. Moreover, in carrying on this radicalized Chalcedonian logic, these particularities are not problems to be overcome, but rather contributors to theological discourse. God identifies Godself in
and through particular stories and particular communities which contribute to the story or drama that reveals God. That is, the from and who of theology communicates something about God; context and community are not targets for theological consumption, but rather legitimate voices in the conversation.⁹⁵

(2) Because theology always speaks from somewhere/someone, it also always speaks to somewhere/someone. It is conversation located within a larger discourse. This means that although it attempts to understand God more truly, it is only ever a provisional claim regarding ‘God’ and should not be confused with more confident metaphysical projects that ‘ground’ theology in either revelation or human experience so that they can claim a more secure picture of ‘the whole.’⁹⁶ Theology lives only in the security of faith, hope, and love; for just as the Scriptures articulate real differentiation in the work of Father, Son, and Spirit, so also the ‘big’ picture of God’s unity remains an eschatological

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⁹⁵ Keifert, “The Return of the Congregation: Missional Warrants.”

⁹⁶ Three things should be said here about my use of the term ‘the whole’ as well as ‘metaphysics.’ (1) Gadamer’s move toward a universalizing hermeneutics—that the human situation as such is irreducibly hermeneutical—challenges the edifice which our sense of ‘knowledge’ and ‘truth’ stand upon. It is not as though we lose all sight of ‘the whole’ in a celebration of ‘particularity,’ for knowing (even in the hermeneutic circle) involves a play between the whole as we understand it (the ‘whole’ work, the ‘whole’ tradition, project, etc.) and its parts. Gadamer writes: “the concept of whole is itself to be understood only relatively. The whole of meaning that has to be understood in history or tradition is never the meaning of the whole of history...The finite nature of one’s own understanding is the manner in which reality, resistance, the absurd, and the unintelligible assert themselves. If one takes this finitude seriously, he must take the reality of history seriously as well” (xxxii). Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd, rev. ed., Continuum Impacts (New York: Continuum, 2004).

(2) The critique of metaphysics that I am articulating in terms of a ‘grounded’ view of ‘the whole’ comes from Merold Westphal, who articulates a vision for a more chastened and humble metaphysic via Marion. See Westphal, “The Importance of Overcoming Metaphysics for the Life of Faith.” And Merold Westphal, “Vision and Voice: Phenemenology and Theology in the Work of Jean-Luc Marion,” International Journal of Philosophy and Religion 60 (2006). (3) Theology that learns from Gadamer’s hermeneutics and works ‘post-metaphysically’ in the way Westphal articulates has a lot to learn from apophatic theology. Marion argues that the apophatic tradition is not simply a ‘negative’ theology, but one that recognizes both the necessity of ‘naming’ God, and also the provisionality of the name. It is theology that recognizes both the necessity to ‘name’ our encounters with God and the inadequacy of this name. Once we ‘name’ God, God has already slipped beyond our grasp. See Jean-Luc Marion, “In the Name: How to Avoid Speaking of ‘Negative Theology’,” In God, the Gift, and Postmodernism, ed. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon, The Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999).
hope. Now we only ‘see in part’ but then we will see more clearly (1 Cor. 13:8-9). In this sense, theology participates in the eschatological hope of God’s new creation.

Theology, so understood, must be *humble* in the sense that it sees faith as an intricate part of knowledge—as faith seeking understanding, or believing in order to know. Because of this, theology has a vested interest in challenging what has been called ‘onto-theology’ or the enlightenment project of ‘metaphysics’ that attempts to relate the parts of reality to some static and totalizing conception of ‘the whole.’

(3) Since theology speaks from somewhere/someone and to somewhere/someone, and since (in terms of the Incarnation and Chalcedonian Christology) this is not a problem for theology but the very claims Christian tradition/experience and Scripture make about God, then the work of theology can be said to be communicative spiritual discernment. Theology takes place *with* someone. Just as communities of faith co-authored various texts in the Scriptures, and as the Gospel gained greater understanding at the cultural boundaries in mission, so also theological work must attend to and make sense of concrete experiences in the church and world; for this is not a God who lives only ideationally, but rather the living God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead and who sends the redemptive and sustaining Holy Spirit into all the world. As discernment, theology attempts to say something about God. However, given the first and second statement, it is a chastened, humble, and open-ended discernment. This is the paradox and challenge for the Christian community: theology must attend to the activity and identity of God in our midst, and yet theology must hold these statements loosely and remain open for more discussion, for we ‘look through a glass darkly.’

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Finally, as open-ended discernment with a community, theology can also be understood as embodied praxis. Meaningful action can be understood as a text. A community certainly says something by what it does, how it lives together. As such, theological discourse should not be limited to what can be verbalized as concepts and articulated in conversation. The lives of the faithful and the matrices of Christian practices must also be attended to as meaningful, as saying something about God. My use of ethnographic-phenomenology is an attempt to attend to this kind of meaningful social praxis and bring it into writing, to draw it into broader frames for theological discourse. Thus, Midtown’s participatory public theology emerges from attending to Midtown’s practices of ministry and engagement.

In light of the research project at hand, these statements lead to another set of questions. The first question is a continuation of the previous one: How is it that attending to the life and framework of a particular congregation might be said to be theology? That is, what particular relationship is conceived (and enacted) between social science and theology that can embed the above theological argument in an actual research project? And the second is more particular: What is evangelical about this theological project? That is, can the research—as conceived and enacted—be claimed and/or recognized by evangelicals?

Theology and Social Science

The argument above articulates the relationship between concrete communities of faith and theological discourse as created and sustained by the Triune God’s commitment

to the world. Theology is a cultural production; yet this does not undercut its intention to understand God more truly. This means that theology must attend in a disciplined and careful way to the world and communities of faith in order to work in a way that is consistent with the intentions outlined so far. This could conceivably be done in a variety of ways. The present project uses social science practices to attend to a community of faith with integrity and intellectual rigor. I think that the warrants outlined above demonstrate that the concrete experiences of the faithful matter, that voices other than the academic theologian should be accounted for, and that world is important for making statements about God. I have developed a set of social science practices that emerge from these theological insights, but it is by no means an easy task. The argument above demonstrates the need for an ongoing negotiation between social science and theology.

Method is not a delivery-system for truth.

Given the emphases developed thus far, this particular project needs to be sustained, challenged, and provoked by social science practices that are hermeneutical

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99 There are many interdisciplinary theological projects that I am not doing. I am not attempting to correlate dogmatics with scientific research, as F. LeRon Shults. See F. LeRon Shults, Christology and Science (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008). I am also not following some earlier types of ‘practical theology’ which seem to articulate decisive ‘moments’ in theological reflection between assessing/understanding context and then engaging with theological resources in light of the context. These are correlational and continue the trajectory of academic theology which places the theologian as the arbiter of traditions and the generator of theology. See Don S. Browning, A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991). And Edward Farley, Practicing Gospel: Unconventional Thoughts on the Church’s Ministry, 1st ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003). Although my project emerges out of similar theological-missional concerns, I am also not trying to ‘frame’ a social science project theologically. See Craig Van Gelder, “The Hermeneutics of Leading in Mission,” Journal of Religious Leadership 3, no. 1-2 (Spring-Fall 2004). At some level, engagement with another academic discipline for the sake of attending to the world in order to understand God truly is an ad hoc affair. One must work with some tools and practices within some or other method, which always eliminates other possibilities. This is true within any particular discipline, (as Bernstein’s argument for judgment and theory-choice demonstrates), and it is even more true with regards to interdisciplinary work. The discursive and phronetic understanding of truth that I have argued for via Bernstein means that there is no such thing as pure method, and understanding is always provisional. The burden of proof is on the researcher to make the case for ‘best fit’ in regards to the phenomena one is attending to and the practices one has engaged in. The researcher makes an argument within a broader conversation, but its ‘fit’ is in part due to the judgment of the community.
and enable the researcher to be humble, attentive to the immediate, and intersubjective.\textsuperscript{100} In short, it must be a set of social science practices that remain open to the possibility of the Other and of transcendence while still attending to the immediate and concrete. Given these concerns, the method pursued will draw upon a particular stream in phenomenology developed from Husserl, Heidegger, and Marion while learning research practices from anthropological ethnography. What has developed is a theological project that I will call an ethnographic-phenomenology in which phenomenology provides a particular set of prejudices while ethnography provides particular sets of research practices.

A Phenomenological Posture

Modern epistemology tends to operate under the assumption that 'like knows like.' That is, knowledge is possible only on the basis of finding common ground—whether this is conceptual, anthropological, or ontological. This has created a host of problems for theology. How can one talk meaningfully about knowing God if such knowledge can only be given by establishing likeness with the very God theology claims is unlike any created being and beyond understanding? There are two basic responses to this problem.\textsuperscript{101} The first is to assert that one can, in fact, know God. This is theology in the affirmative, and it often draws upon a robust notion of God's self-giving in

\textsuperscript{100} This is a key point of difference between what I think I am doing in this research and the views articulated in the last footnote. I hope to do theology in a way that the congregation has some level of co-authorship, that in conversation and discernment we are able to understand God together, rather than in the consciousness of a single researcher. This is why phenomenology via Marion is so important, as I will articulate below. But I also realize that this intention remains somewhat artificial because—in the context of academic work—I must, myself, write and account for the research.

\textsuperscript{101} I mean these responses as basic heuristic categories. I can't think of any theologian who fits perfectly in either category.
revelation. God makes Godself known in and through the words of Scripture, the traditions of the faithful, and in the innermost testimony of the Spirit to the soul. God bridges this distance in God’s own revelation. The second response is to assert the impossibility of truly knowing God. This notes the ontological difference between the Transcendent One and contingent human existence and the fallibility of all human forms—language, concepts, practices—to ‘contain’ or to hold enough likeness to know God.

These responses, however, operate within the same understanding of knowledge. Both are subject to the charge of ‘onto-theology’ or ‘metaphysics’ in the sense that they assume a reliable picture of the whole, and assume a paradigm of knowledge in which an object is taken in and interpreted by a subject. But at the margins of these two responses lurks a third option that has taken many different theological forms. This is a

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102 I have used Carl F. Henry throughout as an example of evangelical theology. He certainly fits into this category, as does Wayne Grudem. For both, their entire theological apparatus rests upon this notion of God’s self-revelation. The God-creation gap is bridged in revelation, which is reliably given in Scripture. This is of course different from Barth (whom they are both critical of), for although Barth works with a similar revelational strategy, the only point of connection is Jesus Christ. Scripture is only Scripture (and revelation) as it testifies to and about Christ. See Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*. And Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*. See also Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G.T. Thomson, vol. 1.1 The Doctrine of the Word of God (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1960).

103 I have in mind here not what is called the ‘apophatic tradition’ but rather theological projects that work only within the horizon of anthropology, where theology names some kind of universal human quest for the absolute but does not have much to do with God. As one concrete example, this perspective is taken up by those who follow the religious pluralism of John Hick. See John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005).

104 Merold Westphal draws upon the Kant’s, Heidegger’s, and Marion’s critique of metaphysics to develop his own argument for post-metaphysical theology. He argues that Kant sought to “deny knowledge in order to make room for faith” in his development of practical reason. So also, Westphal sees the ‘god’ of metaphysics as different from the god of faith: “Metaphysics is dangerous because it assumes that it has concepts and principles that apply univocally within the domains of the sensible and supersensible, failing to see the distortion this imposes on the latter” (258). See Westphal, “The Importance of Overcoming Metaphysics for the Life of Faith.” Zizioulas makes a similar point in his critique of theologies which work with revelation as the unveiling of “pre-existing truth,” which “always unifies existence, through an idea or meaning that is singular and comprehensive…” Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*, 77.
theology that holds both God's distance and provisional—though truthful—knowledge/experience of God together. It is what Aquinas points toward with his use of analogy and what the mystics in the Catholic tradition and the pietists in the Protestant tradition have variously understood. Truthful experience of God does not always find adequate language or concepts. Conceptual frameworks can be shattered by the encounter with an Other, and yet we can discern some kind of adequate or minimal interpretation of this experience. That is, this third way understands knowledge in terms of *encounter* and *event*, in which *world* or that which is *Other* imposes itself on the subject.

From Husserl-Heidegger

Phenomenology informs my research project precisely because it articulates a way in which knowledge is related to an 'other' and in which 'world' can be an agent. Husserl developed a philosophy of the human sciences that created the possibility of a 'turn' to the world as an agent that acts on the subject interpreting an object. This

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105 This is what I would prefer to call the 'apophatic tradition.' I follow Marion's argument that this is not 'negative theology,' but rather a kind of mystical theology, in which although God is encountered and 'named,' God's name always slips beyond our grasp and our ability to adequately understand. In this way, God is encountered but never controlled. Some kind of intimacy with God can be experienced, and yet God is always also 'other.' See Marion, "In the Name: How to Avoid Speaking of 'Negative Theology'." It is this 'third way' that John Caputo sees pursued by both Marion and Derrida, which is why he declares their respective projects to be an "apology of the impossible" (3). See John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon, "Introduction: Apology for the Impossible: Religion and Postmodernism," In *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, ed. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon, The Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999).

106 Within this project, I hope to demonstrate the resources within Pietism for embracing the kind culturally-and-congregationally-rooted theological approach that I pursue. Only through this route can what I am doing be called 'evangelical' and thus work from within the tradition. I am not alone in seeing connections here, however. Dominique Janicaud, in his fierce criticism of the 'theological turn' in French phenomenology identifies (pejoratively) the connection. See Dominique Janicaud, "The Theological Turn of French Phenomenology," In *Phenomenology and The "Theological Turn": The French Debate*, ed. Dominique Janicaud, Perspectives in Continental Philosophy. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 76. Also, Moltmann traces via Augustine a connection between medieval mysticism and protestant pietism. For both, Moltmann sees a limited anthropology such that mysticism and pietism only see the self in relationship to God, and thus see God only in relationship to the self. In the modern world, this has theologically emptied the 'world' and given it over to the 'secular.' See Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, 62-65.
possibility was not necessarily achieved in Husserl's own work, but was picked up by Heidegger, Levinas, Marion and others. Husserl wanted to free philosophy from various transcendentalisms in order to turn attention 'to the things themselves.'

For Husserl, true and 'scientific' knowledge of the world is in finding an adequate concept for what is presented in intuition. That is, objects have an 'intentionality' of their own in which they are presented to our intuition, or 'seen' in our consciousness; for "consciousness is always consciousness of something." The scientificity of Husserl's project rests upon

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107 Husserl articulates his project this way: "phenomenology is eo ipso 'transcendental idealism,' though in a fundamentally new sense. It is not a psychological idealism... an idealism that would derive a senseful world from senseless sensual data. Nor is it a Kantian idealism, which believes it can keep open, at least as a limiting concept, the possibility of world of things themselves. On the contrary, we have here a transcendental idealism that is nothing more than a consequentially executed self-explication in the form of a systematic egological science... It is sense-explication achieved by actual work, an explication carried out as regards every type of existent ever conceivable by me, the ego, and specifically as regards the transcendency actually given to me beforehand through experience: Nature, culture, the world as a whole" (86). Edmund Husserl, Cartesian Meditations, trans. Dorion Cairns (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999). This quotation obviously demonstrates that for Husserl, knowledge is still 'located' in the consciousness of the knower. But despite his emphasis upon the 'actual work' of knowing, he draws attention to a passivity in the knower that Marion later calls givenness. In his Ideas, Husserl lays out the "principle of principles": "that every originary presentive intuition is a legitimatizing source of cognition, that everything originary (so to speak in its 'personal' actuality) offered to us in 'intuition' is to be accepted simply as what it is presented as being, but also only within the limits in which it is presented there" (44). Edmund Husserl, Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy: First Book, trans. F. Kersten, Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1983). quoted in Westphal, "Vision and Voice: Pheneomenology and Theology in the Work of Jean-Luc Marion," 119.

108 'Intuition' in Husserl is the relationship between 'consciousness' and 'ideas.' Robyn Horner, Rethinking God as Gift: Marion, Derrida, and the Limits of Phenomenology, Perspectives in Continental Philosophy (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), 50. Horner refers to Levinas to demonstrate the way in which Husserl contrasts a 'signifying act' with an 'intuitional act' as the difference between aiming at an object and actually reaching it. Horner writes: "Since a signifying act belongs only to the sphere of thought, it is possible that it might refer to something that is not real. On the other hand, an intuitive act encounters reality in seeing it" (50). These ideas come together in Husserl's notion of 'fullness,' which is when the signifier, intuition, and object all cohere (51). For an additional overview of Husserl, see Susann M. Laverty, "Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Phenomenology: A Comparison of Historic and Methodological Considerations," International Journal of Qualitative Methods 2, no. 3 (2003). Westphal, "Vision and Voice: Phenemenology and Theology in the Work of Jean-Luc Marion."

109 Horner, Rethinking God as Gift: Marion, Derrida, and the Limits of Phenomenology, 46-49. 'Intentionality' refers to the relationship between 'consciousness' and its 'object.' Levinas, and later Marion see in Husserl's 'intentionality' an account of experience that is not purely theoretical. That is, Husserl shows that consciousness does not always equate with thematization, although his attempt to make the 'work' of intentionality the 'representation' or 'objectification' of objects overshadows this openness to that which cannot be objectified or thematized in experience.
the purity of intuition within the act of intentionality, as objects present themselves to a
subject, and a subject reaches them in their fullness in intuition. As such, Husserl
develops (for our purposes here) two significant strategies for attending to objects as they
present themselves. The first is ‘free imaginative variation,’ where the object is imagined
from various perspectives so as to understand its essence—and find an adequate concept
for what is presented. The second is the epoche, or bracketing, whereby the limitations
of the project are acknowledged up front, and previous experiences or prejudices are
‘bracketed’ so one can attend to the thing as it is presented to one’s intuition.

Clearly, Husserl extends the transcendental project while continuing to make
knowledge an ideational product of the consciousness. Philosophical hermeneutics has
since dispossessed “consciousness as the place and origin of meaning” and
“ruined...[phenomenology’s] idealistic interpretation by Husserl himself.” But Husserl
did, in fact, turn attention to the world as agent, to ‘the things themselves’ as that which

110 Amedeo P. Giorgi and Barbro M. Giorgi, “The Descriptive Phenomenological Psychological
Method,” In Qualitative Research in Psychology, ed. Paul M. Camic, Jean E. Rhodes, and Lucy Yardley.

111 In Husserl, the epoche served a “transcendental” function. What I mean by this is that it he
attempts to rework the Cartesian cogito by ‘bracketing’ the existential, theoretical, and even
methodological concerns of Descartes in order to attend to the world as it immediately appears to
consciousness. This—for Husserl—is the only true ‘transcendental ego’ for regardless of Descartes
concerns, the world for me (the ego) is the only world I experience: “The concrete subjective processes, let
us repeat, are indeed the things to which his attentive regard is directed: but the attentive Ego...practices
abstention with respect to what he intuits. Likewise, everything meant in such accepting or positing
processes of consciousness (the meant judgment, theory, value, end, or whatever it is) is still retained
completely—but with acceptance-modification, ‘mere phenomenon.’ This universal depriving of
acceptance, this ‘inhibiting’ or ‘putting out of play’ of all positions taken toward the already-given
Objective world and, in the first place, all existential positions (those concerning being, illusion, possible
being, being likely, probable, etc.),—or, as it is also called, this ‘phenomenological epoche’ and
‘parenthesizing’ of the Objective world—therefore does not leave us confronting nothing. On the contrary
we gain possession of something by it....the universe of ‘phenomena’” (20). Husserl, Cartesian
Meditations.

112 Paul Ricoeur, Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation, The Terry Lectures (New
Theology in the Work of Jean-Luc Marion,” 119.
give themselves—a hint which is developed in Levinas and Marion as “reverse intentionality.”

Heidegger first initiated a more hermeneutical approach to phenomenology. By placing phenomenology into the horizon of being, Heidegger’s Dasein challenges both the notion of the epoche and the hope of arriving at an essence through free imaginative variation. For Heidegger, the identity of Dasein is continually under construction and contingent upon the horizons of time, setting, and world. Existence is thrown into an already-ongoing world, and is not yet itself until death and then it is no more. In this framework, the epoche—in terms of an intentional bracketing to pure intuition—takes on a more important, but also more artificial nature. The limits of a project must be clarified, but who can ever know exhaustively what they are? Moreover, the fluidity of identity and world as understood in light of Dasein means that knowledge is not like grasping onto a solid object. Rather, like the notion of being itself, once it is grasped it is no more. Knowledge of ‘essences’ through ‘free imaginative variation,’ then, becomes a fiction in light of Heidegger’s horizon of being.

Heidegger’s ontological horizon draws attention to the human condition in relationship to knowledge. But it is Gadamer who addresses this as a problem of method

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in relationship to truth. Gadamer's full critique of method as an instrument or delivery system for truth. It is not as though Gadamer dismisses method as unimportant or unhelpful, he simply places it within the communities, prejudices, and hermeneutical circle of those who attempt to wield it in search of understanding. Gadamer's hermeneutical re-appropriation of tradition has been criticized for being overly conservative, without room for a critical moment, transcendence, or perhaps even the ethical. This, however, says less about the implications of Gadamer's work (doesn't a fusion of horizons imply some openness to something other, and thus transcendence, critique, and a kind of ethical imperative?) and more about the kind of discourse in which it is located—as a kind of philosophical hermeneutics concerned with the human situation as such and the interpretation of texts.

Jean-Luc Marion

It is Marion, through Levinas, in which transcendence becomes thematized as a possibility for phenomenology. Husserl, argues Marion, worked with a reduction to

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118 This is how Bernstein mediates between Habermas and Gadamer. He grants Gadamer's universality of the hermeneutic condition, and then demonstrates how the fusion of horizons creates space for the kind of ‘critical moment’ that Habermas is rightly so concerned about. And then Bernstein looks to Habermas’s social theory to articulate where such communicative, phronetic communities might be located. See Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis*, 182-97.

119 Marion learns from Levinas the ethical imperative of the Other. Westphal sees in this a kind of “ethical transcendence” in Marion's thought which teleologically suspends the “epistemic transcendence” encountered in the icon and the saturated phenomenon. See Westphal, “Vision and Voice: Phenomenology and Theology in the Work of Jean-Luc Marion,” 132-36.
essence and Heidegger a reduction to being.\textsuperscript{120} Both reductions, in the name of immanence and attending to concrete experience, bracket God as an actor. Marion notes that Husserl poses the possibility of a giving intuition, but that this is conditioned by a horizon in which all phenomena “appears within the horizon to an I—and it is thus ‘conditioned’ and ‘reduced.’”\textsuperscript{121} He asks, though, if we can envisage a phenomenon that would reverse the condition of a horizon by “surpassing” it, which would “reverse the reduction (by leading the I back to itself, instead of being reduced to the I).”\textsuperscript{122} That is, Marion wants to think with Husserl’s ‘principle of principles’ the ‘right’ of the ‘thing’ to show itself, and then to move beyond Husserl by thinking through the reduction to givenness in which the ‘see-er’ becomes the ‘seen’ and the ‘name-er’ becomes the ‘named.’ This is phenomenology on the other side of both Heideggerian ontology and Gadamerian hermeneutics, which radicalizes both human contingency and the ‘detour through the text’ to a phenomenology of “reversed intentionality.”\textsuperscript{123}

The possibility that Marion conceives at the limits of phenomenology he calls the “saturated phenomenon.”\textsuperscript{124} Marion argues that phenomena in which intention corresponds equally with intuition are characterized by a weak intuition. That is, it is a

\textsuperscript{120} Marion, Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness, 27-53.


\textsuperscript{122} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{123} Westphal, “Vision and Voice: Phenomenology and Theology in the Work of Jean-Luc Marion,” 121.

\textsuperscript{124} Marion, “The Saturated Phenomenon.”
de-limited phenomenon in which one's experience can be fully accounted for.\textsuperscript{125} But there are other phenomena that do not fit into the rigorous categories of Husserlian phenomenology, in which the “intentional aim” seems to deceive the intuition, or when the intuition does not seem up to the task.\textsuperscript{126} In these cases, the experience of the phenomenon, the event, is not adequate to previous experiences, to categories of description, to measurement, etc. Rather than attributing this to a limitation of experience/intuition, and rather than bracketing this possibility as non-phenomenological, Marion argues that these events demonstrate the excess of intuition, in which “intuition would give more, indeed unmeasurably more, than intention ever would have intended or foreseen.”\textsuperscript{127} Such experience would be “neither visible according to quantity nor bearable according to quality, a saturated phenomenon would be absolute according to relation as well: that is, it would shy away from any analogy of experience.”\textsuperscript{128} In the saturated phenomenon, the subject is overwhelmed—‘bedazzled’—and the cogito becomes the interloque;\textsuperscript{129} for the Other is a real actor. Meaning is constituted and given in the phenomenal event.

It is this “limit case” of phenomenology that thematizes transcendence. Marion is careful to avoid naming the phenomena ‘God,’ for what he intends to do is articulate the

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{125} Marion is particularly concerned here to show that the ‘fullness’ for which Husserl hopes when intuition effectively ‘grasps’ or reaches the ‘thing itself’ and is therefore able to represent it conceptually is only possible with mundane, ordinary, and ‘weak’ phenomena in which one’s experience of the object is simple and (I might want to say) ‘thin.’
  
  \item \textsuperscript{126} Marion, “The Saturated Phenomenon.” 195.
  
  \item \textsuperscript{127} Ibid.
  
  \item \textsuperscript{128} Ibid., 202.
  
  \item \textsuperscript{129} The interloque, could be translated as “the addressee” or “the one taken aback or surprised.” This is how Marion articulates the identity of “the gifted,” or the reverse of intentionality that he sees as constitutive of subjectivity. Marion, \textit{Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness}, 266, 369-70.
\end{itemize}
possibility of transcendent and transformational experience as phenomena, and therefore open to attentive study.\textsuperscript{130} Rather, Marion sees himself as articulating a ‘phenomenology of religion’ or ‘religious experience.’\textsuperscript{131} But friends and critics alike see him as blurring the line between phenomenology and theology.\textsuperscript{132} How can he work with givenness and not also work with the Giver? For Derrida, Marion’s work is messianic—and thus theological—in the sense that he speaks of the possibility for the Gift of such phenomena rather than its impossibility and absence.\textsuperscript{133} For some in the French Phenomenological school, Marion has failed to follow Husserl’s basic scientific and transcendental project seriously and so has failed to stay within the clearly-delineated realm of philosophic phenomenology.\textsuperscript{134}

However, Merold Westphal sees Marion as articulating a philosophy immensely useful to theology even if he stops short of calling it theological. For Westphal, the important contribution Marion makes is by opening up the possibility of transcendence that is primarily ethical rather than epistemological, and which depends upon a dynamic

\textsuperscript{130} He does, in certain places, make explicit theological claims. But he develops the ‘saturated phenomenon’ in philosophical terms. See Marion, “The Saturated Phenomenon.”

\textsuperscript{131} He calls this a “phenomenology of religion: an appearing at the limits [of phenomenology].” Ibid., 184.


\textsuperscript{134} Janicaud, “The Theological Turn of French Phenomenology.”
dialectic between ‘vision’ and ‘voice.’ For example, in the story of Moses and the burning bush, the invisible becomes visible through an unusual occurrence. Phenomenology as it is usually practiced (and an ‘ethnography of religious experience’ as well) attends to the light, the flames, describes the bush, and marvels as to its meaning. The typical phenomenologist probably does not, however, take off his shoes because he would not be attending to the voice that calls. But for Marion, the “reversed intentionality” that constitutes the subject means that the cogito gives way to the interloque, the ‘grasping’ of visual phenomena is enveloped in the surprising call, the address that precedes the event and gifts the subject. The ‘namer’ recognizes that he is first ‘named;’ and so therefore the ‘see-er’ recognizes that she is first ‘seen.’ It is this call that prompts a particular kind of posture toward the Other that does not grasp, but rather loves. Although Marion’s discussion of the saturated phenomenon does not ‘name’ the ‘giver’ and thus fall into the realm of theology proper, it is a robust conversation partner which points the theologian toward experience and events while also “reminding” theology of its living and speaking subject.


136 Ibid.: 131-35. This is Westphal’s example.

137 Ibid.

138 This is what Westphal means by an ‘ethical transcendence.’ Ibid. This is also how Marion names his own project: “This situation, still unspoiled by exploration, not only allows and requires reconsidering the thematic of ethics—of respect and the face, obligation and substitution—and confirming its phenomenal legitimacy. It would perhaps authorize broaching what ethics cannot attain: the individuation of the Other. For I neither want nor should only face up to him as the universal and abstract pole of counter-intentionality where each and every one can take on the face of the face. I instead reach him in his unsubstitutable particularity, where he shows himself like no Other can. This individuation has a name: love” (324). Marion, Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness.

Phenomenology and 'Ethical Transcendence'

A Phenomenological posture, then, provides both ethical and theological impulses for this research project. I noted above how phenomenology through Marion tests the limits of Husserlian phenomenology through the reduction to givenness. That is, Marion follows Husserl’s intentional aim toward the ‘things themselves’ while also radicalizing the ‘things’ and thus de-centering the individuated consciousness of the researcher. Rather than manipulate objects so as to articulate the essence of the thing as it is given to consciousness, ‘givenness’ thematizes reciprocity and sociality in relationship to knowing. The reduction to givenness, then, is a disciplined attentiveness to events and encounters in which the surplus of meaning and the otherness or differentiation of the Other is acknowledged at the start. As such, it is an ethic or a practice of love in which “the individuation of the Other” is achieved as the Other is “reach[ed]...in his unsubstitutable particularity, where he shows himself like no other can.”140

Following Marion’s lead, the specific shape of focus group exercises in this research project was designed to cultivate spaces for such reciprocity and sociality. As such, theological reflection was generated in communicative practices of discernment, through conversation and deep listening. Additionally, the early phases of research involved a congregational self-study so that even the initial themes that emerged from the research were generated congregationally and socially rather than only from my own observations and interpretations. These methodological decisions sought to embody Marion’s commitment to the particularity of the Other and the socially-generative ‘given’ context for encounter with Others. Focus groups, then, introduced an ethic of both

140 Marion, Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness, 324.
conversation and attending. Phenomenology did not only provide a methodological posture for the researcher, then, but the congregation as well.

But Marion’s insistence on the surplus of intuition, his sense that more is given than can be brought to conceptuality, also articulates the possibility for transcendence in the attentive encounter with an Other. That is, Marion’s phenomenology provides a way for taking experience seriously as revelational without reducing revelation to personal experience—since such an event is (for Marion) irreducibly social and reciprocal (the *interloque*). As the study progresses, I will point out where Midtown’s reflection generated new theological metaphors for making sense of its experience and God’s leading.

These two themes together—ethics and revelation—Westphal calls “ethical transcendence.” They demonstrate the importance of the phenomenological posture for my particular research interest in the lived public theology of an evangelical congregation; for contemporary evangelical piety is often caught between a biblicist foundationalism, on the one hand, and a retreat into the riches of inner experience, on the other hand. This particular research project is designed not only to learn from Midtown’s practices of public engagement, but also to practice evangelical theology differently. Phenomenology opens up new possibilities for this. That is, phenomenology articulates the possibility of revelation as event-full, as *emerging* in the moment of ‘reverse-intentionality;’ and thus creates the hope that by attending carefully to the phenomena of Midtown’s experience, we might also ‘hear’ the voice, the ‘call’ and ‘take off our shoes’ in recognition that *this* space *between* us is holy ground. And these are the conditions of possibility for a different kind of evangelical theology, which I hope to embody in this
project and in these pages. But what is evangelicalism? And what do I mean by evangelical theology?

Evangelicals and Theology

David Wells asks in the subtitle of his book *No Place for Truth* ‘whatever happened to evangelical theology?’ According to Wells, a populist anti-intellectualism has fused with a kind of experiential subjectivism with the result that evangelical congregations are increasingly illiterate in biblical matters and incapable of serious intellectual discourse in public matters. Wells’ argument is a well-worn critique of evangelicals that has echoes of Mark Noll’s *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind.* But alongside these pleas for more robust theological, ethical, and intellectual discourse among evangelicals there stand a plethora of evangelical theological works, colleges, and academic societies. If evangelical theology has fallen from view, it is not because of a lack of effort. But Wells does provoke an important question. What is evangelical theology?

What is Evangelical Theology?

In the first chapter, I suggested that evangelicalism is best understood through an appeal to two different traditions, the reformed and holiness traditions. I want to argue

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142 Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1994). To be fair, Noll’s book is much less polemical than Wells’s. I make this connection simply to demonstrate the widespread critique of evangelicalism’s propensity toward populist anti-intellectualism.

143 Indeed, these persisted and grew exponentially during the fundamentalist ‘retreat’ after the ‘fundamentalist-modernist’ controversies in the early Twentieth Century. This is part of what prepared the way for a renewed, more publicly-engaged ‘fundamentalism’ that is now often called evangelicalism. This, anyway, is what George Marsden argues throughout his work. See Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture.*
here that these two traditions could also account for the set of contradictions one finds within evangelical theology. On the one hand, evangelicals have produced a number of significant theological and academic works in the past thirty years. Prolific writers such as Carl F. Henry, Millard Erickson, Stanley Grenz, Mark Noll, and George Marsden have articulated informed visions of evangelical theology and history.\(^{144}\) They often lament the populist anti-intellectualism in the movement and attempt to call congregations to a more intellectually rigorous faith.

It is impossible to discern a central project that constitutes evangelical theology. Self-identified evangelicals work from Arminian and Reformed, Anabaptist and post-liberal perspectives and many others. But a common concern—called ‘biblicism’ by Bebbington and a key Protestant concern by Sweeney—is for the truth of theology to be secured by some articulation of revelation. There is a concern among evangelical theologians to find a ‘return’ to protestant ‘orthodoxy’ that attends carefully to an inspired text and avoids what it sees as a cultural or experiential relativism in modern theology. Not surprisingly, this concern is taken up more among those working with the Reformed tradition—and is a primary concern throughout the seminal work of Carl F. Henry.

The problem is that very few evangelical theologians (Stanley Grenz, Kevin Vanhoozer, and James McClendon excluded) work with the profound shift in horizons given to theology by philosophical hermeneutics, cultural studies, and social sciences. In

many cases, evangelical theology is still concerned to articulate a proper *method* that will accurately appropriate Scripture in order to produce secure theological truths—an approach rooted in an Enlightenment epistemology regarding truth as both propositional and the product of the proper method and Scripture as an inerrant text. Carl F. Henry works this terrain with a great deal of care. Henry organizes his theology around God's self-consistent personal revelation. He sees in "I am who I am" an onto-theological foundation, that God 'is' and exists 'objectively.'\(^{145}\) God's self-revelation in Scripture is such that God can be known, that objectively true statements about God can be made because God has 'stooped' across the metaphysical divide in Jesus Christ and 'stayed' in the revelational content of the Scriptures and the illumination of the Holy Spirit. Henry dismisses all challenges to God's objectivity as 'process' theology—Barth included. That this looks hermeneutically naïve thirty years after its publication goes without saying. And yet, its ethos is alive and well. Henry's concern for *truth* as a set of ideas that can be known if only the proper discourse could proceed continues in Wells' provocative work, as well as Millard Erickson's entry into Trinitarian theology\(^{146}\) or Wayne Grudem's systematic theology.\(^{147}\) That is, we might say that evangelical academic theology, in its concern for the *accessibility* of true statements about God, tends toward the continuation of a biblicist view of revelation.

However, evangelical piety paints a very different picture. In evangelical *conversionism*, knowledge of God is expressly subjective and personal. Jesus lives in

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\(^{145}\) Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*.

\(^{146}\) Erickson, *God in Three Persons: A Contemporary Interpretation of the Trinity*.

\(^{147}\) Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*. 
one’s heart and the Spirit provides a ‘born again’ experience or perhaps a baptism in the Spirit (depending on one’s interaction with the charismatic movement). True statements about God are traded for truthful accounts of experience. With the blind man in the book of John, evangelicals might not be able to engage the suspicions of biblical critics, but they do account for their own experience of blindness turned to sight. Midtown fits right into this paradigm, as much of their God-talk is in personal terms rather than the ‘objective’ terms favored by Evangelical theologians.

At times this experiential emphasis manifests itself as anti-intellectualism, but it can also provide ground for unity in the face of theological disagreement because of the assumption that it is more important to know God personally than ‘objectively’ or abstractly. These two faith commitments tend to exist uncomfortably within the same movement—an intellectual, Biblicist, revelational stream and a pietistic, holiness, experiential stream. Often the first is taken to be evangelical theology and the second to be evangelical piety or conversion narratives. But is this a truthful rendering of what is taking place? Are there not different sets of theological commitments enacted in evangelical conversionism/pietism than more ‘objective’ statements about divine revelation and an inerrant Scripture? I think so.

The first is obviously a ‘monist’ and revelational project. It works with a picture of the whole, an assumption that truth is something objective that a subjective ‘knower’ can appropriate. It works with a static conception of being, of which God is the Being of beings. The second does not deny the first project. Indeed, many evangelicals work on

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both fronts at the same time. But it does, at the very least, embody a set of commitments not sustained by the above biblicist project. Rather than work with the whole, it attends to the particular, the local, the concrete. It remains agnostic about God’s objectivity and instead describes God in terms of a personal encounter or a transformational event: ‘I do not know about this Jesus, but I do know this, I once was blind but now I see’ (Jn. 9:25)

The phenomenological posture articulated above provides philosophical and methodological resources to draw upon and better articulate this second impulse as theological, and therefore as room within evangelicalism for a more concrete, local, and relational theology. Can we work theologically while still attending to the concrete experiences, narratives, and practices of evangelical congregations? Phenomenology contributes both sociality/reciprocity and the possibility of revelation to a tradition that is often cut loose from revelational positivism and thus without a way of articulating God’s presence and activity beyond a personal and individual encounter. Having articulated the way in which a phenomenological posture contributes to this evangelical theology, I must now account for the specific practices of attending drawn from ethnography that informed the overall research strategy.

**Phenomenology, Theology, and Social Science**

If this work is to be a theological project that attends to congregations and draws upon social science, then (for the above philosophical and theological reasons) Marion’s phenomenological attentiveness must inform and shape the social science strategies for data gathering and interpretation. The problem for designing such a research project is that few researchers depend upon Marion’s branch of the phenomenological tree for such research. Both nursing studies and psychological research have created an “interpretive
phenomenology" methodology, but they tend to follow more closely to Husserl’s concern for the way in which things appear to one’s consciousness through the *epoche* and ‘free imaginative variation.'149 Because the interpretive phenomenology methodology tends to be concerned with the consciousness of the researcher, these studies miss the ‘reverse intentionality’ of Marion’s project. The method finds few ways to take the researcher out of the ‘observer’ and ‘interpreter’ roles. Like Husserl, psychological and nursing phenomenological studies are primarily cognitive exercises of an intentionally-open individual who ‘wonders’ and ‘searches’ for meanings by attending to and interpreting events.150 Marion’s work, as well as the theological warrants above, pushes us to consider a disciplined way of attending to congregational life in a more communicative and socially-generative way. Theology is not necessarily what is produced in an individuated consciousness, but rather what is discerned and disclosed in and among a people seeking God. Theological discernment emerges within *phronetic* conversation. I found in the research practices of ethnography an open-ended, socially-generative, and communicative research design that sustained and enriched this theological project.

**Ethnographic Practices**

Ethnography provided a set of practices for describing and interpreting various aspects of congregational life together, or congregational culture. Drawing upon Clifford

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149 In psychological studies, the phenomenological method was developed by Amedeo Giorgi. See Giorgi and Giorgi, “The Descriptive Phenomenological Psychological Method.” It is more prominent in nursing studies, which has shown a bit more interest in post-Heideggerian phenomenology. See Susan Kleiman, “Phenomenology: To Wonder and Search for Meanings,” *Nurse Researcher* 11, no. 4 (2004); Laverty, “Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Phenomenology: A Comparison of Historic and Methodological Considerations.”; Elisabeth Spichiger, Margaret I. Wallhagen, and Patricia Benner, “Nursing as a Caring Practice from a Phenomenological Perspective,” *Scandinavian Journal of the Caring Sciences* 19, no. 4 (2005).

150 Kleiman, “Phenomenology: To Wonder and Search for Meanings.”
Geertz, James Clifford, and a more broadly-based account of ethnography in the social sciences, I followed the basic structure of ethnographic practice for both fieldwork and ethnographic writing. Ethnographic fieldwork is optimistically presented as a set of practices designed with the hope of developing an *emic* or insider’s view of particular social-cultural phenomena. This is the role of the ‘participant-observer,’ who enters the field, participates in the practices and life of a culture, identifies informants, keeps field notes, and interprets the data in a descriptive essay. In my research process, I engaged in each of these steps. I participated in the life and worship of the congregation and conducted a few individual interviews while keeping a journal and conducting focus groups. The third chapter contains some of this descriptive work related to Midtown’s worship services.

Ethnographic fieldwork provided a helpful set of practices for this theological and phenomenological project because it assumes the *interpretive* and *constructive* role of the researcher in the research process—and especially in writing the final essay. This is due, in part, to the recognition that fieldwork—as a participant-observer enterprise—combines in a single practice two poles of social-scientific concern: that of the

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152 I do not think this insider’s view is possible, but it is a claim that accompanies ethnography as it has moved from anthropology and into other fields of social science. I follow Geertz and Clifford who argue that ethnography ‘produces’ a writing, an interpretation of an interpretation that sits on the boundary (or maybe even creates a boundary) between the observed and the observer. In my research, I both engaged in fieldwork and wrote an ethnographic text. But I do not think I’ve achieved some kind of pure insiders view, nor do I think this is possible. See Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973). James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

153 Clifford and Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. 
distanciated, analytic observer and the invested, engaged, living participant.\textsuperscript{154} For Geertz, it is fieldwork which is an “attempt to transcend the logical gap that separates [fact and value] by a pattern of conduct” which is the ability to “think and live” at the same time.\textsuperscript{155} Geertz borrows from Gilbert Ryle to characterize this search for meaning as “thick description.”\textsuperscript{156} He resists citing ethnography as a methodology, claiming instead it is the whole complex of activities that anthropologists simply do in order to interpret—that is, to describe thickly—the context of human practices, institutions, events, and social processes.

Besides fieldwork, I also drew upon ethnography to think about the product of this research—an essay. For Geertz, ethnography produces a text, a written interpretation of participant interpretations related to meaningful human action. Geertz understands the product of ethnography to be a kind of reading of human action, as a constructive and interpretive exercise that is attentive and bound to a particular ‘given’—the set of human actions (the words on the page in the case of reading)—and which is always a fragmentary work in progress.

Thus, the production of an ethnographic text is caught in this tension-filled fusion. It is not coolly detached and objective, for the researcher—by the very nature of fieldwork—is caught up in the production of the culture she has observed. But it is not a flight of anthropological fancy or detached theorizing either. It is a rhetorical construction that acknowledges its partial and fragmentary nature while seeking to


\textsuperscript{155} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{156} Geertz, \textit{The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays}, 6.
demonstrate its *plausibility* based on the *particular* stories, events, and practices recorded and observed.\(^{157}\) The ethnographer is bound in her analysis to particular events and particular interpretations given by the informant while trying to make an argument for a particular set of meanings. As Geertz says:

> The ethnographer does not, and, in my opinion, largely cannot, perceive what his informants perceive...What he perceives, and that uncertainly enough, is what they perceive *with*—*or* 'by means of,' or 'through.' [the ethnographer proceeds] by searching out and analyzing the symbolic forms...in terms of which people actually represented themselves to themselves and one another.\(^{158}\)

Such a statement might seem to push ethnographic writing into the ghetto of particularized research about obscure people groups and practices. But both Geertz and James Clifford imagine just the opposite, for it is ethnographic writing that enlarges the "universe of human discourse"\(^{159}\) in that it creates and is cultivated by a kind of "contact zone"\(^{160}\) between peoples, cultures, and discourses historically separate. That is, although it produces a kind of "local knowledge," it also demonstrates the ways in which knowledge is *always* situated in particular localities, practices, languages, and cultures.\(^{161}\)

And ethnographic writing creates one possibility for making explicit the creation and flow of localized knowledge, wisdom, and perspectives. As Clifford insists, ethnographic writing is not only *rhetorical*, but also "inescapably *allegorical*" in that "realistic

\(^{157}\) Clifford and Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, 6-7. In the introduction, Clifford identifies six ways in which ethnography is a kind of writing that is determined by contextual, rhetorical, institutional, political, and historical factors. As such, Clifford insists that it is rhetorical, fictional (in that it is a construction), and allegorical (in that it cultivates and provokes new stories and worlds of meaning). See also Clifford, "On Ethnographic Allegory."

\(^{158}\) Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology*, 58.

\(^{159}\) Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, 30.

\(^{160}\) Geertz, *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics*, 115. Geertz draws from Clifford for the term "contact zone."

\(^{161}\) Ibid., 140.
portraits, to the extent that they are ‘convincing’ or ‘rich’ are extended metaphors, patterns of associations that point to coherent...additional meanings.”

Given this description, it is not surprising that Geertz’s work is drawn upon by Bernstein for his *phronetic* and *communicative* vision of truth. The work of ethnographers demonstrates a real ‘fusion of horizons’ between somewhat incommensurable communities. That is, ethnographic work demonstrates the generation of knowledge through careful, attentive work with concrete, particular communities. This is the contribution that an ethnographic study of a congregation can have for theological discourse. A phenomenological commitment to the immediacy and eventfulness of social action, along with a demonstration of the semiotics of social action can be helped by the adoption of ethnographic practices related to fieldwork and the writing of thickly descriptive accounts of social action. And if Ricoeur is right in noting the metaphorical nature of all language\(^1\) and even human thought and Geertz is right in pointing to the semiotic nature of human action, then *theology* and *church practices* become inescapably *local* and incarnational in that they are *cultural productions* even though they are generated from, intend, and serve transcendent purposes. In light of this, the resulting ethnographic text will be a *theological* ethnography, and will thus intend to provide a *thick description* that emerges from the congregation’s own words and actions, as well as from the interpretation generated by the researcher. Conscious of the allegorical nature of such a text, I will also attempt to note the places where such ethnographic work generates

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\(^{162}\) Clifford, “On Ethnographic Allegory.” 100.

new stories or contributes new meaning to old stories as a way of furthering the community of theological discourse about public, missional, and evangelical theology.

However, when ethnographic practices are placed into the phenomenological posture articulated above, I propose one significant change to the ethnographic practices of fieldwork and writing. In Geertzian ethnography, the researcher attempts to remain in a descriptive mode. The product is a thick description gathered from participating with, observing, and conversing with the ‘locals.’ Phenomenology does not deal directly in description, however. It attends to the way in which meaning is generated in contact with an other. Meaning is ‘eventful.’ A phenomenological posture, then, attends more directly to this eventfulness of such knowledge and works more directly in the category of discernment than simply description. As such, phenomenology is co-generative. Thus, although the writing is (in the end) my own, the phenomenological posture (as I would argue) is one that seeks a generative and discerning co-authorship of the research project. This means that I brought my interpretations and reflections into conversation with various groups throughout the research project, and we attempted to ‘discern’ God’s work in our midst. As participant-observer and action-reflection communicative discernment, this project moved beyond ethnography and became an ethnographic phenomenology concerned with theological generation within the congregation.

By way of conclusion, I want to suggest that the two terms describing my method—ethnographic and phenomenology—account for the complex sociality embedded in this theological study. That is, ethnography names my agency and intrusion as a researcher into the life of this congregation, as well as the agency of the congregation in shaping my research work. Ethnography provides a set of research practices dependent
upon and constructive of a particular kind of reciprocity between researcher and congregation. I agree with Geertz and Clifford that the ethnographer never achieves an insider's view, but only an interpretation of such a view, which is then also interpreted by the researcher and reflected back into the cultural system being studied. Moreover, the very presence of the researcher along with the shape of the researcher's questions cannot help but impact the community being studied even while the researcher is dependent upon the community's self-interpretation. That is, ethnography names the way in which this research shapes various boundaries between researcher and congregation, between interpretation and practice, between description and action. It names this research as a set of activities that shapes both the researcher and the congregation. Phenomenology, on the other hand, names the possibility of transcendence, that this reciprocity is not simply between two self-sufficient agents, but rather a living social event that gives more than can be accounted for through the agency of the researcher or congregation. As such, phenomenology articulates how it is that these ethnographic practices of attending and writing might give way to the new while also providing philosophical rationale for a more social and co-generative kind of fieldwork. I will now articulate how these concerns came together in my research design.

An Account of the Research Design

The theological and philosophical commitments of an ethnographic phenomenology have been outlined above. The aim of this method is to cultivate interpretations of the sets of congregational practices that relate in some way to the public vocation of the congregation in order to co-author a thick description—a plausible interpretation arising from communicative discernment—of the theological meaning of
these practices. That is, how do the participants interpret and expect God’s presence and agency in these activities? And in what ways might this account contribute to broader theological discourse and vice versa? I will briefly account for the design of the research method thus developed, from congregation selection to data gathering and interpretation.

Selecting a Congregation

Two questions must be clarified at this point: (1) Why only one congregation? (2) Why this one? Since this study was an ethnographic phenomenology with at least three different levels of data gathering, only one congregation was studied. I argued in my proposal that multiple congregations would risk ‘thinning’ the description, and would not significantly add a level of universality or generalize-ability because the study is committed to discerning the contribution of a particular community and a particular set of practices and theological learning(s) to a broader theological discourse.\(^{164}\)

I also argued that although selecting only one congregation might lead to concerns about the validity of the study, (since some social science work expects large and diverse samples) one congregation is a substantially complex cultural system, with its own narratives, symbols, myths, and vocabulary. Moreover, it is a fundamentally open system, in that it is situated within and participating in broader cultural flows, narratives, practices, symbols, myths, and vocabularies. Attention to this complexity, and the generation of a ‘thick’ theological discernment of the congregation requires time and attention to the multiple facets of this complex system. In light of this, I attended deeply

\(^{164}\) One of the cautions in the methodology literature is that of sample. Since data is to be gathered and interpreted in multiple layers, researchers argue that validity is less dependent upon sample size, and more dependent upon choosing the right sample based on criteria that are shown to relate to the research question. See Thomas Groenewald, “A Phenomenological Research Design Illustration,” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 3, no. 1 (2004). See also Laverty, “Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Phenomenology: A Comparison of Historic and Methodological Considerations.”
to a single congregation in order to generate local knowledge through a rigorous ethnographic-phenomenology. Validity, in this case, is dependent upon depth rather than breadth, generating relevant knowledge at a local level, and procedural or methodological integrity.\(^{165}\) This was pursued by learning from other phenomenological studies in the areas of nursing and psychology which suggest multiple layers of data gathering with small, intentionally-chosen subjects rather than one attempt at data-gathering from larger or randomly-selected samples.\(^{166}\)

Second, I chose Midtown Baptist Church because it is a congregation that correlates in some sense with the important terms of the research question. It self-identifies as evangelical and it has a long history of social engagement for the sake of its mission. Of course, these terms are open for debate. But I used Gary Simpson’s image of “public companionship” as anticipatory of what a public and missional congregation might look like,\(^{167}\) and I chose a free-church congregation with deep roots in the twentieth century development from Fundamentalist conservativism to late-twentieth century evangelicalism. One way of controlling for the first concern (public and missional) was to enroll Midtown in the “Civic Engagement for the Future of Communities” grant funded by the Otto Bremer Foundation. The grant helps congregations seek and cultivate better public partnerships in and with civil society.


\(^{166}\) See Groenewald, “A Phenomenological Research Design Illustration.” See also Giorgi and Giorgi, “The Descriptive Phenomenological Psychological Method.”

institutions. The first year of the grant includes a self-study process as well as training in a communicative spiritual discernment process for talking through and making decisions about difficult issues. Since I was already working on the grant, this proved a good way to invite Midtown into the research project.

Several benefits followed from aligning this research with the grant work: (1) Congregants participated in data collection and interpretation as a part of the self-study process, which is required for the research strategy I outlined above. The resources of the grant provided consultants and materials from Church Innovations to get that started. (2) Congregational self-selection into the grant provided another warrant to argue for the public and missional impulses and intentions of Central. (3) The grant helped to fund a Church Future Finder self-study project as well as a ‘reading team,’ which provided another layer of interpretation for the researcher, and a set of ‘outside’ voices beyond that of the congregation and researcher for interpreting some of the narratives that emerge from the first level of interviews. Although I observed the work of the congregation during the self-study process, I did not train them or serve on the reading team. This provided a way for me to minimize my direct impact on the reflections of the congregation as the research got underway. (4) The grant generated forward momentum in the congregation for discerning, talking about, and seeking public, missional partnerships. I was able to participate with the congregation as it was engaged in new learning.
Data Gathering

As an ethnographic phenomenology, I sought a process that created 'data saturation' by gathering data from some of the same sources in multiple ways.\(^\text{168}\) This might be referred to as both a layered and triangulated approach to data gathering. As such, data was gathered in the following ways: (1) interviews from select leaders in the congregation, (2) observation of public, formal theological statements and other congregational artifacts, (3) observation and participation in worship and/or practices considered by the congregation to be practices of public moral companionship, (4) family, inside stranger, and outside stranger interviews conducted by an interview team within the congregation followed by a 'reading team' report created outside the congregation, (5) Church Future Finder self study completed by the members of the congregation, (6) three rounds of generative and inter-textual focus groups, (7) a journal kept by the researcher, (8) a journal kept by a three congregants, and (9) a final 'feedback loop' in the form of a presentation to the Board of Stewards.

These types of data were gathered in six interrelated movements. First, I began participating in public worship and other public engagements with the church. Although I attended Midtown the year previous to the study, I began to gather information on Midtown’s history, collect public documents, and interview informants regarding these practices and texts while also journaling my own reflections and interpretations with what I call participant-observer texts. Second, while the participant-observer work was

underway, I also observed the training and selection of interviewers by Church Innovations for Midtown’s self-study. The interview transcripts were then brought before a reading team (also provided by the grant and CI) who created a document to help the interview team begin to interpret the data. The first round of interviews also collaborated with a self-study team in the congregation who used the Church Future Finder tool from Church Innovations to construct, collect, and organize various narratives and demographics of both the congregation and surrounding community. This second movement—by creating an initial interpretive ‘snap-shot’ through self-study—provided sets of questions and concerns which guided the first round of focus groups.

The third movement involved four-week journals kept by three congregants who participated in one or more social outreach ministries. The fourth movement consisted of interviews and focus groups with civil society partners and the ministry teams who engage in civil society work. I conducted six different focus groups. The questions for each group emerged from what was learned earlier in the process, and often included reflection on experiences/practices in ministry. The fifth movement was a second-phase of focus group work in which congregants were invited to theological discernment conversations during the Sunday School hour. These conversations took up topics that emerged in previous movements in relationship to Scripture texts chosen by me. The sixth and final movement consisted of two different retreats in which the themes and concerns generated thus far were reflected on in light of Scripture. The most substantial retreat brought over forty persons associated with the church (some church members and some community members) to read and reflect on the book of Mark in relationship to

Midtown’s ministry and context. This served as the third and final phase of focus groups. The other retreat involved the congregational leadership board, where I reflected on the research process with them and invited feedback regarding the theological metaphors generated.

Although I pursued all these avenues, some proved more successful than others. The process depended heavily on congregational participation. Congregation members jumped into some activities and pulled out from others. Some participants in the journal writing, for example, produced reflective reports, while others missed deadlines and were generally less reliable. Also, the Church Future Finder phase of the self-study process remained largely incomplete despite numerous attempts to invite congregants to gather the data and reflect on it together. Other activities, however, were more productive than anticipated, such as the congregational retreat. The conversation was rich and insightful, and truly theological. More on this retreat will be shared in subsequent chapters.

Data Analysis

Because this was an open-ended process, the analysis of data depended upon the kinds of topics, narratives, and social phenomena that appeared in the process of conversation. Moreover, since it was governed by the philosophical prejudices of phenomenology and the anthropological practices of ethnography, the first levels of interpretive theological work were at the level of the congregation and an outside reading team. This way, the interpretive work of the congregation was put into conversation early on with a set of eyes other than the researcher’s to help shape the interpretation of the interviews.
As a participant-observer, I kept a field book, where I described thickly the practices, programs, and activities that I participated in while with the congregation. The field book data helped me to identify the narratives that construct certain practices, the metaphors that fund or provide meaning for various congregational activities, and artifacts generated by the congregation while making an attempt to understand how these things fit into the larger theological whole. That is, what do they say about how this congregation understands and experiences the presence of God in these activities? Subsequent interviews and focus groups served to test out some of what emerged here, and what emerged in participant-observer field notes were no doubt generated by the experience of interviews and focus groups.

In terms of analyzing interviews and focus group transcripts, I sought to bracket broader theological and theoretical concerns that I might bring as a researcher wherever possible in order to attend to the narratives and interpretations as they emerge. This bracketing was done in three ways: (1) interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed so that the exact language, order, and stories can be a ‘text’ to which my work attempted to remain faithful. (2) Any interpretive theological coding done by the researcher was tested in the following layer of interviews and focus groups. And, (3) the coding process followed methodological processes developed in psychological and nursing phenomenological studies, as well as in some grounded theory studies and narrative inquiry.¹⁷⁰ I used NVivo 6 research software to help structure my thoughts.

¹⁷⁰ See Giorgi and Giorgi, “The Descriptive Phenomenological Psychological Method.” In Grounded Theory, Kathy Charmaz presents a similar kind of text-oriented coding for meaning. See Kathy Charmaz, Constructing Grounded Theory (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2006). But both of these approaches prioritize the interpretive work of the researcher before the text of the interview. The narrative approach of Clandinin and Connelly provides a corrective, as any interpretive move by the researcher must be validated from within the narratives emerging from the focus groups and interviews. See D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly, Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative
during the coding, and to make sure 'hunches' could be demonstrated (or not) in the data. NVivo gave me freedom to explore various categorizations of the data while also providing structure so that 'dead-ends' could be seen as well. The coding process helped me to discern units of meaning in the various conversations recorded, and then helped me to place these meaning units into the language of broader theological discourse. The result is both a theological interpretation of a congregational culture and practices, but it will also provoke and sustain a conversation about evangelicals and public theology.

Conclusion

I have attempted here to demonstrate how and why this ethnographic phenomenology is a work of evangelical theology. Just as ethnography produces an essay, so also this work produces, or generates a theology. Whether or not it is theological and evangelical remains to be seen over the next few pages. We will now turn to an account of the research work, and the reflections discerned and generated by Midtown as they attempt to live the good news in the neighborhood.
CHAPTER 3

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNT OF LIVED PUBLIC THEOLOGY

Introduction

On this particular Sunday, the bright spring weather seemed to inflate the spirit of Midtown. The sanctuary was full. The energy in the room was tangible. Worshippers were warmly welcomed, songs enthusiastically sung, and the usually boisterous greeting ritual amplified. As on most Sundays, Midtown’s congregants arranged themselves from stage right-to-left according to age and relative clout in the congregation. There are, of course, exceptions to this pattern, but it is clear that the section to the left of the stage contains more young people, strangers, and uninvolved congregants.

This morning, I sat in the section of strangers near an unkempt man who appears to live on the streets. Although he is present every Sunday and even serves as an usher, nobody ever sits too close to him. I discovered that this is less an act of exclusion, and more one of practicality; he ‘cleans up’ every week with the same blue sweater and tight jeans, his hair and beard combed through but (apparently) without a shower or laundromat. Despite his cleaned-up appearance, the odor of a week’s work manages to fill the section in which he sits. This—I am sure—is what accounts for the two-to-three seat ‘halo’ around him this Sunday.

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1 Midtown public worship, March 22, 2009.
As a section of strangers, stage-left tends to fill with high school students—some who attend with their parents and some who do not—and younger couples that do not have other family members in attendance. Most young adults in the church, however, do attend with other family members, for this is a church with a strong tradition. Throughout the sanctuary, one can see four generations worshipping in the same row, as adult children still sometimes sit with their parents. But older members do worry that young adults (20s-30s) are not investing in the ministry of the church. The mature (55+) generation of the church dominates committees, giving, and ministry programs, while the adult children of this generation sporadically attend. This anxiety emerged in the congregational interviews, as congregants asked in a variety of ways how Midtown can “hand off” its ministry to the next generation. This—clearly—is an anxiety that expresses itself in the practice of seating. When will the respective clout be shared with those seated on the left?

But the stage-left section also draws attention to another aspect of Midtown’s life. On this Sunday, a special-needs adolescent male sat two rows in front of me. I have seen him here before; he attends regularly with his care-givers. He is a joyful young man, who ritually gets up during the sermon once or twice to go out into the foyer. He also sporadically grunts and talks loudly during particularly quiet times of the service. But he is genuinely welcomed. Neither his care-givers nor those around him ‘hush’ him or cast a troubled look in his direction. He often invites smiles, welcome, and gestures of acceptance from those in this section. Midtown’s welcoming posture toward those with disabilities has drawn other families with special-needs children and points toward an

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interesting feature of Midtown’s culture revealed in worship: a general sense of informality.³

Services are not necessarily highly professional endeavors. Videos fail, mics cut out, the worship band is not always ‘tight’—and the congregation takes it in stride. Besides giving the unkempt man an opportunity to serve as an usher, the worship band uses a man with a mental disability on the congas (un-mic’d) who sometimes confuses the music. In many focus groups, congregants celebrated this “acceptance with no strings attached” aspect of the congregation.⁴ Midtown, many insisted, takes people as they are. “You can show up to church drunk—and people have!—and we will receive you,” one congregant asserted.⁵ These factors point toward an informal ethos in the worship service—an informality that features a general acceptance of audio-visual, musical, and programmatic hiccups. The upside of this ethos is that things like the low-hum of

³ In this chapter, I draw upon two different aspects of the term ‘informality’ to help thematize the shape of Midtown’s life and ministry. In ethnographies of communication, ‘informality’ is one way of talking about communication situations that are less structured and more fluid in terms of role expectations and etiquette and thus informality names communication events more open to affectivity and intimacy. This is certainly the case both with Midtown’s lack of professionalism in some areas and the way in which numerous practices are improvisational during the worship service in a way that draws attention to a concern for intimacy, familial warmth, and feelings of authenticity. But informality can also be a way of talking about more egalitarian frameworks for social status and roles. In ethnographies of language, ‘informal’ language designates less rigid status differentiation. Midtown’s sense in worship is that anyone and everyone is welcome to participate (the second understanding of informality), and yet this is an ambiguous informality since the seating of the congregation communicates a quite formal understanding of power relationships in the congregation. Despite this use of informality in ethnography, it is a slippery term and its usefulness is contested within ethnography. It is not a technical term, but it does have descriptive value. I use it here because it describes an initial ethos of the congregation, but I do acknowledge its limited usefulness. For a good discussion of its various uses and problems, see Judith T. Irvine, “Formality and Informality in Communicative Events,” American Anthropologist 81, no. 4 (December 1979). A similar conceptuality is also used in cultural studies to denote relative equality or inequality in a society. Those with a low level of “power difference” were more likely to value adaptive and flexible—informal—behavior than others. See Geert H. Hofstede and Gert Jan Hofstede, Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind, Rev. and expanded 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005), 39-72.

⁴ Sunday School Hour focus group, facilitated by author, May 10, 2009; Also, similar wording in the Children’s Ministry focus group, facilitated by author, April 22, 2009.

⁵ Sunday School Hour focus group, facilitated by author, May 10, 2009.
children busying themselves throughout the sermon, outbursts from special-needs persons, and the questionable hygiene of those that come in off the streets are accepted by the congregation without a second glance.

Overview of Chapter

What might the stage-left section tell us about Midtown? What does the informality of the service mean in relationship to the observation of the formal way in which congregants seat themselves, and the related difficulty of transferring power to younger and newer members? In this chapter, I will write an ethnographic essay, attending to the practices of Midtown’s public worship service in order to articulate the key themes and questions that will guide the following account of Midtown’s evangelical, public, and missional narrative strands. As such, this chapter serves to both set the scene and introduce the characters. I will do this by attending to three of the basic practices that shape Midtown’s public worship—singing, greeting, and preaching—and point to a sense of informality in regard to the performance of public worship, relationship with one another, and also relationship with God. Informality serves as a context-clue for the rest of the study, highlighting two different goods embodied in

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According to James Clifford, the essay is not only the ‘product’ of research, but also an act of research in and of itself. It is a ‘constructive’ engagement which cannot help but underscore “the constructed, artificial nature of cultural accounts” which is the “historical predicament” of ethnography, that it is always caught up in the “invention, not the representation of cultures” (2). This is a liability for ethnography, but also opens up possibility, for ethnographic writing “cultivates an engaged clarity” at the boundaries between systems and cultures (2). The result is always some kind of “fiction” in the sense of a constructed, partial, “committed and incomplete...truth” (7). See Clifford, “Introduction: Partial Truths.” This particular chapter, however, is not the result of only my participant-observer work, but rather has emerged from a kind of ‘dialogue’ with the whole of the research process. As such, I use ‘ethnography’ in the more holistic sense of Clifford. It is writing that has been intricately involved in my research. And it is also a partial and limited account of Midtown’s public worship.
Midtown’s life and ministry: the good of intimacy and hospitality. In chapter four I will provide a thick account of the good of intimacy as it informs and engenders the evangelical narrative strand. In chapter five, I will explore the good of hospitality as it explicates Midtown’s public narrative strand.

Goods, however, must be associated with an account or accounts of moral action that can place the good in a particular project or set of actions. Charles Taylor’s project in *Sources of The Self* begins with an attempt to connect moral agency with an account of the good. For Taylor, particular goods which are strongly valued create a horizon, or set of hopes/expectations which orient, interpret, and judge our action. He considers the way in which these goods (and the evaluation of some over others) create a “framework,” which is a way of talking about how “the goods which command our awe must also function in some sense as standards for us.” Frameworks, then, make moral agency intelligible, for human personhood is only conceivable within “strongly qualified horizons” which are “constitutive of human agency.” For a good to orient a practice, there must be a sense of how one’s action can fulfill, accomplish, or participate in this

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7 By ‘goods’ I am referring to ‘non-moral goods’ in the sense that these would not qualify for philosophical speculation about ‘the good’ or ‘the good for humanity.’ Nor are they particular goods related to classical virtues, such as in virtue ethics. Rather, I mean ‘goods’ in the sense that Maclntyre and Taylor (among others) use it more generally to specify the way in which certain goals or values are embodied by particular actions or practices, while also, in turn orienting these practices. See the following footnote.

8 For Alasdair Maclntyre, goods are internally related to particular practices that are sustained by living traditions. See Maclntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 181-203. Although Maclntyre’s account assumes more social fragmentation between traditions/practices (and thus a kind of incommensurability) than the kind of hybridity and fluidity between communities and traditions in our present situation, his insistence that goods are related to practices (and thus an account of action) is an important contribution to my interpretation of this project. Charles Taylor also works with Maclntyre’s account of practices to articulate a vision of human agency as necessarily existing within a “moral space” (31). See Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, 20-31.


10 Ibid., 27.
good; agency is connected to projective thought, or visions of what is good.\textsuperscript{11} For even wishful thinking or utopian visions that seem divorced from reality are projective in terms of making possible certain kinds of action.\textsuperscript{12} By way of example, we could say that Disneyland’s nostalgia engendered practices of escape through various entertainment products. But accounts of action embodied in actual practices also construct or reform an understanding of the good being pursued. Continuing the example, one might argue that American’s practices of escape through consuming entertainment products helped construct and make plausible Disney’s vision.\textsuperscript{13} Because of this dynamic relationship between goods and accounts of practice, I will also attend to the particular theories of practice embodied in Midtown’s worship through three ‘brief excursuses’ throughout the chapter. These accounts of practice provide a kind of character sketch for Midtown by explicating deeper sources of some of Midtown’s theological and theoretical horizons. The insights gleaned here will help to tell the story in following chapters.

A Word About Method

Although the study took place over a four-month period in the late-spring of 2009, I had attended Midtown Baptist Church during the year previous to the study. This limited involvement means that I have more experience with Midtown’s public worship

\footnote{11} Ricoeur has shown how fiction and even utopian dreams, from its location ‘external’ to the limitations of our present world function to ‘redescribe reality’ in the same way a metaphorical utterance creates sudden and new relationships. For Ricoeur, utopia and ideology are related as two ends of the same continuum. Ideology functions to orient one toward integration (which is, of course, a distortion), and utopia provides the vantage point ‘from nowhere’ to discern and critique the distortions of ideology—but also remains subject to its own eclectic distortions. See Ricoeur, “Imagination and Discourse in Action.”

\footnote{12} See Ibid.

\footnote{13} I have in mind here the way in which both Taylor and Ricoeur resist an ‘either-or’ or ‘primary-secondary’ dichotomy when talking about goods and practices (Taylor) or utopia (imaginative visions) and ideology (making sense of real life).
services than any other set of practices in the congregation. During the four-month study period, I attempted to bracket this previous experience by attending to particular practices in worship on different Sundays. Of course these previous experiences informed my understanding of the action; a year’s-worth of stories, sermons, and observation are impossible to completely set aside. But following Ricoeur’s insight regarding the distanciation of past action, that action becomes—even for one who participates—a text that describes and redescribes a world, I wrote accounts of public worship as a textual witness to my initial interpretations. These texts were then critiqued, but also proved informative, as the study moved from participant-observer work into generative focus groups.

Initially, however, I positioned myself in public worship as both a participant and observer by attending to the practices, rituals, and symbols in front of me along with the meaning given to them in the immediate context. After each service, I wrote a participant-observer text to reflect on the experience, and I subjected these texts to continual interpretation in light of conversations, observations, focus groups, and interviews. In this chapter, I will use these participant-observer texts and the ensuing process of reflection to frame Midtown’s lived public theology around several of Midtown’s central practices in public worship. The result is an ethnographic account of Midtown’s worship that also introduces the themes that will inform the rest of this project.

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14 Ricoeur, “The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text.”
The Practice of Public Worship and Public Theology

Midtown is a church actively engaged in civil society. Why, then, do I frame this discussion with the various constitutive practices of public worship? Why not attend to Midtown's public engagements theologically? Two reflections have convinced me to pursue this presentation of my research: (1) Midtown sees public worship as its open door to the community. Services are filled with the language of hospitality, and the worship space is assumed to be public space for the worship of God. That is, concern for both 'public' and 'God' is brought together in Midtown's own commentary on its worship services. Worship services, then, are a significant practice of public ministry for Midtown—and its most consistent one. I will begin, then, with this expression of congregational life as a practiced public theology. (2) This account follows the narrative of my research more directly. I was attending worship services and recording observations/questions even before the congregational interviews were completed. After this, my own observations, the interviews, and the reading team report helped raise questions/concerns for my focus group work and the rest of the project. I will follow this trajectory in chapters three, four, and five.

Midtown's public worship services are constituted by six practices: gathering, singing, greeting, public prayer, preaching, and sending. In the introduction, I included a brief account of Midtown's gathering in terms of its formal seating arrangement. Midtown's sending is also a somewhat formal exercise, with the pastor leading a benediction from Numbers 6:26. But neither practice—nor that of public prayer—significantly adds or challenges the argument made in this chapter. Due to considerations of space, then, I will attend to the three practices that provide the most data and 'set the
stage’ most effectively for the work ahead. I will describe Midtown’s practices of singing, greeting, and preaching in turn.

**Singing**

The choir, worship band, and organist all lead Midtown’s singing at different times in nearly every worship service. Although all three elicit a response from the congregation, the choir performance creates the most visible energy in worship. This is not surprising, given the pride that Midtown has in its choir, which is quite large for a church its size. Twenty-to-thirty people participate in choir each week, singing in purple gowns on Sunday and practicing every Wednesday. As a symbol of the congregation’s commitment to the choir, the church hired a part-time director rather than a worship-leader last year when they lost their previous worship-leader/choir director. Midtown presently pays the choir director and relies upon a volunteer to lead singing.

Worship services often start with one or two hymns led by the pipe-organ before transitioning to a contemporary praise band. Midtown’s hymnody tends to be as mixed as its musical styles, although both hymns and praise songs draw from a similar theological tradition that celebrates a substitutionary atonement and an intimate/personal faith in Jesus Christ.\(^\text{15}\) A man on a piano leads the worship band with a fairly eclectic group of people up front. The band sometimes lacks a smooth professionalism, which underscores that they are not self-conscious about creating a performance. It is noteworthy, however, that despite the passionate/intimate language in their songs, singing rarely evokes an

\(^{15}\) I will not explore these traditions here because (ironically, perhaps) they do not figure prominently in Midtown’s language and interpretation of its experience. Much more emphasis is on Pietist ‘regeneration’ stories, which I will account for in the next chapter. Their hymnody, however, does reinforce the good of intimacy while also sharing in a more generic American evangelicalism, which might be understood through an appeal to Sweeney, who writes about a particular understanding of atonement in evangelicalism. See Sweeney, *The American Evangelical Story: A History of the Movement*. 
emotional response from those in the congregation. The congregation reserves emotion for the choir, where it is not unusual to respond with enthusiastic clapping followed by shouts of ‘amen.’ It seems as though singing is something that most in the congregation simply get through; but ‘getting through’ might be an improvement for Midtown’s worship.

A number of years ago, the congregation struggled with worship style—a familiar scenario that played out in congregations throughout North America. Some pushed for a more contemporary style of music. They wanted to use guitars, bass, and drums in worship, to get away from a hymnal in general and hymns in particular. Others opposed the change for a wide variety of reasons, arguing for the inappropriateness of the instruments, or the theological vacuity of contemporary songs, or personal preference for the older music. For some time, the congregation experimented with two services, but this taxed the staff, divided the church, and failed to maintain any kind of critical mass for either service. When they hired their last worship director (in the last year he took a full-time position at another congregation), he innovated a piano-led integrated service. He seemed to strike the right note of compromise, and the diverse factions generally made peace. But the consequence is perhaps a resigned passivity from many congregants during the music.

This points to a pragmatic sensibility among the congregants. Midtown proudly asserts its roots in Swedish pietism, which they say has rescued them from the conservative fundamentalism of the twentieth century and has given them ‘space’ for

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16 Conversation with a congregant, March 5, 2009.

17 Ibid.
diversity in theological and ministerial terms. In the focus groups, I discovered a surprising theo-ethical diversity around explosive culture-war issues like homosexuality and abortion. In the congregational interviews, many respondents indicated that socio-economic, generational, and racial diversity were important resources for Midtown’s life rather than a threat or source of anxiety. This space for the concerns and preferences of the other is also reflected in the multitude of programs, boards, and committees that a relatively small church such as Midtown sustains. One might wonder what keeps a knitting group, weekly pilates ministry, tutoring, and housing the homeless together in a single coherent vision. On one level, this coherence is a critical question because the resources of the church are stretched to provide for such a complex of programs and concerns. But at another level, the diverse sets of programs reflect a sustained commitment of the church to not divide over non-critical differences. The congregation tends to give permission for whatever a person feels must be done at the church. This is reflected in congregational singing. There is a no-nonsense quality to the worship. People participate somewhat dispassionately, as if they acknowledge that it is not their preferred style, but it is what works in this particular congregation.

First Theory of Practice: American Pragmatism

I choose the term ‘pragmatic’ to describe Midtown’s ‘sensibility’ regarding worship styles intentionally. I do not mean that Midtown seeks expediency in a crass means-ends calculus in relationship to worship styles, nor that their divergent sets of ministries demonstrate the kind of technical proficiency which we might describe as

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18 Ibid.

eminently practical. Rather, I use the term pragmatic to refer to a distinct American philosophical tradition that claims (among other things) an “anti-ideological liberalism,”[^20] “epistemic anti-foundationalism and minimalistic ontological realism,”[^21] rooted in a democratic and experimental account of human action as “creative action.”[^22] As a live tradition of thought, the contours of pragmatism are the subject of an ongoing and deeply divided debate.[^23] My particular account attempts to discern some of the different nuances in this conversation about pragmatism while keeping the practices and ethos of the congregation in focus. That is, certain pragmatic debates and manifestations of the tradition might not be as fruitful in understanding and describing the congregation as others might. Thus, what follows is a pragmatic attempt to account for the pragmatic tradition as it seems to surface at Midtown.

In 1907, William James published a series of lectures called “Pragmatism: A New Name for an Old Way of Thinking.”[^24] In these lectures, James declares pragmatism to be a “mediating philosophy” that reconciles the empirically “tough-minded” concern for scientific ‘facts’ with the enduring, quasi-religious, idealist-optimistic “tender-minded” worldview rooted in humanity’s enduring ‘values.’[^25] In these lectures, James drew upon


[^25]: Ibid.
"the principle of pragmatism" which he attributes to Charles Sanders Peirce from an 1878 paper entitled "How to Make Things Clear." However, Peirce's project was much less concerned with the dichotomy between empiricism and moral values than that between theory and praxis. As such, Peirce articulated a kind of "laboratory philosophy" in which he created a set of maxims for assessing, evaluating, and judging ideas, methods, and theories based on the "effects" or results they generate when practiced. Thus, Peirce argued for a chastened kind of realism; that our truth claims and theoretic constructions are not thrust upon an empty void but rather a real world of other forces and agents. Reality, so to speak, does 'bite back.' The merit of this claim or that theory, then, is in how well it clarifies, predicts, or controls that which it claims. In its emergent form, pragmatism is a falliblist and experimental epistemology which attends to the ways in which knowledge claims are produced, tested, and verified in real life.

Peirce shaped these views with a clear opponent in mind. He sought a way beyond the Cartesian cogito and subsequent method of universal doubt. Peirce saw that the posture of universal doubt by a single, isolated questioner failed to account for the ways in which modernity's most successful intellectual discipline actually generated knowledge—that is, scientists do not work like the Cartesian cogito. Rather, scientists

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid. There is a division among neo-pragmatists regarding Peircian and Jamsian realism. Some, such as Richard Rorty, see this as something they wanted to move beyond but lacked the conceptual tools gained by the later linguistic turn in philosophy. Others, such as Hillary Putnam defend this chastened realism as an important contribution to be defended today. For an account of this debate, see Nicholas Rescher, "Pragmatism at the Crossroads," Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society 41, no. 2 (2005). For an interesting hermeneutical attempt to reconcile these approaches see Colin Koopman, "Language Is a Form of Experience: Reconciling Classical Pragmatism and Neopragmatism," Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society 43, no. 4 (2007).

29 Hookway, "Pragmatism."
work by addressing a particular problem within a particular context. They do not doubt *everything*, but rather raise a question about the particular problem that confronts them.\(^{30}\)

So also, scientific knowledge is not generated solely via thought-experiments, but rather on the basis of concrete, empirical experiments conducted with and among bodies; for scientific knowledge is not simply the product of a mind. And finally, scientific inquiry takes place amidst a *community*; for knowledge to count as such, it must not only *work* in an experiment, but the account of what actually took place must be reviewed and evaluated by the larger scientific community.\(^{31}\) For Peirce, such an account of fallible, progress-oriented community judgment ought to also characterize philosophy. Peirce says:

> Philosophy ought to imitate the successful sciences in its methods, so far as to proceed only from tangible premises which can be subjected to careful scrutiny, and to trust rather to the multitude and variety of its arguments than to the conclusiveness of any one. Its reasoning should not form a chain which is no stronger than its weakest link, but a cable whose fibres may be ever so slender, provided they are sufficiently numerous and intimately connected.\(^{32}\)

Thus, scientism offered Peirce an approach to epistemology that deliberately avoided both metaphysical abstraction and foundationalist projects to ground truth. So also, Peirce saw in the scientific ethos a more holistic conception of knowledge that rebuffed the mind-world, individual-community dichotomies with its emphasis on practices of experimentation within particular contexts.

\(^{30}\) Ibid. See also Joas, *Pragmatism and Social Theory*, 18-19.

\(^{31}\) Hookway, “Pragmatism.”

James shared Peirce’s epistemological concerns, though he worked with an explicit concern for psychology, and attempted to provide an account of conscious experience in relationship to knowledge claims.  

Whereas Peirce worked with more substantial empiricist assumptions, seeing a direct relationship between sense-data and worldly events, James explored themes of will and desire in relationship to these events. What is the experience of the knower? What is reliable experience? Against determinist theories, James sought to understand the creative, desiring, and willing ‘spaces’ in human consciousness without giving up Peirce’s concern for the ‘objectivity’ of the world as one encounters it. Thus, James distinguished between ‘pure experience’ and the way one consciously accounts for that experience. For James, consciousness is always different from pure sense data, which helps sustain Peirce’s fallibilist notions of knowledge, but it also stretched Peirce’s view of how ‘true’ knowledge seeks to understand ‘reality.’  

James’s use of psychology led to a more pluralistic view of truth, that there can be different kinds of truths related to different perspectives and belief systems. As demonstrated from what I referenced in his 1907 lectures, this different set of questions allowed him to account for religious experience and to bring moral-ethical values back

33 Hookway, “Pragmatism.”

34 Michael R. Slater, “Pragmatism, Realism, and Religion,” Journal of Religious Ethics 36, no. 4 (2008). Slater calls James’s appeal to experience a ‘humanist’ account that competed with a Peircian ‘realism.’ Slater writes: “While James was not always successful in balancing the realist and humanist aspects of his pragmatism—at times he suggests that reality is somewhat altered or reconstructed through our cognitive interactions with it, which has the effect of undercutting his commitment to realism” (665).

35 A difference not lost on Peirce, who tried to change his account to ‘pragmaticism’ to keep his and James’s accounts from conflating. See Hookway, “Pragmatism.”

36 Slater, “Pragmatism, Realism, and Religion.” For James, the “free exchange of religious ideas and reasons in the public sphere was a vital social good” (673). This is rooted in his account of experience as what mediates our thinking, seeing “values as inextricably connected with the judgments made by minded beings—and recognizing the different judgments that such beings make—can help us to account for the pluralistic nature of values in addition to their realistic nature” (676).
into an epistemological conversation dominated by ‘tough-minded’ empiricists. However, he did so by attending to the inner-experiences and beliefs of individuals in service of a pluralist account of such values.

Something of Peirce’s orientation toward problem-solving communities of experimentation is lost, as is his emphasis on the testing of such claims in the world rather than in a state of consciousness. It is James’s contemporary, Josiah Royce, who brings Peirce’s concern for interpretive-experimental communities forward to consider religious claims and communities. In The Problem of Christianity, Royce builds upon what he calls an ethic of loyalty to consider Christian claims and practices in light of the “Universal Community.” The religious individual, for Royce, can only be accounted for in and through the common life of the community in service to one another and the world.

As I trace Midtown’s pragmatic ethos through the rest of this study, I will note (particularly in chapter four) the ways in which a Jamesian appeal to inner experience persists in Midtown’s understanding of piety rather than a Roycean concern for community and service or a Deweyan-Meadean concern for community-problem solving in relationship to theological inquiry. This becomes particularly evident in the lack of a ‘public’ imaginary for theological thinking. Midtown largely expects God to reveal Godself in intimate, personal, and private terms. One of the questions throughout this study will be ‘how is it that Midtown generates public theology pre-reflectively in their practices of public engagement? How is it that God is revealed in and through these

37 Hookway, “Pragmatism.” See also Slater, “Pragmatism, Realism, and Religion.”

practices?' This is less a Jamesian question than a Roycean (through Peirce and sharing in the concerns of Dewey and Mead) question.

I began this discussion on pragmatism by calling it a non-ideological liberalism and an anti-foundationalist epistemology rooted in a democratic, experimental creative account of human action. Peirce and James demonstrate the way in which pragmatism seeks an anti-foundationalist epistemology that is non-ideological and experimental. However, the rest of the description depends upon Mead and Dewey's mediation of the tradition and the way in which it has been picked up by Neo-pragmatists since the 1970s. Mead fruitfully brought to articulation themes of sociality in relationship to the development of the self; his work remains influential for thinkers as diverse as Jürgen Habermas and Wolfhart Pannenberg, while also immensely useful for social psychology and sociology. Dewey, however, connected the emergent, epistemological work of Peirce and James to larger themes of American self-consciousness, ‘widening’ pragmatism by connecting it to American democracy. Thus, it is Dewey who helps us understand how a congregation such as Midtown might manifest a particular pragmatic shape.

Dewey shared with Peirce a concern for context and action as starting-points for inquiry while also taking up societal-political concerns regarding perceived threats to American democracy. Dewey, with Peirce, emphasized the ‘problem-solving’ and

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39 For an account of this relationship, see Koopman, “Language Is a Form of Experience: Reconciling Classical Pragmatism and Neopragnatism.” See also Charley D. Hardwick and Donald A. Crosby, eds., Pragmatism, Neo-Pragmatism, and Religion: Conversations with Richard Rorty (New York: P. Lang, 1997). For an account of ‘narrow’ pragmatism and then the later ‘widened’ pragmatism since 1970, see Hookway, “Pragmatism.”

‘experimental’ practices of scientific communities while also noting that something
similar happens in democratic processes of public discourse that seek common solutions
to shared problems. For Dewey, something distinctly American and liberal is embedded
in pragmatism. In line with the pragmatic tradition, Dewey saw democracy not as a set of
institutions or particular polity, but rather a:

*moral ideal*, a personal way of life to be concretely embodied in everyday
practices... It is the culture and practice of democracy in everyday life that Dewey
stresses. Democracy is a reflective faith in the capacity of all human beings for
intelligent judgment, deliberation, and action if the proper conditions are
furnished.\(^{41}\)

Thus, Dewey’s form of pragmatism identifies a similarity between the ethos of scientific
experimentation, public deliberation, and judgment *and* the micro-politics\(^{42}\) that sustain
and enrich public life.\(^{43}\) In this way, the practices of science became in Dewey an
American public-ethical task that sustains the democratic virtues necessary for enriching
the “moral character of [our] community life.”\(^{44}\) Dewey saw pragmatism as *praxis* in the
Aristotelean sense and experimented throughout his life with the kinds of communities,
and the kind of community life that can generate democratic virtues.\(^{45}\)

What kind of community life does Deweyan pragmatism seek? Mead identified
social order as “not to be found in normative consensus, but in the capacity of a collective


\(^{42}\) This is a distinction made by Graham Ward; politics as a way of life rather than a voting record. See Ward, *The Politics of Discipleship: Becoming Postmaterial Citizens*, 4-5.

\(^{43}\) Bernstein, *Philosophical Profiles: Essays in a Pragmatic Mode*, 260-64.

\(^{44}\) Ibid., 264.

\(^{45}\) Ibid.
to successfully solve its problems.\textsuperscript{46} Dewey would agree. Dewey and Mead articulate a distinct, realistic-yet-optimistic account of human agency. Against biological or environmental determinism, they articulate a way in which communities seek to understand and address perceived problems.\textsuperscript{47} They insist that the experimental response of various communities could always have been otherwise. So also, against teleological accounts of action they insist that the very open-ended framework of an "experimenting intelligence" means that when communities address specific problems the possibility for new ways of action is opened up.\textsuperscript{48} Dewey's interest in education demonstrates this well—for it is in children's play (which is rarely teleological or intentional according to specific ends) that new possibilities for action are learned.\textsuperscript{49} One commentator on the pragmatic tradition articulates it this way: "...it is not merely interested in the application of pregiven normative rules, but in the construction of new possibilities for moral action."\textsuperscript{50} Thus, pragmatism at the hands of Dewey and Mead constructs an account of human practice as creative and communicative in the sense that human practice is not "clearly prescribed beforehand by reality, but calls for creativity and brings something objectively new into the world."\textsuperscript{51}

But what does this connection of democracy to scientism and a theory of moral action have to do with Midtown? It certainly seems that we have strayed a long way from

\textsuperscript{46} Joas, \textit{Pragmatism and Social Theory}, 254-55.

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 20-21.

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 248.

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 22, 248-53.

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 253.

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 4.
the practices of singing and an observed ‘pragmatic sensibility’ in the congregation. However, one should not underestimate the power of national explanatory mythologies—of which Dewey’s ranks particularly strong.\(^5^2\) Dewey’s insistence that this scientific, problem-solving, anti-ideological pragmatism is distinctly American and democratic is certainly debatable.\(^5^3\) Are Americans more predisposed to pragmatic action? Is Dewey’s account of democracy and its sustaining practices coherent and convincing? This is up for debate. But regardless of whether Dewey’s case can be made empirically, it can certainly be made through an appeal to the kinds of narratives and ideals by which the United States makes sense of itself. It is quite possible that Dewey’s non-ideological account of pragmatic practices functions ideologically to sustain certain democratic ideals and practices. It could certainly be the case that these narratives about the nature of democracy and democratic action function within the congregation. But it is also possible that certain theological and ecclesial habits and commitments in Midtown’s Baptist-Pietist heritage also supply a kind of pragmatism—as theologically shallow as these ecclesial resources might appear. This is the case that Daniel Tröhler makes by tracing the Congregationalist-Baptist roots of both the University of Chicago and the early pragmatists. Tröhler says:

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\text{...the common ground connecting what James called the Chicago School was American reformed Protestantism as it articulated itself within...Chicago. In this}
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\(^5^3\) Lloyd takes this assumption to task, focusing on the way in which Dewey’s nationalism functioned ideologically to sustain a myth of ‘non-ideological’ pragmatism as ‘American.’ Certainly, Lloyd’s essay is subject to the same critique of ideology he levels against Dewey—what power-agenda does Lloyd have at stake? But it is an argument to keep in mind, especially since Dewey does downplay his Hegelian-German resources in his use of historicism. See Lloyd, “Liberty Philosophy: Nationalism and the Making of American Pragmatism.”
context, American Protestantism is best understood not as a specific theology, but rather as a mentality, one that was highly skeptical toward universally applicable doctrines (see, for example, the Baptist and Congregationalist churches). Because these Protestant movements saw the local congregation as the fundamental and essential element of the church and were committed to the strong particularism of individual congregations, which were organized according to 'democratic' structures, social-religious practice was more important than theological speculations.\textsuperscript{54}

It is possible that pragmatism is a philosophy that echoes some of Midtown’s theo-ethical habits that are rooted in the Baptist tradition and nurtured by idealized narratives of American democracy. During the interview phase of my research, one of the respondents characterized Midtown as “irenic” in the sense that both theological conservatives and liberals work together in the same congregation.\textsuperscript{55} The senior pastor often describes the church as a place where red-state and blue-state come together. One might guess that such peace comes at the price of an uncomfortable silence around explosive issues, but this is not the case at Midtown. It is, rather, a peace that is promoted and maintained through well-formed practices of conversation, deliberation, and open-ended moral discernment. Two examples will suffice: (1) During the summer of 2008, the congregation held a series of open-door conversations immediately after the Sunday service on controversial moral-political issues such as ‘war and peace,’ and ‘consumerism.’ During the meetings, passionate disagreement was maintained amidst an expectation of civility, and some conversations brought about greater agreement than others. Of course, these kinds of public conversations look a lot like the democratic, inclusive, problem-solving practices celebrated by Dewey. It would be easy to assume


\textsuperscript{55} Interview N, March 2009.
that these kinds of practices are simply carried-in by an activistic and well-formed citizenry who also attend Midtown. This could certainly be part of the explanation. However, these conversations in 2008 were set up as an expression of the summer sermon series that celebrated the Baptist-Pietist heritage. The sermon series made an argument regarding Baptist-Pietist identity, stating that Baptists create identity around a few ‘essentials’ (primarily a shared experience) of the Christian faith while allowing a great deal of openness in terms of how this faith is lived out. The conversations were meant to demonstrate how well-meaning Christians can disagree while earnestly seeking answers together. Whether or not this is an accurate or simply idealistic portrait of the Baptist tradition is up for debate. It is significant, though, that these very democratic and pragmatic practices of community conversation are accounted for through an appeal to an ecclesial-theological tradition rather than only the American democratic tradition.\textsuperscript{56}

(2) During one of my focus group conversations, an elderly member of the congregation interjected a comment on abortion rights that was well-outside the conservative-evangelical ‘script.’ This put me on high alert. I waited for the strong backlash such a comment would, no-doubt, evoke as the room became quite tense. A couple people delivered an impassioned rebuttal with dignity and respect. The woman who made the initial comment respectfully and firmly replied as the two sides drew upon different biblical-theological arguments to articulate their respective position. After a few

\textsuperscript{56} By ‘democratic tradition’ I mean to refer to both what Dewey articulates as a ‘way of life’ or set of communicative, deliberative practices. In contemporary ethics, this tradition is outlined by Jeffrey Stout, who argues that public accountability and judgment through the giving of reasons is our democratic heritage, a particular tradition that generates particular virtues. See Jeffrey Stout, \textit{Democracy and Tradition}, New Forum Books (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004). However, Stout has been criticized that his account of the tradition remains quite shallow—in that it could account for the problem-solving practices of accountability in any society, not just ‘democracy.’ See Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Jeffrey Stout on Democracy and Its Contemporary Christian Critics,” \textit{Journal of Religious Ethics} 33, no. 4 (2005).
rounds of give-and-take, the group found some middle-ground on the issue of *compassionate practice* in terms of how the church should relate to those with an unwanted pregnancy and/or single mothers. It is another instance of an open-ended, problem-solving act of creative community agency.

These are further examples of Midtown’s ‘pragmatic sensibility’ that appeared initially in how the congregation has worked through its worship-style differences. In the instance of worship style, two ideological sides were brought together through the give-and-take experimental false-starts of separate services, a guitar-led service, and then finally a blended, piano-led service. Throughout, social action remains a kind of ‘testing-ground’ for what is a deeply theological, emotional, and personal issue for those involved. This is the ‘way of democracy’ as Dewey imagined, or Mead’s social order as the “capacity of a collective to successfully solve its problems.”

It is slightly ironic that the political practices Dewey and others hoped to inspire through a secularized ethic is embodied (in this case) in a congregation through a self-conscious appeal to its own theological tradition. At this point, however, the shape of this pragmatism at Midtown must remain an open question. In the next chapter, we will consider Midtown’s explicit appeal to the Pietist tradition and its bifurcation of the inner and outer worlds. This is obviously not coherent with pragmatism as outlined here, and this must be accounted for. Furthermore, I do not mean to suggest the very narrow and explicit *epistemological* concerns of the early pragmatists or the intentionally non-metaphysical, antifoundationalist, and linguistic-hermeneutical concerns of neo-pragmatists are taken up by the congregation. Common language in the congregation identifies the Bible as a

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57 Joas, *Pragmatism and Social Theory*, 254-55.
'foundation' for Christian truth and tends to espouse a correspondence, realist conception of truth. The *practice* of the congregation, however, tends to point in a different direction. This is especially true in chapter five, where the narrative strand of Midtown’s public theology is discussed. Midtown seems to have a Deweyan experimental-pragmatic response to the challenges it faces in its neighborhood that is theologically thin. I will continue to attend to these differences as we continue.

**The Practice of Singing—A Brief Conclusion**

We began this section by describing Midtown’s practice of congregational singing, and initially described it as *informal* while also discussing the way in which various conflicts around singing point to an embodiment of some elements of the pragmatic tradition. In conclusion, the informality reflected in Midtown’s singing shows up in two different ways. First, the performance of the worship band is not performance-driven. This results in a band that sometimes does not play well together, but whose competence does not seem to affect—positively or negatively—the response of the congregation. The congregation participates, but relatively dispassionately and appreciatively. Second, the hymnody reflects a kind of colloquial informality in relationship to God. In song, Midtown ‘decides’ to follow Jesus, proclaims her love for Jesus, and stands in awe that ‘above all’ Jesus thought of *her* while on the cross. Although an organ can create a sense of distance and grandeur, and although ‘classic’ hymns such as “Holy, Holy, Holy” emphasize God’s *otherness*, the placement of these songs amidst a larger worship set that emphasizes the informality of a ‘personal lord,’ within a performance that minimizes the distance between performer/audience tends to limit the critique to informality such hymns can offer.
The apparent informality of this language in relationship to God in Midtown’s hymnody—while expressing a value for an immediate, colloquial, and personal relationship with God—can also be understood quite formally as a predictable articulation of a particular ‘script’ for evangelical conversion. It is rooted in nineteenth century revivalism, which moved beyond the more reflective Edwardsian search for signs of one’s election in favor of a Wesleyan-Holiness ‘decisionist’ optimism regarding human agency. As such, one’s ‘personal’ relationship with God is related to a decision, while ongoing sanctification is sustained by ‘walking’ with God through participation in various practices. I will develop this theme more fully in the next chapter when we discuss the conventional regeneration narrative.

**Greeting**

The ritual of congregational greeting breaks up the set of songs in most services through two distinct movements. In the first, congregants are encouraged to greet each other. At the command from the front to ‘greet those next to you,’ certain worshippers immediately spill out into the aisles, many making their way along the full length of the aisle before someone from the front calls them back to their seats. Others, however, politely greet those nearby and then either stand or sit to wait out the rest of the ritual. On one particular Sunday, I sat a few rows behind a single mother new to the church. After the first wave of moving-greeters passed her, she turned to those nearby. But short exchanges of ‘hi—good morning’ could not stretch to fit the allotted greeting time. She stood awkwardly isolated, a statue in the midst of the lively exchange of a public square. She looked straight ahead and seemed to be contemplating sitting down prematurely as

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she fidgeted to find a place to rest her hands. Just as she started to find her chair, a second wave of aisle-greeters swept through to fill the time for her before the voice from the front asserted the (evident) ongoing joy of greeting—‘we love to greet, don’t we?’ the leader asked from the front.

Who are the ‘we’ at Midtown Baptist? I ask this question in relationship to the practice of seating that I referred to in the introduction. Is Midtown’s ‘we’ those that sit stage-right? Are they those who are the referent when the metaphor ‘church family’ is spoken from the front? We will consider this more fully in chapter four when we account for familial-intimate imagery in the interviews.

The second movement of the greeting ritual consists of the congregational announcements, called ‘life in the church.’ This time can stretch for ten minutes and include multiple speakers, who each come up to promote an upcoming event or ministry. As such, it is a window into the concerns and anxieties of the congregation. On many Sundays, the announcements emphasize both the concern of the congregation for the neighborhood—there is some or other ministry taking place that persons are invited to join—and the ongoing anxiety in the church regarding finances. Since it is a somewhat open-ended time for promoting various church activities, speakers often come to the front with a ‘sales pitch’ for the congregation that is contextualized with theological terms. A retired theology professor named Elton⁵⁹ sets the standard for this part of the greeting.

On one particular Sunday, he talked about an upcoming stewardship drive at the church. Midtown maintains an ambitious yearly budget that reflects the church’s deep commitments to overseas missions, work in the immediate neighborhood, and social-

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⁵⁹ Throughout this work, names have been changed to protect identity.
service programs. The budget, however, places the financial well-being of the church on precarious ground. Letters, announcements, and brochures are issued at various points during the year to communicate how well giving is keeping pace with budgeted (and actual) spending. The past two years, the church has made its budget by having two-to-three stewardship drives, where members are asked to give above and beyond their usual tithe to help cover ministry expenses. On this Sunday, Elton got up during announcements for his theologically-framed sales pitch to (and with) the congregation.

He told a story about a father and fourteen-year-old daughter he met while serving as a volunteer at the airport. The father was an abrupt, disgruntled, and unappreciative customer, while his daughter and Elton carried on quite well. After the father got the information he needed from Elton, he irritably asked his daughter to quit talking with Elton so they could continue on their way. Elton, slowing down his cadence, delivered the punch-line to his story: “The daughter, though not happy about the request, turned to me and said ‘I am sorry, I must be obedient to my father.’”

Elton let the story settle in for a few seconds before he drew the connection back to stewardship and congregational finances. Like the daughter, Elton reminded us, we must be obedient to our Father in everything—even our finances. We, too, must live in a “state of obedience” to our heavenly Father in much the same way this unusual daughter so respectfully obeyed her father’s wishes. Having set the metaphorical and narrative terrain, Elton then turned our attention to a flier in the bulletin that showed how various

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60 Midtown public worship, March 15, 2009.
61 Ibid.
62 Ibid.
budgetary lines match up with the stated vision and goals of the church. The opening statement of the flyer states four principles for the congregational commitment to stewardship:

(1) everything belongs to God; (2) Jesus set the example for stewardship; (3) our giving reflects our love for others; and (4) the use of our money reflects our relationship with God.63

Reading these four principles, Elton exhorted the congregation to remain on pace with its giving so that they do not fall behind the budget. Other announcements follow a similar form, but Elton is clearly the most practiced, and gives announcements with some frequency. Judging by congregational response, Elton’s appeals—and others given from the front—seem quite effective. Appeals to stewardship are met with generous giving: Midtown continues to meet its ambitious budgetary goals even when it trails them for much of the year. Moreover, announcements are intermixed with enough banter and laughter that the congregation seems to encourage this ‘sales-pitch in theological frames’ form for giving announcements.

Second Theory of Practice: Missions, Benevolence, and Stewardship

The sales pitch recalled above focuses on stewardship. This is not unusual for Midtown. Often, announcement pitches are made to elicit some kind of response from the church in regard to their time, money, or talent. As with Elton’s announcement above, the subtext for these requests is the sense of great need in the community and even the world. An orphanage in the Philippines needs clothing; the tutoring program needs educators; the youth ministry needs a digital camera; the church budget needs an extra boost. These requests are made with a generous spirit, and the congregation often rises to the

63 Midtown Baptist Church worship folder, March 15, 2009.
challenge. But theologically, it is worth noting that within these requests the church is always in the same position vis-à-vis this or that need. That is, the church is assumed to have an excess of whatever deficit—whether it is an issue of capacity or financial need—which confronts them. The church assumes a benefactor role in relationship to the neighborhood and other global needs. To put it crudely, the church is the benefactor to a host of other clients in the community and world.64

Theologically, the congregation sustains this kind of role through explicit Christological appeals. In one such appeal on a bulletin insert, 2 Corinthians 8:9 (“for you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that through his poverty you might become rich”) was placed in the border underneath a title saying “Stewardship Update—Investing in Ministry.” The insert connected ministry to community needs through an appeal to personal generosity modeled after Christ’s sacrificial giving.65 The congregation—like the Corinthian congregation to whom Paul appealed—was exhorted to bring riches to others by giving up their own. So also, on another Sunday, a brief dramatic reading began the service.66 The reading featured a wealthy man (presumably North American) who traveled to Port Au Prince, Haiti. The wealthy westerner rented a car and, after driving into the city, was confronted by another man offering to wash the window of the wealthy man’s car. The North American, instead, invited the man to work much longer—to clean out the entire


65 Midtown public worship, March 29, 2009. I choose the term ‘model’ here intentionally. I will pick up this ‘imitation’ account of action in my account of preaching.

car—and then paid the Haitian generously for his work. As the North American got into his car to drive off, the Haitian asked him: “Sir, are you Jesus?” The reader concluded with the words “Hope Lives” and we sang a song by the same title that had been rewritten for a series on global poverty. Like the North American, Midtown is also acutely aware of needs in the community, and seeks to address these needs in a direct and personal way—and to do so in the name of Jesus. But must the North American always be the hero of the story? Must the one blessed with resources, with Christian heritage, always get to be mistaken for Jesus?

Thus, the diverse and active social ministries of the church are funded theologically by a Christocentric benevolence. Just as Christ gives of himself for the needs of others, so does the congregation. I use the term ‘benevolence’ here to indicate the way in which the power to act, the power to give, rests entirely on one side of the dyad. Christ gives and the church receives. So also, the church gives and the community receives. The power inequalities inherent in this kind of relationship are underscored by the appeal to ‘obedience’ in Elton’s announcement. The church gives out of obedience. Is ‘obedience’ also expected from the community? The metaphorical constructions only push in one direction. In the next chapter, I will highlight how a particular understanding of missions helps bridge the congregation’s concern for intimate, personal relationships and the needs and concerns of strangers in the community. In this section, I will highlight the way in which the tradition and practices of the Protestant missions movement reinforces Midtown’s particular kind of benevolent agency on behalf of ‘others’ and ‘strangers.’
When David Bosch explores the 'Missionary Paradigm'\textsuperscript{67} of the Protestant Reformation, he rightfully provides significant space for the emergence of German Pietism in the seventeenth century. He argues that the Halle pietists challenged the ecclesial and theological inertia of protestant scholasticism that tied the church to concerns for territory and government. Bosch states that pietist reform consisted of an appeal to personal and individual conversion experiences accompanied by small, "revived," activistic groups within church-structures (\textit{ecclesiola in ecclesiae}).\textsuperscript{68} Pietists combined "the joy of a personal experience of salvation with an eagerness to proclaim the gospel of redemption to all. This was frequently associated with an almost unbearable impatience to go to the ends of the earth."\textsuperscript{69} As Halle and Herrnhut missionaries scattered the globe, Bosch notes that a vision of mission was enacted without any clear connection to the church, for "the church was not the bearer of mission...neither was it the goal."\textsuperscript{70} Instead, mission was seen to be an "act of Christ himself, through the Spirit" in which "Christ made use of people in extraordinary faith and courage, of daring energy and persistent endurance."\textsuperscript{71} Following Warneck, then, Bosch sees the Pietists as introducing the principle of 'voluntarism' in mission.\textsuperscript{72}

\textsuperscript{67} Although I think Bosch's use of 'paradigm' can be helpful heuristically, it is problematic for a variety of reasons.


\textsuperscript{69} Ibid., 252.

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., 253.

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid.

When Midtown appeals to the Pietist tradition, however, it does not refer to this individualistic voluntarism, but rather that the form of Pietist mission was 'holistic' and aimed at improving education and living conditions. Bosch and others affirm this as well. Although Pietist missions maintained an ambiguous relationship with ecclesiology, it embodied a dual concern for both social development and conversion. That is, despite the importance placed on individual experience and the subsequent bifurcation of the inner and outer life, Pietist missions maintained a vibrant and robust vision for the improvement of society through the founding of hospitals, orphanages, and schools. For just as personal conversion must show exterior signs of genuine inner renewal, so also ministry aimed at the conversion of 'souls' must also be complimented by concrete concern for the 'exterior' conditions of one's life and society. I will develop this theme more fully in chapter four, but here it is enough to point out that even though Pietism stressed both the inner and outer life, it is clear that the ultimate concern was a genuine inner experience of conversion along with the multiplication of renewal groups throughout the church. This bifurcation along with the prioritization of interiority provides the basic structure for a benefactor-logic. It is the converted that have in their 'possession' something that must be shared, offered, or given over. And missions, as well as social service projects and church-renewal work at home, provided the context and opportunity for this experiential gift from God to be shared. It is not difficult to see a similar dynamic taking place today at Midtown.

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73 Francke worked to create a hospital, an orphanage, and a school for the poor in Halle, and pietist missionaries showed a similar concern in many places throughout the world. See Bosch, Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission, 254-55.
However, a number of centuries stand between Halle and Midtown. And in these centuries, the voluntarist orientations of the early pietists—with their vision of heroic individuals sent by Christ for the sake of mission—became more thoroughly fused with the benevolent logic of pietist interiority. The place where this is most evident is in the ‘great’ nineteenth century of modern missions. For if the pietists introduced a voluntarist activism, the nineteenth century—and particularly American evangelicals—perfected it. Andrew Walls explores in detail the web of relationships between the trans-Atlantic evangelical revivals known as the ‘Great Awakening’ and the birth of this modern missions movement. Walls argues that modern missions—with its use of voluntary societies as first exemplified by William Carey—was a child of the first wave of evangelical revival nearly fifty years earlier; and that it was the continuation of evangelical revivalism that continued to inspire and recruit missionaries for the task of world evangelization. Walls explores this connection in relationship to Christendom, that evangelical revivals are a form of protest against “Christian society that is not Christian enough.”

Thus, the turn to interiority and to greater commitment in practice, stands not only in a long line of Christian renewal movements, but also as an act of contextualizing the faith for the conditions of modernity and the crumbling institutions of Christendom.

Walls notes that since the religious and cultural conditions in America were significantly different than continental Europe, this protest movement against cultural

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75 Ibid., 83-84. Walls writes: “Western Christianity therefore faced a cultural crisis—attrition of its basis in Western culture, with the weakening of the sanctions of the institutional church, the increasing efficiency of the centralized state, and the relegation of religion into the private sphere. The Evangelical Revival was perhaps the most successful of all the reformulations of Christianity in the context of changing Western culture... To use the appalling current missiological jargon, the Evangelical Revival contextualized the gospel for the northern Protestant world” (84).
Christianity was able to develop in ways that created an *expansionist* vision for Christianity and missions among American evangelicals. For evangelicalism in America did not work to renew existing state churches, but rather developed against a horizon of (what seemed like) limitless space. As such, it exuded an ethos of expansion along with the Western frontier, and “in these circumstances it could be expansive and effective only by being entrepreneurial.”\(^76\) Christian entrepreneurial activity often existed symbiotically with that of nineteenth century industry and business entrepreneurship. Voluntary societies, which existed apart from ecclesial hierarchy, provided a context for wealthy businesspeople to exercise a great deal of power to shape and initiate various ministries. As such, “the linking of entrepreneurial activity, efficient organization, and conspicuous financing, which was characteristic of American business, became characteristic of American Christianity.”\(^77\)

This, of course, created nearly perfect conditions for diffuse and ambitious missions projects—both home and abroad. The existence of such voluntary societies depends upon both the practice and values of free association and the “cash surplus” to fund such ongoing projects.\(^78\) Thus, “North American Christianity became pluriform and diffuse. There was always room for an inspired individualist... Well might Rufus Anderson see America as the natural sphere of the voluntary society.”\(^79\) Through the

\(^{76}\) Ibid., 229.

\(^{77}\) Ibid., 230.

\(^{78}\) Ibid., 225. Walls writes: “For the voluntary society to operate overseas implies the existence of cash surpluses and freedom to move them about. It cannot operate if the surplus of production is marginal or if the movement of surpluses is controlled by the wider community. America provided *par excellence* the economic capacity for voluntary societies to operate overseas, just as it had provided a favourable social and political climate for their development” (225).

\(^{79}\) Ibid., 229.
voluntary society of modern missions, America’s industrial efficiency and entrepreneurship through the free flow of capital also became a characteristic of its form of the Christian faith. In this way, both missions and social welfare projects became the benevolent engagements of a few “inspired individualists” funded by the financial ‘stewardship’ of many others blessed with wealth. I propose that this benevolent activism stands in the background of Midtown’s logic of social ministry and its ongoing appeal for stewardship.

We will explore this connection more fully in the next chapter as we consider the evangelical strand of Midtown’s narrative and how intimacy functions as a strongly valued good. What I want to underscore here is how themes, practices, and concerns of the missions movement seem to compel a certain kind of framework for understanding the social action of the congregation. Both those stewarding their resources and those individuals engaged in the front lines of ministry understand their work in categories of benevolence; they have something of value in their possession that must be shared efficiently and effectively.

The Practice of Greeting—A Brief Conclusion

We began this section describing Midtown’s greeting ritual in two parts, and we described both parts as a kind of improvisational performance as a way of thematizing the implicit value granted to informality in Midtown’s public worship. In the first movement, improvisation is encouraged by the open-ended instructions, time granted for greeting, and the scores of people who spill into the aisles on any given Sunday. As illustrated by the single mother, even newcomers are drawn unwittingly into the performance; those who stand wondering (sometimes awkwardly) how to fill an undesignated time with open-ended instructions serve as fixed points for the flurry of greeters making their way
up and down the aisles. It is not chaotic because some do not know enough to spill out into the aisles, and yet it is an unscripted activity that remains unpredictable in a certain way every week.

In a similar way, the second movement works with a given script for announcements as ‘sales pitch’ in theological-pietistic language. But like any improvisational performance, it thrives on audience engagement and creative interpretation of the ‘sales pitch’ form—as evidenced par excellence in Elton’s announcement. Because the sermon form maintains a much more distinct audience-performer set of role-expectations, and since singing tends to invite only functional participation, I would argue that congregational greeting is the most interactive and responsive constitutive practice of public worship for Midtown. And the feature that makes it so is what I will call its ‘improvisational’ component that both invites and requires creative, adaptive, and interactive audience involvement each week.

I consider this part of Midtown’s informality because although improvisation requires certain forms, it necessitates an open-ended posture toward their innovative use. The forms and structures of congregational greeting are not slavishly followed, nor is the greeting heavily scripted and the speakers polished. Rather, congregants expect the creative inversion of forms and sacrifice some level of polish at the programmatic level so that the audience can help enact both the greeting and announcement rituals.

The practice of greeting also says something that seems, at this point, quite apart from what I have described as informality. The form of the announcement as a sales pitch is oriented toward encouraging stewardship for sustaining the ongoing benevolence of the church. This helps to identify a significant set of frames for understanding how Midtown
conceives of its public, missional action—as a kind of benevolent activism modeled on the long history of evangelical missions. We will leave this theme until the next chapter.

Preaching

The senior pastor preaches most Sundays from a raised stage with a narrow, wooden pulpit off to the left side of the stage. Wearing a suit and tie, he tends to preach thematically by expositing a single text in relationship to a given theme. Although he does work through entire biblical books, most of his preaching is topical. In the past year, he has worked his way thematically through the Old Testament in a way that really combines both the expository and thematic approaches. However, he suspended this series for the Lenten season (which overlapped during some of my research) to preach on global and local poverty. The Lent theme—Hope Lives—was integrated with adult education curriculum as well as devotional materials for the church.

All of this might suggest a rather formal setting and set of expectations for preaching. The preacher addresses the congregation from a raised stage and with the help of power-point slides projected on a large screen. The preacher can stand behind a wooden pulpit (which is small enough one could call it a ‘lectern’). And the sermon certainly feels like the ‘main event’ on any given Sunday. The service works up to the sermon and ends with a congregational response. The preacher tends to dress considerably more formal than most in the congregation. During special teaching series, the sermon drives children’s curriculum and adult education opportunities. These observations could be used to make the case for an elevated set of expectations around

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80 It is important to note, though, that this sense of ‘formality’ would certainly not be considered as such in a tradition where clergy still wore robes and collars. This is ‘formality’ in an already ‘informal’ tradition in these respects.
preaching, especially considering the way in which the Biblical text is revered in ‘biblicist’ evangelical traditions.

But upon closer inspection, I do not think that formal restrictions accompany the preaching event. This is certainly the interpretation of some older members of the congregation, who lament the loss of formality in and around the preaching event the way it is currently practiced. For these members, the colloquial speech of the preacher underscored by his extemporaneous style (he writes the sermon ahead of time but does not use notes in delivering it) means a loss of formal seriousness about the preaching event. This, of course, is equated with a loss of theological seriousness as well—a move from concern for the ‘Word’ to a concern for ‘experience.’ It is not an uncommon objection among those who have resisted the move toward ‘contemporary’ music and more ‘seeker sensitive’ worship services; a trend in evangelical congregations which has certainly impacted Midtown.

The informality of the preaching event, however, might be best demonstrated by pointing toward the kind of innovation and risk that is taken with regard to the delivery of the sermon. In the opening sermon for the Lenten “Hope Lives” series, two examples of this innovation can be found.\(^8\) The sermon for this day was on Judges 1:1-16, and the call of Gideon. First, as the congregation settled for the sermon, one of the congregants came out from behind the stage dressed as the children’s television icon ‘Mr. Rogers’ and singing “It’s a beautiful day in the neighborhood…” He sat down in a rocking chair, greeted the congregants as “children,” and provided an introduction to the story of Gideon before reading the text. The pastor, Mr. Rogers told us, was the “deliveryman”

\(^8\) Midtown public worship, March 1, 2009.
that would deliver the sermon to us. The congregation laughed and seemed to enjoy a very creative way of reading the sermon text. But the mixture of Scripture, pop-culture, and preaching symbols rested uneasily together. What does it mean that the text must be read as a children's story? What does it mean that those watching are “children”? Why do we need a pastor to ‘deliver’ a sermon to us? What function does sermon play in relationship to text? Does Mr. Rogers point toward a kind of distance we feel from the text, or perhaps the immaturity of the congregation, or even the willful innocence of the congregation in regards to historical-criticism, theological method, etc.? The telling insight about the practice of preaching for Midtown, however, is that these questions did not seem to haunt the congregation. There is a freedom to innovate with the form of preaching in order to entertain or communicate more effectively. It becomes an informal practice for the sake of certain unidentified instrumental ends.

Once the sermon began, the pastor introduced the Scripture passage and then stepped off the stage. On the projection-screen in the front of the church, a video played in which the pastor eyes up a Harley Davidson motorcycle while the famous electric guitar riff from “Bad to the Bone” plays in the background. The camera pans back and forth from the pastor—who is now putting on black gloves, sun-glasses, and helmet—and the motorcycle. The last time the video cuts away from the motorcycle, it shows the pastor putting the final touches on his ‘biker’ uniform only to step onto a 1980s moped and slowly swerve down an abandoned alley. The video brought hearty laughter from the congregation, and the pastor used the video to ask: “What would it be like to really risk?” The question was phrased in light of Gideon’s God-inspired, God-initiated risk and his own initial resistance to it. The pastor particularly dwelt upon the disjunction between the
Angel’s address to Gideon (‘mighty warrior’) and Gideon’s posture as one hiding in the wine press to thresh the grain. The pastor seemed to suggest—without saying it outright—that the congregation, too, has an opportunity to rise to a call to take a risk in relationship to poverty in our community and world. As surprising as it is for one in a ‘biker’ uniform to ride away on a moped, so also (the metaphor suggests) Midtown ‘dresses up’ to do something more substantial than it actually does.

Again, this innovation in the delivery, or form, of the sermon was an instrumental innovation. It was a specific and narrow use of another medium to communicate (or deliver?) a particular message. It is unusual for the ‘form’ of the sermon to be innovated this significantly. However, the use of media, drama, and interruptions during a sermon are not unusual. Regardless, these examples can still point to a particular kind of informality with regard to the preaching event—that this practice can be significantly altered and symbols re-orientated without causing much of a stir within the congregation.

Marshall McLuhan would advise us to not distinguish too easily the form of the sermon from the actual content. If media and message are related, then we might expect to find this same tone of informality in content as well. What kind of content is this that can be communicated through some fairly creative (and even uncertain) forms? What does this content demonstrate about the role and expectations of the preaching event?

I will argue that most simply and directly, the content of preaching tends toward the immediate, the personal, and the practical. That is, sermons are crafted to bridge the gap in time from biblical text and the immediate present. For example, the ‘Palm Sunday’ sermon remained entirely in the past-tense when talking about Jesus’ reception in Jerusalem as an instantiation of ‘hope living in Christ.’ The preacher made six
observations about how “hope was alive” in the life and ministry of Christ in order to point toward ways in which we might also embody hope in our present context. The resurrection did not function in this case to talk about Christ living among us (and perhaps out in front of us) in the same way. The easy critique at this point would be to charge Midtown with insufficient reflection on the resurrection. But this is not the only explanation. Perhaps this is the kind of message that an informal-instrumental approach to preaching tends to generate. If the problem of preaching is to communicate effectively a given message (set in the past), then one can expect this problem of immediacy to dominate the content of the message: how can we make an old word present?

A sermon is also always personal. That is, it is not directed at a plural ‘you’ but rather a collection of individual ‘yous.’ This is expressed in the set of imperatives and directives that close off most sermons. Once the text is adequately attended to, and the gap between text and present bridged, a set of ethical and/or spiritual imperatives often follow for each person present. The Gideon sermon mentioned above was directed most specifically to individuals—what would it mean for me to take risks? What is it that God is calling me to do in regard to global-local poverty? The ‘we’ addressed in relationship to risk was simply the congregational journey to look at poverty together. The expected action was first of all personal.

Finally, the sermon is specifically practical. The moral-spiritual, personal imperatives are finally and almost-always directed toward some or other end. There is a particular ministry that needs help, or perhaps a particular spiritual practice that we ought to take up. Good sermons, in this tradition, must move toward a particular application.

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82 Midtown public worship, April 5, 2009.
For this reason, sermons at Midtown can sometimes be used for purely instrumental purposes—to rally the congregation around a particular need, or to introduce a new program.

Sermons at Midtown, then, say what they do, and they do what they say. By attending to its formal features, I thematized its informality in relationship to its instrumentality. That is, form can be innovated, subverted, and changed for the sake of accomplishing certain ends of effective communication, entertainment, or perhaps some other unarticulated goals. This is, of course, within a tradition that has already rejected many trappings of formality from more sacramental traditions in such a way that even markings of formality—such as suit and tie, elevated stage, etc.—are already informal features of preaching in relationship to other traditions. The informal characteristics of this preaching tradition attempt to minimize mediating relationships and structures between individuals and God. Throughout the worship service, any given form seems mould-able in light of this desired end: direct, personal, and immediate encounter with God. Preaching—and I would argue worship service in general—is simply instrumental to this end. As I demonstrated above, the content of Midtown’s sermons reinforces this sense of immediacy and instrumentality articulated in its form. I pointed to the immediate, personal, and practical intention of Midtown sermons. At the end of this chapter, I will bring preaching back into conversation with the worship service as a whole in order to articulate what kinds of goods this informality points toward. But first, preaching underscores another theory of Christian practice, which I will now describe.
Third Theory of Practice: Imitation

The practice of preaching highlights one more theory of practice that appears in Midtown’s worship. The theory of practice that I call imitation theologically sustains Midtown’s sense of benevolence through articulating a particular kind of anthropology in relationship to Christ as a model. In chapters four and five I will demonstrate how the theological impulses and habits given by the practice (and theory of practice) of imitation helps construct Midtown’s good of intimacy and the shape of Midtown’s benevolence and Jamesian appeal to experience.

As I outlined above, sermon content tends to move toward the immediate, personal, and practical. In my description of preaching content, I stated that preaching tries to make an old Word present through clear exegesis of the passage and a personal (read: individual) application of the principles extracted from the story. As such, application serves to bridge the chasm between Bible and congregation, between God’s revealed Word in the past and the present personal concerns of the congregation. This, of course, is a common evangelical approach to biblical text and preaching. Evangelical theological prolegomena has, over the past century, consisted of an articulation of the doctrine of Scripture as ‘inspired’ and ‘infallible,’ or perhaps ‘inerrant.’ In the early parts of the twentieth century, such a textual focus helped to protect evangelicalism from the ambiguities brought about by historicism, philosophical hermeneutics, and the linguistic turn. But it also left behind important dialectics in Reformation theology that held the biblical text in tension with a sense of God’s ongoing activity as the living Word. This is what Bebbington calls the ‘biblicist’ tendencies of evangelicals. It is also what William Abraham describes as a theological adaptation of Common Sense Realism in order to
establish Scripture as an epistemological criterion, such that Charles Hodge could claim (as a way of affirming Princeton’s theological project) that “a new idea never originated at this seminary [Princeton].”

It is my contention that this approach to Scripture as it is practiced in Midtown’s preaching and Bible study compels an ‘imitation’ theory of Christian practice. By imitation, I mean to stress that the Christian act is always modeled after what has appeared previously in the Christian text. That is, Midtown’s preaching articulates a ‘just as it was—so also we’ logic. The preacher ‘delivers’ the message just as (in the Mr. Rogers skit I recorded earlier) the ‘mailman’ delivers a letter. Biblical content is a fixed, static entity that must be brought before the congregation; just as they did, so also we.

This is a kind of biblical realism, in that the biblical text records a real past that is a model for the present. For example, church is understood through an appeal to the model that is articulated in Acts 2. In this conceptuality, the Christian act is judged based on replication rather than re-creation; for ‘there is nothing new under the sun.’ And yet, an unquestioned sense of agency is imparted to the Christian actor herself. For the Christian actor must decipher, decide, and copy that which God has given her in Scripture. God has revealed the model in the ‘just as it was,’ but it is up to the Christian actor to accurately apply the model to say ‘so also we.’ Perhaps it goes without saying, but most often, the Christian is not imitating a particular historical community (such as Acts 2), but a

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84 I am influenced in this analysis by Abraham’s overall argument that Christian theology has tended since the Reformation to fuse ‘canon’ with ‘criterion.’ It seems to me that Midtown’s imitation framework for Christian action is an extension of a view of Scripture as an ‘inerrant’ foundation for theological reflection. See Abraham, *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology: From the Fathers to Feminism*, 1-26.
particular historical person—Jesus Christ. A Christian act, for Midtown, is—in the sense articulated above—*imitatio Christi*.

Since action is judged based on replication, Midtown’s *imitatio Christi* tends to be an account of action without a clear sense of the world. Unlike some other theories of moral action, the meaning of the *imitatio* is internal to itself; the act is judged by its likeness to its original rather than its achievement of one or other concrete result in the world. So also, the world simply provides the context for the intended act; and it only contributes a possible barrier or threat for faithful re-enactment rather than something generative. Intention directly correlates with action; model directly correlates with application. The world, as an other to the internal logic of the *imitatio* is—at best—the context or the passive ‘target’ for action; at worst, it threatens to lure the Christian away from faithful replication. Thus, the Christian act is (potentially) wiped clean of any ambiguity, for one’s intended obedience to the model is judged free from other perspectives and voices which might disturb such a direct relationship between intention and action, model and application.

Stanley Grenz argues that this imitation theory of practice points toward a substantialist anthropology.85 Surveying several theologies, Grenz demonstrates how *Imago Dei* functions for evangelicals as anthropological content and is rarely understood vocationally. Thus, the image of God is some-*thing* located in the original creation story and the New Testament testimony to Christ as the “image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15) points toward Christ as a guide to God’s original intention for humanity. An imitation logic, then, shares in this substantialist anthropology in which the nature of the

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human person "can be discerned from God's act of creation in the primordial past." So also, Christian practice is always a copy of what is previous.

This account of Christian action certainly generates responsible and productive activity in Midtown. The Christian life is something to be 'decided' and 'lived' through disciplines of reading and applying Scripture. The imitatio encourages an activistic and engaged kind of faith. One must copy what she sees Jesus doing, for Christian action is each one's responsibility. Midtown funds its commitment to environmental issues, global poverty, and even welcome for strangers and aliens by such a vision of action. Beautiful and meaningful acts are performed as Midtown attempts to copy the model provided by Jesus Christ in the Scriptures. But what is Christ himself doing? How is the living Word accounted for? This is a concern that begins to be raised in Midtown's pragmatic public engagement narrative strand, for the theological limits of this imitation anthropology become clear in Midtown's encounters with their neighbors. But this imitation anthropology becomes a direct concern for theological reflection when we consider the missional narrative strand in chapter six.

**Conclusion: Informality and Action**

How does one determine what any set of social actions means? Do we say more by what we do than what we can ever possibly explain or describe? Perhaps. This, of course, is an ongoing question and concern for any ethnographic work. Who gets to interpret? How do we determine valid interpretations? The above account of Midtown's worship practices is a case-in-point. The actions and words recorded here are rich with meaning, and point in many directions at once. And in writing these accounts, I have

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86 Ibid.: 626.
chosen to leave others out. Over the next two chapters, I will make an account of my research process in, with, under, and (at times) against Midtown Baptist Church in order to articulate a particular interpretation of what Midtown means by what it does and what it says about what it means; and—finally—how it is that we might understand God more truly in the midst of this congregation's life.

In the ethnographic work of this chapter, two broad themes emerged. The first is the sense of informality observed in Midtown's public worship. I thematized all three practices according to this prevailing colloquial, improvisational, casual, and hospitably open informality. The second theme I attended to is the way in which Midtown's practices and language demonstrate three distinct theories of practice: pragmatic, benevolent, and imitation. In the next two chapters, I will attend to both themes as they emerge and develop through the research process. But first I will summarize these themes for the sake of clarifying the task ahead.

Informality: Intimacy and Hospitality

One way of summarizing the theme of informality in Midtown's worship is that it seems to point in two directions at once. First, at various points in the above description, Midtown's informality identifies and reinforces intimacy as a good by which its relationships and life are judged and considered meaningful. As I outline above,

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87 See Keifert, “The Return of the Congregation: Missional Warrants.”

88 I have not yet defined what I mean by ‘intimacy.’ Intimacy, as I am using it, is understood in Midtown largely along the lines of personal closeness and warmth, much like the sentimental portrait of the ‘nuclear family.’ As such, I am using intimacy in the way Richard Sennett, Parker Palmer, and Patrick Keifert do to characterize the way in which intimacy can function as an ideology to undermine one's public life with and among strangers. In the next chapter, I will talk about intimacy as both a good for interpersonal relationships and one's relationship with God. Intimacy in Midtown functions as a good for relationality as such. See Palmer, The Company of Strangers: Christians and the Renewal of America's
Midtown’s informality reinforces a sense of intimacy and warmth in the congregation’s relationships with each other and God. The improvisational character of the greeting ritual, with persons spilling into the aisles to hug and shake hands, along with the high level of audience engagement (and ‘inside jokes’) during announcements tends to assume a high level of familiarity with one another (whether that is true or not). This became very clear in the interview process, as an abundance of ‘family’ metaphors were used to describe the life and identity of the church. Similarly, the extemporaneous nature of public prayer, the hymnody, and the personal orientation of the sermons point toward expectations of intimacy with God. The ‘good’ of such practices, it seems, is a more personal and intimate relationship with God. This is also expressed in the interviews and throughout the focus groups. Informality in worship, then, draws attention to the horizon of the personal, in which relationships with God and each other are expected to be intimate. Through an appeal to the Pietist tradition, I will argue that this good of intimacy structures and directs the evangelical strand of Midtown’s lived theology. I will address this good in chapter four.

Second, Midtown’s informality creates a sense of warm hospitality and openness to others that they have called a ‘come as you are’ ethos. The practices of singing, greeting, and preaching are not necessarily disrupted by an occasional outburst or an out-of-place ‘riff’ on the congas or an unavailable shower the night before. This is seen in the attitude toward professionalism in the service; for the congregation, at some level, values inclusivity over performance in their use of musicians, in ushers, and even in their Sunday school teachers. What appears to be a high level of inclusion limits the

Public Life, 49-51. See also Keifert, Welcoming the Stranger: A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism, 24-26.
performance of certain activities in worship—but this does not seem to bother the church. It is, rather, part of the congregation’s identity as a people with an open door to the community. This is also seen in how the congregation pragmatically engages the mix of contemporary-praise music and organ-led hymns during the service for the sake of sustaining an intergenerational congregation. The interviews showed a good number who are not entirely happy with the music, but they understand that this is what is needed to minister to both older and younger generations together.

However, this observed character of the congregation did not show up as often in the interviews as the personal-intimate expectations and interpretations. Rather, the ‘come as you are’ ethos was expressed most directly by the ministry teams who carry out much of Midtown’s social engagement with the neighborhood when they were describing the nature of their work and telling stories of success. I will call this the good of hospitality and will account for this as the good embedded in the narrative strand of Midtown’s public lived theology.

Theories of Practice

Midtown’s practices of public worship also highlighted three different traditions or accounts of moral-public practice. I developed these through three ‘excurses’ that broke up the ethnographic account of worship practices. First, the way in which the congregation addressed, experimented, and found a solution to its ideological differences over worship music drew attention to the many ways in which Midtown embodies various elements of the American pragmatic tradition. This is a tradition that sees democracy as a way of life, in which communities learn to work together to solve common problems across (what might be) ideological differences. It is also a tradition
that sees truth claims as necessarily oriented toward real life and necessitating experimentation and testing in a community of discourse. Midtown demonstrates both aspects of this tradition. Second, the way in which Midtown’s greeting ritual uses announcements to remind the congregation of its stewardship of resources points toward an account of moral action as benevolence. I account for Midtown’s benevolence with a detour through the modern missions movement in America, underscoring how the movement institutionalized a particular posture toward funding ‘outreach.’ The mission agency gathers resources (or capital!) from the faithful, and then sends it to those in need on ‘the front lines.’ Mission-as-benevolence means that the resources only move in one direction; this is also the case for Midtown. In this case, moral action is benevolent, resourceful giving for the sake of others in need. Midtown embodies this on many levels. And finally, the practice of preaching for the sake of the immediate, personal, and practical demonstrates an approach to the Scriptural text that sees its historical precedent as a model for Christian action. In the person of Jesus, then, Midtown understands Christian action (or perhaps discipleship) based on its imitation of the model of Christ: imitatio Christi.

In chapter four, I will draw upon these theories of practice to help understand how intimacy functions as a good in the congregation. In particular, I will demonstrate how these theories of practice are both shaped and sustained—while shaping and sustaining in turn—Midtown’s informality as intimacy. Intimacy, so it seems, provides a set of ‘conventional narratives’ for Midtown’s self-understanding that is rooted in historical pietism and evangelical benevolent missions. As such, Midtown’s evangelical strand—through its prioritization of intimacy—tends to reinforce the boundaries between the
inner and outer self and the congregation and world. The evangelical strand does give certain gifts, however. Drawing upon James McClendon, I will consider the good of intimacy in relationship to the Baptist tradition of 'watch-care.'

In chapter five, I will explore how the good of hospitality emerges in Midtown’s Deweyan-pragmatic (and theologically-thin) response to challenges it faces in its neighborhood. I will show how the public narrative strand problematizes and is, in turn, problematized by the good of intimacy by pointing to McClendon’s second strand of Baptist theology—that of ‘witness’ to the world. In chapter six, I will provide an account of how the missional strand can challenge and reframe both the evangelical and public narrative strands by providing a theological rationale for the liminality opened up between the goods of intimacy and hospitality. There, I will explore these theories of action in relationship to the metaphor of sowing; arguing that evangelical, public, and missional theology is an account of participation that is on the way with a host of strangers given them by God.
CHAPTER 4
THE EVANGELICAL STRAND: INTIMACY AS GOOD

Introduction

The previous chapter developed the theme of informality in Midtown’s practices of public worship along with three different theories of practice that emerge from within the descriptive account. I concluded that the sense of informality in public worship identifies two different ‘goods’ that orient the life of the congregation: intimacy and hospitality. In this chapter, I will argue that intimacy functions as a ‘strongly valued good’ in Midtown’s life and ministry in order to articulate the evangelical strand of Midtown’s lived theology. As such, the strands of Midtown’s evangelical narrative can be accounted for in terms of the conventional stories that reinforce and socially-construct intimacy as a good. Of course, evangelicalism is much more complex and diverse than the good of intimacy, and Midtown’s public and missional strands could also be understood as informed in some way by Midtown’s evangelicalism. However, the good of intimacy articulates a set of Pietist-experiential commitments deep within both Midtown’s practice and the holiness tradition of evangelicalism. At the end of the chapter, we will explore this tradition with the help of James McClendon’s in order to both clarify and problematize the theological issues at stake in this account of the evangelical strand.

My argument will progress in three steps. First, I will show how intimacy emerges in the congregational interviews as good that both orients and interprets
Midtown’s interpersonal relationships and each individual’s *personal* relationship with God. Second, drawing upon interviews and focus groups, I will explore the two primary *conventional* narratives that sustain and project intimacy as a strongly valued good in the life of the congregation. Finally, I will close the chapter by considering the features of Midtown’s evangelical theology in light of the good of intimacy. In particular, I will focus on two different metaphors—the foster home and the community of watch-care—in order to consider how Midtown theologizes the relationship of God to the social; is the Gospel *social* at all for Midtown? However, before I continue, I must articulate how and what I mean when I use ‘good’ in relationship to ‘narratives’ and ‘theories of practice.’

**Goods, Narratives, and Practice**

One of the convictions embedded in a phenomenological-ethnographic-theological project is that *lived* life in Christian communities—in all its richly textured ambiguity—is a site or *locus* for theological work. In chapter two, I argued *theologically* for attentiveness to local congregations and *philosophically* for a phenomenological posture in relationship to these congregations while drawing *methodologically* upon the wisdom embodied in the practices of ethnography in order to articulate the kinds of intellectual traditions (or perhaps narratives) that sustain, enrich, and are—in turn—embodied in this particular theological project or practice. As such, this approach searches for a way of doing theology without reinforcing mind-body and individual-community dualities, assuming with what is now called ‘virtue ethics’ that “our convictions embody our morality; our beliefs are our actions.”¹ And, I would add, ‘vice-

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versa.' That is, convictions are not simply ideas, but embodied in actions; so also, actions are faith-commitments or embodied beliefs.\(^2\)

The challenge in this project, then, is to provide an interpretive theological account of Midtown's life and practice for the sake of understanding God more truly in a way that attends to both what Midtown says but also what it does and the relationship between the two. The challenge at present is how I might understand and provide an account of the real time relationships between Midtown's actions, accounts of that action, and Midtown's own historical situatedness. A conventional history of ideas or argument from historical causation in relationship to evangelicalism, pietism, or American Protestantism would not be sufficient—even though some kind of genealogical work is being and needs to be done to understand Midtown. Midtown is a particular congregation with particular practices and actions. But it would also be insufficient to simply account for Midtown's practice apart from theological and historical ideas; for it is not in a vacuum. Thankfully, this is not a set of concerns unique to my project. William James McClendon and Stanley Hauerwas have begun to extend the insights of virtue ethics to theology, arguing for the ethical import of theology; that theological convictions both form and are formed by Christian communities while informing and being informed by Christian practices.\(^3\) For this reason, I have found some of the explanatory frameworks

\(^2\) Of course, convictions do not always live up to actions, as in hypocrisy and/or blasphemy. But actions will often unveil or embody convictions.

\(^3\) "Christian convictions take the form of a story, or perhaps better, a set of stories that constitutes a tradition, which in turn creates and forms a community" (24). See Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics*. While I find Hauerwas's account somewhat reductive (that the idea in the form of 'theological conviction' forms *community* and not vice-versa), his clear and concise connection of theological conviction to Christian practice is both important and necessary. McClendon does a better job of articulating the kind of relationship I want to work with—one in which Christian convictions both form and are informed by practice. For McClendon, it is *ethical practice* in Christian community that tends to
from virtue ethics—the relationship between goods, narratives, and practices in particular—helpful for articulating Midtown’s life, practice, and convictions.

The outstanding problem of any account of virtue ethics is ‘what counts as virtue?’ Indeed, MacIntyre concedes as much at the end of his historical look at moral theory, stating that in the western philosophical tradition, there is “no single core conception” of virtue.\(^4\) What MacIntyre does find, however, is a kind of relationship between practices, goods, and narrative. I find the basic shape of this relationship useful for interpreting Midtown’s life and ministry. For MacIntyre, virtue is a kind of agency, an acquired ability to perform certain practices with excellence so as to achieve certain goods, or ends internal to the practice. Virtues, then, are learned, cultivated, or apprenticed through participation in practices—coordinated social action that sustains a particular tradition. In this framework, goods are the ends internal to a particular practice but are not particularly fixed, for they are subject to the ongoing argumentation that constitutes the tradition informing the practice. MacIntyre uses medicine or portrait-painting as examples to illustrate this. The goods in both practices have changed as the tradition has been sustained and innovated through the generations, but there is a kind of historical continuity, a narrative-shape to these practices as embodied traditions.

All this, however, begs the question of agency. How is it that humans are moral agents in this conceptuality? On the one hand, MacIntyre rejects what he calls the ‘run ahead’ of formed theological convictions, though he does not become reductive about that relationship either. See McClendon, Systematic Theology.

\(^4\) MacIntyre, After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory, 181. MacIntyre does, however, argue that his account of virtue brings a “conceptual unity” to the various traditions (186). The conceptual unity, though, comes from the “background concepts” of practice, the narrativity of human life, and his concept of a moral tradition—elements of ‘virtue’ that he draws somewhat eclectically from different traditions that develop a moral vision of ‘virtue’ (187).
‘liberal’ conceptions of self-autonomy, in which moral agency is understood as an *ad hoc* choosing of moral options as from an all-you-can-eat buffet. Against this view, MacIntyre argues that we are formed within traditions and practices—whether we intend to be or not. But on the other hand, MacIntyre wants to account for some kind of chastened agency. How is it that our moral action is meaningful and not simply the product of some or other tradition? How is it that we make judgments and thus constitute an argument about the goods of a particular practice? MacIntyre finds a way through this impasse by turning to narrative. Our attempts to forge an intelligible existence take the shape of narrative—in which we become (at times) a co-author of our life story and even (at other times) one who receives that narrative from others. It is narrative that makes sense of both our *teleological* intention and unpredictable future inherent in our actions. MacIntyre writes:

...like characters in a fictional narrative we do not know what will happen next, but nonetheless our lives have a certain form which projects itself towards our future. Thus the narratives which we live out have both an unpredictable and partially teleological character...man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal. But the key question for men is not about their own authorship; I can only answer the question ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’ The answer to such questions, MacIntyre calls a “quest” for narrative unity, which renders moral agency intelligible or not. MacIntyre’s project, however, creates several problems for the work being pursued here. I can cite at least four interrelated areas. First, MacIntyre’s own quest to find moral intelligibility and coherence in modern liberal societies relies upon setting up

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5 Ibid., 216.

6 Ibid., 218-19.
a strong dichotomy between the ‘internal’ goods and narrative ‘unity’ of particular
traditions and the present pluralist society with its lure of ‘external’ goods and the myth
of a self-constructing self. This means that virtue is something formed through an
apprenticeship in a particular community with its own standards of excellence and
narrative constructs to sustain this vision. For my purposes, MacIntyre’s conception of
both practice and community formation is too narrow and rigid a conceptuality for
working with congregations. That is, in Midtown’s case, congregational practices are too
loose, narrative constructs too divergent, and ‘apprenticeship’ in Christian practices too
voluntary to meet MacIntyre’s criteria.

Second, MacIntyre’s tight conception of community formation through divergent
sets of practices is made ethical by his insistence that one’s life be gathered together and
rendered coherent as a ‘good life’ through what MacIntyre terms “narrative unity.” I
note above that the loose and fragmentary nature of Midtown’s practice creates a problem
for MacIntyre’s framework. This is especially true at the level of narrative coherence. In
Oneself as Another, Ricoeur problematizes this hope for narrative coherence by
considering the significant differences between a fictional narrative and how one
experiences one’s own narrative. Ricoeur argues that a narrative is rendered coherent by

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7 MacIntyre’s early conceptuality of apprenticeship in the virtues emphasized the necessity of
hierarchical relationships within virtue-forming communities; where the apprentice receives training in the
practice by the master. One is left wondering what difference the apprentice makes for the master.
MacIntyre has since moved toward a more reciprocal understanding of formation in the virtues. I discuss
this below.

8 Kathryn Tanner makes a similar argument about Christian practices in general. See Kathryn

9 MacIntyre, After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory, 218-19.

10 Ricoeur, Oneself as Another, 157-68.
connecting action and result from a clear beginning toward a particular ending. As such, a fictional narrative creates a world that might relate analogically or allegorically to other narratives and worlds, but which is, in the end, a self-contained and incommensurable world.\textsuperscript{11} But this is never the case with the narrative of our own lives. For both the beginning and end our life-stories are the property of others. We do not and cannot tell of our beginning or end. So also, the world of our narrative is necessarily dependent upon other narratives and worlds. The incommensurability that ‘narrative unity’ requires is not possible at such a fundamental level. That Midtown’s life together discloses itself as constituted by somewhat divergent narratives and projects offers support to Ricoeur’s critique of Maclntyre. I conclude that any talk of goods and narratives names a messy and radical contingency between community-formation, practices, narratives, and world(s).

Third, Maclntyre severs his account of goods from human creature-liness. That is, Maclntyre does not consider how goods orient ethical action when the biological realities of human personhood are taken into account—Maclntyre’s conceptuality does not take into account moral-intellectual development, early-and-late life dependency, developmental delays, sickness, and general human frailty. In \textit{Dependent Rational Animals}, Maclntyre both admits and attempts to account for this oversight.\textsuperscript{12} And by doing so, he opens the door to a more reciprocal, relational, and messy account of

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 159. Ricoeur puts the question to Maclntyre this way: “how do the thought experiments occasioned by fiction, with all the ethical implications that will be discussed below, contribute to self-examination in real life? ...how have we, in our own passage through the levels of praxis, been able to place the idea of the narrative unity of a life at the summit of the hierarchy of multiple practices?”

\textsuperscript{12} Alasdair C. Maclntyre, \textit{Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues}, The Paul Carus Lecture Series (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 1999), x. Maclntyre admits this mistake or omission himself in the preface for \textit{Dependent Rational Animals}. He says: “In \textit{After Virtue} I had attempted to give an account of the place of the virtues, understood as Aristotle understood them, within social practices, the lives of individuals and lives of communities, while making that account independent of what I called Aristotle’s ‘metaphysical biology.’ ...I now judge that I was in error in supposing an ethics independent of biology to be possible—and I am grateful to those critics who argued this case against me...”
practices, narratives, and goods. It is this consideration of human frailty within which MacIntyre articulates a less-hierarchical (and also) less tidy vision of goods than in *After Virtue*. He says:

> If I am to flourish to the full extent that is possible for a human being, then my whole life has to be of a certain kind, one in which I not only engage in and achieve some measure of success in the activities of an independent practical reasoner, but also receive and have a reasonable expectation of receiving the attentive care needed when I am very young, old and ill, or injured. So each of us achieves our good only if and insofar as others make our good their good by helping us through periods of disability...¹³

Such a view of reciprocity leads him to critique virtue ethics developed thus far as without a clear account of the “virtues of acknowledged dependence.”¹⁴ This critique creates space to correct his previous work and answer some of his critics. Although my account of goods, practices, and narratives is considerably less rigid than even what MacIntyre presents in *Dependent Rational Animals*, I use this conceptuality in a similar spirit; in that these terms name a complex and fluid set of relationships.

Fourth, MacIntyre’s project attempts to reconstruct a concept of virtue for modern society. This is not my present concern in relationship to Midtown Baptist. I am concerned, however, about the theological wisdom embodied in their practices of public engagement, and in a ‘thick’ understanding of their moral-theological sensemaking as they live out their faith in public spaces.

Despite these difficulties, much can be learned from the way in which MacIntyre links goods, practices, and narrative. Drawing from MacIntyre, I understand ‘goods’ as a *telos* or end *embodied* in cooperative social activities, or practices. Cooperative social

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¹³ Ibid., 108.

¹⁴ Ibid., 119-28.
activity creates, discovers or perhaps even (sometimes) intends an end; if this end is
considered desirable, it is 'good.' But unlike MacIntyre, I am not making a distinction
between 'goods' internal or external to practices primarily because I am using a much
less technical, much messier conception of 'practice' for all the reasons noted above.
Moreover, I am not assuming that an articulated or intended sense of the 'end'
completely orients or determines the practice. With Ricoeur, I assume that there is no
necessary and clear link between intention and result, or ideal and lived experience. In
this sense, I am using the concept of 'good' in relationship to 'practice' much like
Charles Taylor in Sources of the Self. Taylor considers a practice to be "something
extremely vague and general: more or less any stable configuration of a shared activity,
whose shape is defined by a certain pattern of dos and don'ts."\textsuperscript{15} Taylor's conception of
moral agency follows a trajectory similar to MacIntyre's, in that he identifies a moral
agent as necessarily situated within particular communities constructed by particular
narratives and engaged in particular practices. Moral ideals, as such, are not context-less
declarations of 'the good' but rather reflective articulations arising from attempts to make
sense of the patterns of practice, the dos and don'ts. So also, 'goods' are embodied in
practices but are \textit{secondary} phenomena in the sense that they might not be (at the outset)
an explicit rationale or desired end for the practice.\textsuperscript{16}

For Taylor, goods and practices make up the moral "frameworks" in which we
find ourselves, and within which our sense of identity and subsequent moral agency is

\textsuperscript{15} Taylor, \textit{Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity}, 204.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
Frameworks depend upon certain “strong evaluations,” in the sense that one or another ‘good’ is desired or considered superior to another good. The goods in question can be pre-reflective, in that they are embodied and assumed in practice but not articulated as such, or they can be a reflection on practice or even a utopian dream (which functions as a critique on current practice). Either way, a discussion of goods helps to understand the ways in which the moral space of a particular community—or a ‘framework’—creates certain kinds of possibilities for moral action, as well as attending to the telos of the constituting practices of a particular community. But since goods are often secondary accounts, or even pre-reflective, any such discussion involves significant interpretation, and could very-well be otherwise.

This nuanced understanding of ‘good’ helps to understand the way in which Midtown’s practice embodies two very different kinds of goods. For example, in the next chapter we will consider hospitality as a good embodied in Midtown’s practices, but not clearly articulated as a good in direct fashion. In generative focus group sessions, this good emerged as the groups reflected on Scripture in light of church practice and experiences in ministry. Hospitality, as I will develop it in the next chapter, is a somewhat pre-reflective good for Midtown, embodied in practice but without the necessary conventional narratives to sustain it as an end or intention of practice. That is, it does not yet have substantial theological-moral narratives constructed to authorize it as an end toward which the community hopes. In the present chapter, we will consider intimacy as a strongly valued good. It is clear from the interviews and focus groups that

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17 Ibid., 20-28.

18 Ibid.
this good is not only strongly valued, but it is a moral-theological ideal that makes sense of Midtown’s practice. ‘Intimacy’ is the end by which Midtown’s relationships with each other and God are judged.

MacIntyre also relates moral agency to narrative; our moral sensemaking takes on a narrative shape. Our stories convey a sense of place and history; they tell us how we got ‘here’ through an account of our tradition while also pointing toward how one might participate in the tradition. Although not always the case, some narratives function authoritatively in that they tell a stylized history in a way that sustains a certain kind of practice in service of a particular kind of good. We might call these ‘scripts’ or ‘conventional narratives’ in the sense that they are rehearsed boundary-markers for a community that communicates some kind of community wisdom. Conversion narratives can function like this in evangelical circles, in that only a certain kind of experience that matches the ‘script’ will ‘count’ as a conversion. An articulated, strongly valued good in a community will have such stories, and Midtown is no exception. In this chapter, I will point toward two kinds of stylized, conventional narratives that reinforce and help articulate the way in which intimacy functions as a strongly valued good. In the next chapter, I will note the ways in which these narratives are improvised or even dropped in light of the good of hospitality.

And finally, community practices do not appear ex nihilo, but rather have their own history and influences. In the previous chapter, I pointed out three different traditions and theoretical-theological frameworks that seem to inform and shape Midtown’s life together. Midtown seems to draw from an American pragmatic ethos in terms of the way they experiment and solve problems, while their public engagement
takes the shape of a benevolent missions project, and their general approach to Christian action is as an imitation of Christ. The diversity of these perspectives points toward the complexity which we are trying to interpret, and it also demonstrates that MacIntyre’s clear delineation between practice, narrative, and virtue is not entirely helpful when looking at congregational systems.

Thus, this chapter will explore intimacy as a strongly valued good for Midtown by attending to its own articulations of intimacy as it makes sense of its own practice through congregational interviews. However, noting that intimacy is valued does not necessarily describe it as thickly as we would like, so I will also explore the two conventional narratives which sustain this good in order to understand how it is that intimacy is embodied in, while also informing and transforming, three of Midtown’s theories of practice. That is, we will finish this chapter by trying to understand how it is that intimacy relates to Midtown’s actual practice and offer the metaphor of ‘foster home’ to help communicate this.

**Intimacy as a Strongly Valued Good**

**An Account of the Interview Process**

As I mentioned in the second chapter, the congregational interviews were conducted as a part of Midtown’s participation in a grant. As such, an interview team was selected from within the congregation and trained by a consulting and research firm called Church Innovations. As part of this training, the interview team selected potential interviewees from three different sociological categories in the congregation. Out of twenty-four interviews, six were selected to give voice to the ‘Family,’ with six more selected as ‘Outside Strangers,’ and the remaining twelve considered ‘Inside Strangers.’
Church Innovations did not tell the interview team how to discern the differences between these categories, other than stating that ‘family’ names those considered on the ‘inside’ and in power in the congregation, whereas the ‘outside stranger’ is one who attends sporadically and is only loosely connected to the congregation. This makes the ‘inside stranger’ the largest group that exists in-between; they are those that attend regularly but might not be well known or involved.

Midtown’s interview team followed these guidelines well. They interviewed the ideal number set by Church Innovations—24—and followed the socio-gram fairly closely.19 Besides selecting the interviewees and conducting the interviews, Midtown’s interview team—by design—also provided the first interpretation of the interviews: they were instructed to ask each question without elaboration or leading of any kind, to listen carefully, and then write summaries. These summarized answers were then read back to the interviewee, who signaled his or her approval of the statement by initialing the interview sheet. The process creates space for deep listening and attending on the part of the interviewers, while also giving the interviewee confidence that he or she has been listened to and understood, since the interpretive summary is clarified with the interviewee and amended as appropriate. After the interviews were collected, they were sent to a Church Innovations Reading Team, who read the interviews and produced a report that both summarizes the themes/word counts and interprets these themes as ‘recommended questions to consider.’20 Once the report was produced, the convener of the Reading Team met with the Interview Team to discuss the report and work on

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19 They did interview more family than Outside Strangers, but this is not uncommon.

20 See “A Report to [Midtown] Baptist Church.”
summarizing the most significant findings of the report. Finally, the Interview Team presented the report and the summary to church leadership.\footnote{"Executive Summary Sheet," June 19, 2009.}

I did not work with the interview team or Church Innovations during this process. This was an important part of creating an ethnographic research project that is phenomenological, for I tried to set up a process where my interpretation of Midtown’s culture and practices was simply one voice among many. The Interview Team, the interviewees, and the Reading Team all provided interpretations of interpretations, engaging in conversation (directly and indirectly) with one another. And although I participated in the process by observing, I did not offer direct instruction regarding this work. The Reading Team report, then, is a co-generative, interpretive account of congregational culture, practices, and values.

I want to be clear about the above process, because this is where intimacy emerges most clearly as a strongly valued good in the experiences, hopes, and anxieties of the congregation. Intimacy appears as a good that evaluates, interprets, and directs interpersonal relationships primarily though the metaphor ‘family,’ while it also functions to orient and interpret one’s relationship with God through the appeal to individual, personal experience.

Family Intimacy

Congregations are, in some sense, family systems. However, the prominence of the family metaphor in the interview process reveals Midtown’s expectations regarding intimacy within the congregation. Initially, this appeared as the Interview Team worked to select interviewees in the ‘family’ category. They were highly selective in this
category. They only interviewed those with significant longevity in the congregation (10+ years) and concentrated on those over fifty years old (five of seven). Because the team was so selective with the ‘family’ designation, they had a large group of potential candidates for the ‘inside stranger’ designation and could find few who fit in the category ‘outside stranger.’ Their selectivity with ‘family’ seemed to weight the entire process towards those on the inside of the church. This, I would argue, is as significant as any additional findings from the interviews. Like congregational seating on Sunday mornings, there is a clear sense of who is ‘in’ and who is not.

Or, rather, Midtown expresses hope or even longing for some sense of clarity about who constitutes the ‘family.’ This is more obvious when one considers Midtown’s high school ministry. At one time, ‘church families’ constituted the majority of Midtown’s children/youth ministries. Then, youth group was an unambiguous part of the church’s cradle-to-grave family care. Now, however, these ministries are constituted by large numbers of students from the neighborhood whose families are only marginally involved. Furthermore, some ‘church families’ send their children to other, more suburban congregations for mid-week programming. These factors combine to force some ambiguity regarding these ministries. Are they ‘church’ ministries constituted by congregational ‘insiders’ or ‘family’? Or are they considered church ‘outreach’ and thus mission-to the neighborhood or care-for a people and thus an extension of the church family? These questions are asked and answered very differently depending upon who one talks to. Ministry leaders call these students ‘church kids,’ but at the level of congregational leadership and among those in the ‘family’ they are considered ‘community kids.’
This selectivity regarding the ‘family’ designation is reinforced by interview results, which demonstrate high anxiety over sustaining the traditions/identity of the church as older folks pass on and as Midtown actively seeks to “pass the torch” by transferring “power and authority along to our younger folks.” Midtown seems to have a fairly specific and inflexible understanding of its congregational identity in relationship to core families who have attended and led the congregation for generations. ‘Family,’ so it seems, is limited—literally—to these core families who are increasingly late-middle aged and looking to transfer leadership to the next generation in the church. The problem is, however, that only a few younger families are considered ‘family’ even though many young families/persons are fairly active in the congregation. The pastoral staff largely understands this issue as a problem located within younger members of the congregation—that since this generation does not like committee work it balks at opportunities to lead in the church. But the selection work of the Interview Team points toward another possibility: too few of the younger members of the congregation are related to the core ‘family’ members of the congregation or have not attended Midtown long enough to be considered ‘family.’ Intimacy, it seems, is a good constructed from within the family system. I will show in the next chapter how this stands in marked difference from the good of hospitality.

Family also showed up as a metaphor in two interview questions that ask interviewees to characterize the life of the church. In question five—which asks “describe this church to someone new and how they would be nurtured there,”—congregants


23 Thanks to one of my readers, Dr. Mark Lau Branson, for pointing this out to me.
described the church most dominantly as "multigenerational," "welcoming," and "caring," with a few people adding that it is "like an extended family." Similarly, in question six regarding worship, three remarks focused on the love at Midtown which was like "love for [a] big extended family." These church descriptors that value welcome, caring, and fellowship alongside the specific mention of 'family' point toward an expectation of intimacy in Midtown's relationships. The health, nurture, and worship of the church is related in some way to the intimacy experienced in interpersonal relationships in the same way it is in an idealized family system.

Thus, 'family' is a metaphor that describes the 'inside' or 'core' of the church in terms of either literal familial descent, longevity and power, or the projected hopes and expectations regarding the quality of church life. As such, 'family' suggests intimacy as a 'strongly valued good' in the sense that Charles Taylor uses it. Interpersonally, 'intimacy' names a kind of relational telos for Midtown: 'intimacy' as a good holds relational warmth, closeness, familiarity, and personal care as the collective aim and horizon for relationships within the family. Moreover, since this understanding of intimacy describes the relational horizon for the congregational family, it is a good sustained by and invested in boundaries between the inside family and those outside. This is clarified by Midtown's conventional narratives, which I will discuss below.

Family intimacy—understood as relational warmth, closeness, familiarity, and personal care—emerges throughout the research data. For Midtown, the perceived quality

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25 Ibid., 7.

of relationships corresponds with the level of intimacy generated and the
faithfulness/length of one’s involvement in the church family. The ‘executive summary’
put together by the interview team commented on this relational dynamic by pointing
toward the ‘gap’ that emerges in the report between older and younger (read: ‘newer’)
members as well as anxiety regarding how to move forward (read: ‘change’) without
losing Midtown’s rich tradition. What is at stake in both of these questions/anxieties are
family dynamics, the question of how to hand off leadership to those that are ‘strangers,’
who have not shared in the long-term stability of the church and who are not family
members of the existing ‘family’ nor personal friends. Few younger members of the
church have been at Midtown for more than ten years. If intimacy is a strongly valued
good as I am arguing, this helps us to understand the force of this anxiety regarding
future leadership and the continuation of tradition. How does a family that values such
intimacy embrace and give agency to the ‘strangers’ that it is hosting? This is a real and
existential question for Midtown.

Intimacy, however, is not only a strongly valued good for interpersonal
relationships, but for relationality as such. In the previous chapter, I made note of the
language of intimacy addressed to God in prayer and underscored by the extemporaneous
format for prayer, as well as the emphasis on personal salvation in the hymnody. These
themes—evident in congregational practice—were also expressed in the interviews.
Intimacy, so it seems, is also a strongly valued good in one’s relationship with God.
However, God-language did not draw upon ‘family’ imagery at all. One’s relationship
with God was not relative to participation in one or other family. Rather, God-language is

taken up in almost exclusively personal terms. As pointed out in the description of preaching at Midtown, God-language and spirituality are interpreted most often against the horizon of the personal, the individual. We will now explore this theme in the interviews.

Personal Intimacy with God

Intimacy also emerged as a ‘good’ that both structures and judges one’s understanding of God’s presence and action in the Midtown community. In the interviews, when God is the subject of an action verb, it is preceded by the clause ‘I felt’ or ‘I experienced God…’ With the exception of one comment regarding worship in which “God seemed to be sitting among us at the campfire,” 28 God’s presence and activity in worship is talked about in nearly every instance as personal, experiential, and individual. Worship is “totally individual” chance to “connect with God.” 29 Some others did point toward the life of the people together; one person states that looking out and seeing a diverse group of people worshipping together is “a slice of heaven,” 30 while for another the ongoing service of the congregation to the neighborhood and the quality of relationships within the congregation provide sets of experiences related to profound worship. 31 But even in these instances, God is not encountered as an Other that is ‘among us’ or that ‘comes to us;’ rather, these external experiences of diversity or service serve to reinforce the immediate and individual experience of God’s presence. Even with an

31 Congregational Interview X, March 2009.
explicit appeal to the community, the community simply provides the context for a personal encounter with God, which happens somewhere ‘deep inside’ the person.

We can see this better by attending to the two questions in the interview schedule that ask for direct reflection on God’s presence and work in the congregation: question two asks respondents to describe a profound experience of worship they have had and question six asks “What tells you God is present here in worship?”\(^\text{32}\) The first of these questions is striking for the diversity of answers that emerge. Only six of thirty-one remarks can be grouped into three groups of two.\(^\text{33}\) The remaining twenty-five responses are one-off descriptions of “personal profoundness” such that the Reading Team asks the congregation to think more socially about these personal experiences, saying: “Many of these answers describe moments of personal profoundness...but quite a few happened because the person was in a group experiencing the event together...How does [profound worship] come about exactly because so many people are present?”\(^\text{34}\) Clearly, profound worship does take place in and with the larger community, or ‘family.’ But the worship services and community gatherings seem to simply provide context for an encounter that is irreducibly personal and individual, an encounter that is just as diverse as the number of people interviewed.

The second question in the interviews that deals directly with God’s presence in the congregation in worship yielded a set of answers that could be grouped much more effectively. However, as the Reading Team notes in the report, the answers provide only

\(^{33}\) Ibid., 3.  
\(^{34}\) Ibid.
a marginal sense of how God is present in worship at Midtown. For this, the Reading Team asked three questions to suggest ways in which Midtown might think theologically about worship services.\(^{35}\) Again, God’s presence is interpreted in terms of the personal and/or intimate, whether that is a personal encounter with another such as the three persons who responded with “when I am in need, I ask and someone helps me” or the four who interpret God’s presence in terms of the “dedication of committed Christians” at Midtown.\(^{36}\) Like in the previous question, God’s presence is understood in terms of immediate and interpersonal encounters. If it is not something immediately intimate/personal such as “I feel it” or “I leave feeling better than I came,” then it is something mediated interpersonally, through the love of the family, the participation of others in worship and singing, or praying with one another.\(^{37}\) Either way, an internalized account is what determines its validity. God’s presence is rarely understood or interpreted through less personal or less intimate mediations, such as liturgy or sacramental practices and symbolism. God’s presence in either question is not interpreted or expected in terms of open space for strangers, or traditional/formational rituals, or even liturgical call-response acts which certainly are part of the script on a Sunday morning. As a way of naming Midtown’s framework for understanding God’s presence and activity, ‘intimacy’ names the irreducibly personal, private, and interior experience of God. God-talk is often framed in personal-intimate terms.

\(^{35}\) Ibid., 7.

\(^{36}\) Ibid.

\(^{37}\) Ibid.
The individual, then, is the site and horizon for interpreting God’s presence and activity in the Midtown community, for intimacy is a ‘strongly valued good’ that orients and directs Midtown’s relationships and relational expectations with one another and God. This can be seen in the metaphor of ‘family’ and in the interview questions relating to God’s presence and worship. One possible significant interpretation of the informality observed in worship shows up in this thematization of intimacy by looking at Midtown as a family and a set of individuals who each encounter God. Informality in worship underscores and reinforces the commitment to authentic relationships that such intimacy values—in that prayer is simply talking to God without the mediation of liturgy or written words and preaching is a colloquial event between friends and for individual appropriation.

**Conventional Narratives and Intimacy**

The importance of ‘intimacy’ for Midtown is initially surprising given the kind of ministry in which Midtown engages. It is a congregation that takes great pride in holistic ministry to children and families in the neighborhood, which means cooperating with schools, Health and Human Services, and local universities. It is a community that does—in practice—create space for strangers, hosting homeless families on site in partnership with the city Council of Churches and county government while also hosting an emerging Eritrean congregation and a Mothers of Preschoolers (MOPS) ministry that cultivates its leadership from a variety of other churches. How can a congregation with such an active engagement in social ministries—that seeks to aid in structural support for social-welfare programs, that lives with such an open-hand to strangers in the community (even offering them leadership in some programs)—how does this kind of practice relate
to hopes and expectations of intimacy? If God is only experienced and understood in terms of personal piety, how is God a meaningful part of this ministry? And if congregational relationships are valued based upon an understanding of familial intimacy, how can this ministry with and among strangers, this work in and with civil society, be meaningful church work if such familial relationships are not experienced or even possible?

For the Midtown community, however, this is not a troubling question. It became obvious in both interviews and focus groups that a ministry is judged to be ‘successful’ and ‘faithful’ by its personal impact on individuals. Ministry is ‘holistic’ because it tends to the whole individual. Midtown opens up its doors to the community to build relationships. Housing homeless in partnership with the county might help contribute to a more trustworthy or just world, but this is not the primary horizon for interpreting this activity. Rather, the congregation gets to build meaningful relationships with needy families in their community.

The interpretive power of the personal is both taught and reinforced through two highly stylized, conventional narratives. By ‘conventional,’ I mean to underscore their particular form and function in the life of Midtown. As a particular form, these narratives are a predictable script; events recorded in these narratives are placed within a predictable plot. Paul Ricoeur calls this necessary aspect of narrative-construction ‘emplotment,’ and he emphasizes the way in which emplotment involves both a mimetic and interpretive act on the part of the narrator.38 By placing events into a plot, the narrator imitates (even in a

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work of fiction) her own historicity, and the contextual, historical nature of human life. But in order to do so, the narrator must have some sense of what these events mean, for a plot requires an *end* which makes the flow of events seem ‘reasonable.’ The *form* of these narratives, then, determines an *end* through the good of intimacy, so that events and experiences can be emplotted and thus interpreted in light of a certain tradition and good in the life of the congregation.

So also, in terms of their *function*, these conventional narratives serve to reinforce, interpret, and compel an already-existing good in relationship to certain practices. Ricoeur also emphasizes in numerous places the way in which the mimetic and interpretive/explanatory functions of narrative open up new possibilities for action. Narrative—even and especially fiction or mythological accounts—has a clear *referent* in the realm of present and future human action. Midtown’s conventional narratives also function to open up possibilities for action in relationship to the good of intimacy already sustained by its scripted form. Thus, I use *conventional* to emphasize the way in which these narratives are a *scripted* rehearsal of a particular tradition with a clearly-defined *referent* in view. They serve to sustain the good of intimacy by drawing new experiences and events into its narrative framework.

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40 Ibid., 293-96. See also Ricoeur, “Metaphor and the Central Problem of Hermeneutics.” Here Ricoeur argues that the phenomena of metaphor within the ‘work’ of a sentence to create live and innovative semantic meaning (something new) parallels the way in which a *text* as a work of sentences within a *discourse* opens up “possible worlds and possible ways of orienting oneself in these worlds” (177). Something similar takes place in narrative, as a certain genre of discourse manifested in the particular ‘texts’ or stories being told.
The ‘Regeneration’ Narrative

The first conventional narrative emerges whenever stories of ministry success or personal transformation are told. These kinds of stories take the basic shape of the blind man in John 9. Like the blind man, these stories emphasize concrete and significant personal transformation while remaining somewhat agnostic in regard to personal and divine agency: ‘I don’t know about this Jesus, but one thing I do know, I once was blind but now I see.’ They are ‘agnostic’ in the sense that they do not show any interest in parsing out God’s work from their own acts of faithful obedience. Unlike a more standard evangelical ‘conversion’ narrative, these stories tend to avoid judicial imagery and the subsequent emphasis on justification. Rather, God’s transforming (and I’d assume justifying) work is intermixed with a host of other agents—the church community, the heroic care/ministry of a pastor, a particular sermon, one ‘hitting bottom’ or developing a renewed sense of resolve. The point of the story, then, is not the forensic clearing of sin but rather a new life, a concrete, ongoing, and personal transformation by the grace of God. As a community, Midtown is blessed with many of these stories: former convicts now worship beside their families, recovering drug addicts work with troubled high school kids, and single mothers who previously felt ‘cut off’ and judged by God now care for and lead other single mothers. These stories serve to underscore the concrete and personal ways in which God is at work among them. And it is this experience and evidence of a changed life that marks and defines ‘successful’ ministry.41

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41 This became most clear in the focus group conversations. In the next chapter, I will describe in greater detail how these conversations were conducted and how it was that this particular narrative emerged in relationship to asking questions related to ‘ministry success.’
This regeneration narrative—with its emphasis on experience and evidence—
echoes some of the Pietist tradition. In the Seventeenth Century, Philip Jacob Spener
challenged the emphasis on judicial imagery within his Lutheran context through an
appeal to concrete, organic, and evolutionary imagery to express the life of faith. Spener
made an explicit appeal for everyday Christians to exhibit *evidence* of a *new life*. He
exhorts the reader in one passage: “Again, you hear the Word of God. This is good. But it
is not enough that your ear hears it. Do you let it penetrate inwardly into your heart and
allow the heavenly food to be digested there…”42 For Spener, genuine faith needed to be
expressed in a changed life rather than dogmatic precision or proper reception of the
sacraments. This changed life was not only something God does, but something which
we must ‘allow’ to happen. Thus, Spener emphasized one’s active reception of God, for
the Word of God does not simply *do* something to us, but we must also “allow” it to
“penetrate…[our] heart[s]” so that we *keep* the Word as well as hear it.43 For Spener—and
generations of Pietists after him—the Christian *life* is the mark of salvation. Real,
observable change provides evidence that Christ is not just *for* us, but also *in* us. This, so
it seems, is echoed throughout Midtown’s ‘regeneration’ script. Proper *experience*
demonstrated by outward change marks the work of God or the Christian life.

Not surprisingly, Midtown understands itself in direct relation to the Pietist
heritage. In recent memory, Midtown’s denomination experienced a significant
theological controversy. Conservative factions in the denomination pushed to create new
‘tests’ for ‘orthodoxy’ in an attempt to exclude some less conservative figures and


43 Ibid.
congregations. During this time, Midtown’s leaders joined with others to defend the present theological diversity in the denomination. In the process, they became aware of their own Pietist heritage. According to Midtown leaders, it was the discovery of a theologically generous, experiential tradition such as Pietism that helped keep the denomination together. One intellectual in the congregation asserts that Midtown’s Pietist roots have protected it from the kind of “generic evangelicalism” that divides church bodies on ever-narrowing tests of orthodoxy. For this person, the “experiential Christianity” of the Pietist tradition has given a great gift to Midtown in the form of political and theological diversity; for within this tradition, the regeneration script trumps other commitments that might divide the community. That is, evidence of a changed life weighs heavier than intellectual, political, or theological disputes. It is not surprising, then, that this verbal commitment to the Pietist tradition is ‘backed up’ in concrete action: a pastor and professor in the congregation edit a periodical on pietism for the denomination.

But how does this rather tenuous connection between ‘regeneration’ narratives, congregational ethos, and a recent awareness of Pietism help interpret the way in which ‘regeneration narratives’ function? It is foolish to try and draw a direct line from Spener to Midtown Baptist; nor have I encountered anyone in the congregation willing to do this. In what sense, then, is the regeneration narrative Pietist? Does this tradition help us to understand the narrative? These questions are problematic almost immediately; for the term ‘Pietist’ itself is open to ongoing interpretation. F. Ernest Stoeffler states that

44 Conversation with a congregant, March 5, 2009.

45 Conversation with a congregant, March 5, 2009.
Pietism is “one of the least understood movements in the history of Christianity.” And the immense growth of Pietist research in the thirty-plus years since he made that statement has done little to clarify what it is or is not. The ‘purest’ or easiest definition of Pietism limits it to a German-Lutheran renewal movement begun by Spener in the seventeenth century and focused around Halle before fading in influence by the eighteenth century. This is the easiest definition because it limits the movement to the initial genius of Spener and Francke without making historically tenuous genealogies across traditions and continents. But it fails to account for the way in which similar, cross-pollinating renewal movements emerged in Puritanism, Dutch-Reformed, and Wesleyan-Methodist spheres within a century of each other.

The second, more risky way of understanding Pietism thus tries to connect these diverse renewal movements as different manifestations of the ‘Pietist tradition.’ Although Pietist research remains divided over these different approaches, recent scholarship has embraced both a larger vision for Pietism as well as exploring the influence of Pietism on modern Protestantism, culture, and society.

It is clearly this...

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47 For an overview of this research, see Jonathan Strom, “Problems and Promises of Pietism Research,” *Church History* 71, no. 3 (2002).

48 Ibid.: 542.

49 Ibid.: 542-43.
multifaceted, reform-minded pietist *impulse* that informs Midtown’s piety and vision of ministry rather than an explicit appeal to the work of Spener and Francke.\(^50\)

If we can call Midtown’s regeneration narrative as sharing in a broad, Pietist impulse in American Christianity, then perhaps a more careful account of the tradition can help us understand how the regeneration narrative functions in Midtown. Two elements of the tradition seem worth noting. First, although the emphasis within ‘regeneration’ seems to focus initially on concrete, observable changes in behavior, these changes are secondary *effects* or *evidences* of the real, internal transformation the regeneration narrative communicates. This is particularly significant in relationship to the good of ‘intimacy.’ For when the prioritization of the *inner experience* is understood, we can see how regeneration serves to sustain various hopes and concerns in relationship to intimacy both within the congregational family and in relationship with God. And second, although internal experience is prioritized, the ‘outer’ world does not disappear but rather becomes a kind of ‘floodplain’ for the ‘overflow’ of internal ‘riches’ given in Pietist experience. As I mentioned in the previous chapter—despite its reputation, Pietism is quite activistic.

First, the regeneration narrative depends upon a Pietist bifurcation of inner and outer worlds. Ernest Stoeffler uses the term ‘Pietism’ to designate “all experiential Protestantism during the Post-Reformation period.”\(^51\) By “experiential Protestantism,” Stoeffler means an insistence that “the essence of Christainity is to be found in the

\(^50\) For a volume that explores the many generative links between the continental Pietists and a variety of North American Christian movements, see F. Ernest Stoeffler, ed., *Continental Pietism and Early American Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976).

personally meaningful relationship of the individual to God.\textsuperscript{52} Although not helpful for delimiting Pietism from other kinds of Protestant traditions, Stoeffler’s understanding of what it means to be within the ‘experiential’ tradition of Protestantism mirrors Midtown’s self-understanding. As I demonstrated above, the relationship of the individual to God is central to Midtown’s account of God’s presence and activity in the congregation. The turning point in regeneration stories is always when an individual ‘receives Jesus Christ as personal Lord and Savior.’ That is, although regeneration stories focus on the empirical details of transformation and new life, the most significant data remains hidden from view—the experience of assurance in one’s own heart. Stoeffler articulates this well:

\textit{…the Christian faith must be based upon an unassailable source of authority. Like all the masters of the devotional life in the history of Christianity, beginning with the apostles and coming down through Augustine, the mystics, and the Reformers, Pietists had the further insight the kind of authority which alone makes the Christian faith individually significant is always experiential…Such authority, they held, cannot be based on external standards, whether they be doctrines of infallibility, or succession, or creedal correctness…It is [instead] involved in the mystery which envelops all personal knowledge.}\textsuperscript{53}

It is obvious that such conceptuality relies heavily upon a bifurcation of the ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ life. In this way, ‘experiential tradition’ and ‘Pietism’ become ways of talking about \textit{Herzensreligion}, or religion of the heart.\textsuperscript{54} Just as the ‘family’ metaphor serves to create clear distinctions between the intimate patterns of relationships on the inside of the congregation and those outside the intimate circle, so also the \textit{interior} life is where one experiences personal fellowship with God through Jesus Christ. “There can be

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 13.

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 14-15.

\textsuperscript{54} Donald G. Bloesch, \textit{The Evangelical Renaissance} (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 106.
no faith apart from an experience of the heart." Jesus might be ‘savior’ and ‘Lord,’ but these terms are controlled by the adjective *personal*. It is not an overstatement to say that Jesus’ Lordship is, in the first instance, a Lordship of individual *hearts*, a savior first experienced in the innermost heart.

Turning to Midtown, then, the personal interpretive horizon with its expectations of intimacy relies upon a particular kind of dualistic anthropology which prioritizes *interiority* or the *heart* as the location for a more true experience of God. Intimacy is not just a strongly valued good, but it is that which determines the assurance of saving faith. It is not a leap in logic, then, to see how an inner-outer dualism also functions interpersonally in the congregation. The *interior* life of the ‘family’ is thus seen as the sustaining, strengthening, and empowering source for ministry in the church.

Second, the prioritization of internal experience does not exclude the ‘external’ world, but rather makes it a kind of ‘floodplain’ for the ‘overflow’ of internal experience. As mentioned above, the outer life constitutes the bulk of empirical evidence for regeneration stories. Donald Bloesch says “For the Pietist, faith is inward, experiential, and *total*...” This word, ‘total,’ refers to the activistic, reformation-oriented ethos of the ‘experiential’ Protestant renewal movements that Bloesch, Stoeffler, and others call ‘Pietism.’ In these movements, the inward experience of assurance, the inward-intimate encounter with God, was simply expected to produce a new kind of life—regeneration. For the Pietist, inner experience, theology, and ethics become inseparable. Theology—including a theology of salvation—is expected to “have practical or ethical

\[55\] Ibid.

\[56\] Ibid. Italics mine.
implications.” That is, it is expected to be livable. Among Wesleyan-Holiness traditions, this becomes the doctrine of perfection and/or sanctification, and it gets expressed both personally and socially, as a revivalistic activism for the reformation of the church and society.

Thus, the intimate and interior assurance of Christ’s saving work in the individual and inside the community is understood to contain particular sanctifying-ethical imperatives. Pietists, historically, have been voluntaristic and activistic moral-spiritual reformers, which is why defenders of Pietism dismiss popular criticism regarding ‘pie in the sky’ piety. Midtown’s regeneration stories often contain accounts of heroic activity on the part of a member of the church. Often, it is the dogged pursuit, the faithful obedience, or the humble integrity of a member of the church that ‘introduces’ the individual to Jesus and helps ‘turn’ their life around. Spener, and generations of Pietists after him, emphasized the imitation of Christ as a framework for sanctification and ethical activism. As we see Christ doing, so also we do. As a religion of the heart, Pietists tend to emphasize Christ within us, and so personal agency is infused with Christ’s agency. Midtown’s sign on the front of the church captures this well, stating “God’s love, alive in the [Neighborhood].” This could be a statement of objectivity—that God is ‘out there’ so to speak. But it is clear from church materials that this is intended much more directly. God’s love is alive at Midtown, and also in the neighborhood through Midtown. This leads to the second conventional narrative: the heroic missionary.

57 Ibid., 122.

58 At the end of this chapter, I will pick up the theories of practice again in relationship to these narratives and the good of intimacy.
Intimacy and The Heroic Missionary

The activism provoked by the ‘total’ emphasis of the regeneration narrative also has its own conventional narrative that I will call ‘the heroic missionary narrative.’ The basic shape of this narrative can be demonstrated from the Youth Ministry Leaders Focus Group. When asked about success stories, the leaders began to share stories from the regeneration narrative. This youth or that young person ‘came to Christ’ and now has a life that looks very different. But interspersed in these rehearsed stories was another kind of story; a couple ‘lone’ figures consistently and persistently acted on behalf of the church in ‘reaching’ these students. The regeneration stories were made possible by stories of personal, heroic, missionary agency. This was the narrative for how leaders understood their own ministry. Each leader has a direct and individual relationship with persons in ‘the community’ and ‘on the streets.’ One leader put it this way:

You would be amazed at times I run into a kid that thanks me. He tells me ‘it was the best time of my life…’ Makes me feel good. I have relationships with most of them. A couple of them want me to write a letter of recommendation for college and has invited me to their events because of the time they had here at church and basketball.\(^{59}\)

I was asking questions about the church and public theology, but the answer was always interpersonal, with a ministry-leader showing a great deal of intentionality in overcoming the ‘gap’ between church and community. In this example and others, the individual stands in for the congregation. Engagement in the community is an interpersonal act, and it is the action of certain individuals who go out and make this relationship happen.

Another example comes from the congregational interviews. In the margin of one of the interview sheets, the interviewer wrote a note that did not fit into any of the above

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\(^{59}\) Youth Ministry Leaders Focus Group, April, 1, 2009.
questions. The note said: "The person interviewed said that no one has done more for the outreach and connection of the church to the community in the past twenty years than [name of a church leader]." In fact, every focus group and many of the interviews celebrated exemplary instances of individual initiative; of the 'one' who makes ongoing and consistent connection with the neighborhood. The form, then, of the 'heroic missionary narrative' begins by recognizing a gap between church and community, introduces an individual with a unique set of gifts and/or vision, and ends with an account of the needs being met, the lives being changed, or a 'regeneration' narrative regarding a particular ministry 'success.'

Why do I call this narrative the 'heroic missionary?' In chapter three, I described the way that 'stewardship' involves the congregation in various 'extensions' of the congregation to meet needs in the community. I accounted for a tradition of benevolence in the modern missions movement and argued that the practices of engagement with the neighborhood assume a benefactor-client relationship. I pointed to numerous examples that do not need to be recounted again here. The form of the 'heroic missionary' is certainly related to this benevolence-logic, both informing and reflecting this kind of practice. It is a 'missionary' narrative because it connects with this logic, and reinforces the sense that the missions of the church bridge the gathered community and the outer world. It is a 'heroic missionary' story because it is not certain practices or organizations which bridge the gap, but rather individual persons.

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60 Congregational Interview Q, March, 2009. This individual was highlighted throughout the interviews and also celebrated in focus groups, and might even be considered the paradigmatic instance of this narrative, though others placed themselves in a similar narrative framework when talking about why they got involved in a ministry.
This narrative functions, then, to reinforce and help interpret the outreach-as-benevolent-missions practices of the church while also helping to resolve the tension between the good of family intimacy and the concern the congregation has for the stranger in its neighborhood. That is, missions provides a form and space for Midtown to bridge its inner and outer worlds through the heroic activism of individuals and the generous giving of the congregation. The riches of the inner experience of Christ and family intimacy are benevolently and activistically extended to the neighborhood (and world) through the logic and framework of missions.

As articulated in chapter three when I discussed benevolence, this fits with the Pietist tradition through the holiness-revivalist strand of American Protestantism. Drawing upon this tradition and a concern for extending the church around the world, Midtown’s missions board oversees a sizeable amount of the church budget, supporting missionaries in several countries and campus ministries in the United States. The church continues to have a “Missions Festival,” where some of the missionaries who receive support come to preach and lead Sunday School over a two-week period every year. In recent years, ‘missions’ has included Midtown’s neighborhood; a percentage of the missions budget is now set aside for ‘missions’ at home, going to support the children’s ministry, youth ministry, tutoring, and other activities in which the church extends care to the surrounding community. This has caused some conflict, since some on the board argue that ‘missions’ involves giving to something in another context, but the move did get enough support to remain in the budget indefinitely.

The heroic missionary narrative, then, provides a kind of social script for bridging Midtown’s Pietist bifurcation between inner and outer worlds. The regeneration narrative
emphasizes the priority of inner experience. In relationship to the good of intimacy, ‘inner’ can be understood along two trajectories: both the ‘inner’ relational wealth of the intimate family and the ‘inner’ experience of transformation and encounter with God. Both sets of experiences are considered essential for the life of the church as they manifest intimate relationships and are able to be narrated with the conventional regeneration narrative. But the regeneration narrative does not provide a social script for the activistic fervor unleashed by the experience of inner transformation and family nurture. The heroic missionary narrative provides such a script. The inner and outer worlds are bridged through heroic, individual activity or the stewarding of resources to sustain that activity.

What does the heroic missionary narrative have to do with intimacy? At first, it seems to push past it by celebrating those who have sought to extend or push past the intimate community. But in the congregation, it seems to manage the boundary between ‘family’ and community, between ‘inner experience’ and ‘social engagement’ by providing a real and fruitful extension of the church that only moves in one direction. The intimate family, the saved individual, gets to move outward in care and concern sustained by his or her inner riches. As evidenced by the way the congregation seats itself and the anxiety over ‘passing the torch’ to the next generation, the boundaries between the intimate family and those who receive various services is managed quite well. These two conventional narratives certainly play a role in this by prioritizing that which is ‘inner’ and then providing a script for responsible, loving ‘mission’ to the community. This is how Midtown sees “God’s love, alive in the [neighborhood].”
Evangelical Theology

In what ways can this account of intimacy clarify the evangelical strand of Midtown’s lived theology? Certainly, evangelicalism and Pietism are more multi-faceted than can be summarized through the good of intimacy, as the historical-theological overviews in the first two chapters suggest. Yet, a close reading of intimacy as a strongly valued good identifies and generates insight regarding a long-standing problem for evangelicalism: articulating the relationship between the nature of social life and the Gospel. This ambiguity for evangelicals is at least as old as the ‘great reversal’ in the early twentieth century as fundamentalists pulled out of public affairs to preach a privatized and ‘spiritual’ gospel in response to the social gospel. But if the good of intimacy is indeed linked to Midtown’s Pietist heritage, as I argue, such an ambiguity extends back into the Pietist roots of evangelicalism; for the practices and narratives linked to intimacy make possible both benevolent practice and imitation anthropology.

At least two implications follow from the account of intimacy above. First, the good of intimacy exchanges the ‘social’ for the ‘personal.’ Midtown’s language and self-understanding is built around interpersonal frameworks and language. Social engagement is nearly always a personal engagement, a face-to-face encounter with a neighbor. When a distance, or gap, between one of the ‘family’ and a stranger from the community cannot be addressed immediately and personally, Midtown sends ‘heroic missionaries’ to extend the care and concern of the congregation. This is a posture in continuity with the benevolent-missions paradigm, as I argue in chapter three. And second, the good of

61 The phrase “the great reversal” comes from David Moberg, though Moberg attributes it to an unpublished lecture by Timothy L. Smith. See Moberg, The Great Reversal: Evangelism and Social Concern.
intimacy understands the presence and work of God in terms of personal interiority. This is true particularly when the term ‘Gospel’ is used at Midtown, for it often exclusively refers to a regeneration story. The outlines of this framework can be seen in the imitation anthropology, as one can imagine Christ working from the past through the Christian in the moment of replication and out into the world. The regenerate Christian has Christ ‘inside’ and so acts appropriately. Intimacy demonstrates that, for Midtown, the social/public and the Gospel are not understood together. And yet, Midtown compensates for this lack through deliberate and consistent social engagement in the community. In the following section, I will provide the metaphor of a foster home to describe this tension before turning to McClendon, who works from a similar starting point as Midtown but also problematizes and addresses the evangelical ambiguity regarding the social and the Gospel. I will close the chapter considering what has been clarified so far and what still remains problematic in the evangelical strand of lived theology.

The Foster Home: Imitation of Christ in Benevolent Action

On June 19, 2009 I presented my initial reflections on the research to Midtown’s leadership board. I shared much of what is written in this chapter about the good of intimacy and the importance of ‘family’ for understanding the life of the congregation. But I also shared that Midtown’s family system—though seeking intimacy—was also quite extended into the neighborhood. I used the metaphor of a foster home to characterize how I felt these two dynamics related to each other; for a foster home is constituted by a host of ‘others’ who draw upon the stability, relational warmth, and care of an existing family. The success of a foster home depends on how well care is administered, not necessarily whether the foster children are connected long-term with
the family. So also, in a foster home the contours of the ‘natural born’ and ‘intimate’
nucleus of the family are almost always clear. A foster home, by design, provides short-
term care by extension while also maintaining the kind of long-term intimacy of a more
traditional family. In the meeting, I offered ‘foster home’ as a picture of Midtown’s
combination of intimate family life and missionary activism. The board affirmed this
picture as helpful for understanding the kinds of anxieties they faced over handing off
leadership to new members in the church and how to account for a youth group and
children’s ministry made up of many ‘community kids’ (who attend regularly—why are
they not ‘church kids’).

Given this conversation, I offer ‘foster home’ as a metaphor for the practices and
life of Midtown Baptist Church in relationship to the good of intimacy. The intimate
nucleus of the home is nurtured by Christ: a strong male figure at the ‘head’ who
provides both an example and requests obedience from his children. As the ‘natural born’
members of the family, these children have a long history with Christ and with one
another; and their intimacy with each other works in relationship to their intimacy with
Christ. Altogether, they seek to follow Christ’s model. Their ethical life with each other
and in the world seeks to follow Christ—the ‘head’s—model. I demonstrated above how
this is embedded in the preaching moment and also within the regeneration narrative as it
comes through the Pietist tradition. It is this placement of Christ as the ‘head’ and the
‘model’ which stands as the theological center of Midtown’s practices as an intimate
family. The prioritization of the inner over the outer means that relationship with Christ

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Admittedly, I am drawing upon a narrow and institutional understanding of foster care for this
metaphor. There are, of course, successful initiatives that embed foster families within larger, long-term
structures of care and community.
precedes (theologically, at least) one’s relationship with the family. This is certainly a subtext of regeneration narratives. That is, one relates to the others through the head. So also, it is the head who authorizes and models ministry and outreach for the family.

The metaphor breaks down, however, when time is considered. A key assumption of the imitation of Christ ‘theologic’ for Christian action is the ‘gap’ between Christ’s model and the church’s present set of ethical concerns. As such, imitation requires attending to the model and then applying the insights gathered. The family imagery I suggest above assumes a kind of contemporaneous relationship between Christ and the family that is not part of imitation. Christ is internal to each one, but not—in Midtown’s language or imagination—among those at the church except by extension as each one imitates Christ in his action toward the others. The ‘head’ is personal only for those on ‘the inside.’

But Midtown understands the ‘head’ to model a concern for the whole world. And so the same logic of extension that exists within the family extends toward the world as well. As I outline in the previous chapter, Christ’s giving of himself for the individual is seen as a model for the Christian. So also, the church freely gives of itself, modeling Christ’s sacrifice and care for Midtown’s neighborhood. This is a foster home in which the children extend the care they have received from the ‘head’ of the household. But such extension, if it is not reciprocated or understood as only ‘short-term’ care, means that the foster home functions as a benevolent community; its neighbors as foster children who come and go. The riches of intimacy are poured out, the relationship with the ‘head’ overflows by extension, but intimacy is not a ‘good’ that can be offered with extended arms.
Foster Home Theology

The metaphor of the foster home underscores how Midtown’s imitation anthropology and benevolence activism sustain intimacy as a strongly valued good. The differentiation in the foster home between the natural born and foster child reinforces intimacy’s interiority while also personalizing the outreach of the congregation, for a foster child is still a part of the family. But how might we consider this family theologically? What is at stake in exchanging the social for the personal and understanding the Gospel in terms of interiority? I will consider the work of James McClendon to begin sketching an answer to these questions.

A Community of Watch-Care

In connecting the good of intimacy to the Pietist regeneration narrative and missionary activism, I have shown how a particularly romantic and sentimental good of intimacy forms Midtown’s evangelical strand. But this has been a one-sided account of intimacy. A concern for personal interaction, for long-term face-to-face relationship, for care and authenticity develops certain habits and qualities within a community that are not necessarily thin or romantic notions of ‘fellowship.’ Intimate relationships create much more than warm feelings or a sense of safety. They sometimes do the reverse by de-centering the self or even exposing the self to one’s own inconsistencies and in-authenticity. At times, this is true of marriage and family life, and Midtown is a foster family where such habits of community-building are also lived. Interviewees often told stories of personal care received during times of struggle or loneliness. Stories of intimacy also emerged when interviewees talked about the breadth, diversity, or intergenerational nature of the congregation. These differences are deemed positive
because Midtown is "one big extended family" that manifests "reconciled friendships" that preserves its fellowship amidst diversity in which persons experience authentic relationships, ("we don't 'play' church—we're real") nurture, and (at times) warmth. It is a short step from this acknowledgment to the observation that such intimacy nurtures Christian identity. Sometimes one's interior experience of God is mediated through another, or even the work of God in one person comes through another. That is, even under the narratives and practices of intimacy, the personal and interior cannot be completely buffered from others in the family, nor can the family—as a foster family—completely buffer itself from the neighborhood. The social cannot easily be left behind.

The problem for Midtown—and for evangelicals more generally—is that such sociality is rarely thought theologically. We can phrase the question this way: How is God present and active in Midtown's family intimacy and not simply in family-members? James McClendon can offer conceptuality for Midtown that shares in its concern for familial intimacy while also articulating how such relationships are theological and not simply a context for God's interior work. McClendon refers to Christian sociality as a

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64 Ibid., 4.

65 Authenticity can function a number of ways. It can denote a kind of romanticized and affective sense of warmth and closeness. This is a decidedly 'thin' account of authenticity. But it can also articulate the way in which a community seeks truthful and trusting relationships with one another through clear and honest communication. In the context of intimacy as 'familial warmth,' the thin account seems most likely. However, the good of intimacy sustained by Midtown's practices of caring for one another and remaining in relationship across differences also demonstrates the possibility that the second, more profound understanding of authenticity is also present at Midtown.


67 Ibid., 6.

“community of watch-care.”  By this, McClendon means to emphasize both that the Christian life is necessarily social (a community) and also that there is such a thing as Christian sociality (watch-care).

McClendon begins his chapter on watch-care by stating that “there is no solitary Christianity” in order to argue for the “necessary social solidarity of the way of Zion and of Jesus.” 70 With this statement, McClendon wants to affirm the church as constituted by persons in solidarity with Christ (his theme of embodied witness) and also one another (community of care). Midtown tends to identify theologically with the ‘Christ in me’ but not necessarily ‘us in/with Christ.’ McClendon bridges the two by bringing a structural account of sociality through institutions (rooted in a doctrine of creation) together with a MacIntyrian theory of practices in order to claim that human life is formed within ambiguous matrices of “powerful practices.” 71 He asserts that we are formed within various institutionalized practices—‘powers and principalities’—that are both created by God and corrupted by sin. The church, then, shares in the created social structure of the powerful practices. It, too, is a community that forms persons in particular practices but does so according to the narrative of the cross and resurrection. With this conceptuality, McClendon hopes to avoid the “dual errors” of both Constantinian Christianity and sectarian withdrawal. 72 Rather, the distinct sociality of the church—as powerful practices constituted by the cross and resurrection—is to

69 McClendon, Systematic Theology, 77.

70 Ibid., 165.

71 Ibid., 178.

72 Ibid., 181.
witness concerning the reversal of power achieved in Christ's resurrection; that is, [the sociality of the church] must make plain that these civil, military, economic, traditional, cultural, social, yes, religious and other structures are not themselves the end and meaning of life. Thus, McClendon's argument for the sociality of Christian life emerges from his understanding of creation, as well as a structural-social account of sin. Despite 'Jesus in my heart,' human life is constituted in ambiguous social practices. For McClendon, any such account of the Christian life must also articulate church as a community of powerful practices.

It is not insignificant that McClendon also structures his argument based on a social-structural account of the Gospel. That is, Jesus' life, death and resurrection are not understood only in relationship to the personal imputation of sin, but rather as a confrontation with and victory over the "fallen and rebellious" powers. Christian sociality, then, is properly good news in that it is part-and-parcel of the Gospel. For as the community whose powerful practices are shaped by and within the narrative of the crucified and risen Son, Christian sociality forms a community in the way and witness of Christ. Newbigin's understanding of the congregation as a "hermeneutic of the Gospel" corresponds to the point McClendon is making here. So what is the good news of a Christian community?

McClendon argues that the good news embodied in the Christian community is a community of watch-care characterized by a "politics of forgiveness." Watch-care is a

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73 Ibid.
74 Ibid., 179.
76 McClendon, Systematic Theology, 213-41.
word McClendon develops to characterize the Baptist heritage of concern and care for others on the journey, or (in Midtown's terms) the good of intimacy that directs family relationships. It also names for McClendon the central thrust of the church as a community of forgiveness, in which gathered members forgive one another just as God, in Christ, forgives them (Eph. 4:32). Here again, McClendon mediates between the social and personal/individual. At the social level, the formation and maintenance of community constituted by powerful practices necessitates the communication of rules and expectations. As such, watch-care depends upon creating certain boundaries—for the coherence of such community formation depends upon it. And yet, the fallen state of all such institutions means that even (or perhaps, especially) community rules and expectations related to churchly practices are susceptible to totalizing and exclusive forms of life. This means that the rules and expectations associated with ecclesial community practices must be continually open to contestation and conversation.

The community of watch-care, then, has "fluid" boundaries that are constituted by an "ongoing community conversation" that is "something akin to judicial process."77 This judicial process, however, is not set up to cast the one who transgresses the boundaries out, but rather to create processes of forgiveness and reinstating, for "forgiveness is the healing of a broken church."78 Theologically, McClendon sees Christ's personal forgiveness of the individual sinner as accounting for this politics of forgiveness. It is Christ's atonement, of bearing upon himself the transgressions of sinners, that serves as McClendon's key for the community of watch-care. Just as Christ took upon himself our

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77 Ibid., 226.

78 Ibid., 227.
transgressions, so also we take on the transgressions of those in our Christian communities. This is the kind of politics that constitutes the church. This is what it means for the church to embody good news in its sociality and not just to proclaim good news for individual souls.

Problems with Watch-Care

McClendon’s vision of a community of watch-care demonstrates both the possibility and inherent limitations of the good of intimacy for Midtown, for McClendon’s watch-care shares with the foster home a firm sense of boundaries related to particular goods of care and nurture. Moreover, McClendon shares with Midtown an imitation anthropology as can be seen in the ‘just as it was-so also we’ logic of forgiveness. Indeed, McClendon’s articulation of the ‘Baptist principle’ and his subsequent reading of Scripture works similar to Midtown’s imitation logic.79

With these shared frameworks, McClendon articulates a theology of the social that does not run roughshod over Midtown’s concern for intimacy. He demonstrates that the ‘head’ of the foster home does not need to be hidden in individual hearts, but rather present in the real bonds of intimacy generated from the building and maintaining of community in the practice/politics of forgiveness. That is, McClendon’s voice can be heard in the foster home as encouraging Midtown to have eyes to see and ears to hear the shape of their own life as a foster family to be good news; that in the shape of the intimate family, an alternative social life rooted in the narratives of cross and

79 The ‘Baptist principle’ guides his whole theological project. He states it like this: “the church now is the primitive church and the church on judgment day; the obedience and liberty of the followers of Jesus of Nazareth is our liberty, our obedience, till time’s end.” McClendon refers to that as a “mystical” kind of ecclesiology and biblicism, that “this is that” as a basic way for Baptists to work with theological materials. See Ibid., 30-32.
resurrection, atonement and forgiveness is lived out in face-to-face relationships. As I note above, such an insistence requires that Midtown reflect social-systemically on the Gospel, to recognize God’s victory over the ‘powers and principalities’ rather than only personal sin. But Midtown already recognizes social-systemic challenges in its midst. They already address social concerns in their community through a Deweyan pragmatism—which I will account for in the next chapter. They have not seen it theologically.

Moreover, McClendon’s insistence that the boundaries that reinforce the community (for Midtown, the boundaries of the intimate family) are fluid and open to ongoing negotiation and conversation also fits Midtown’s foster home framework. This is promising theologically for both McClendon and Midtown, as it unhinges the ‘good news’ from an ideological stasis. The good news embodied in any one expression of church is always in danger of institutionalizing certain power dynamics or exclusive practices. McClendon realizes the ambiguity of community practices, and so articulates a theology of the social in which communicative discernment negotiates and continually reshapes the boundaries. Thus, McClendon’s conceptuality further challenges Midtown’s foster home to consider how it is that the foster children cause Midtown to reconsider the boundaries of the intimate family, or to consider how the boundaries of the family—in the name of intimacy—have become static.

But McClendon’s focus on boundaries also points toward some of the fundamental problems for a theology of the social rooted so deeply in the good of intimacy. For McClendon, community boundaries are established through rules and expectations related to constitutive community practices. As such, McClendon
emphasizes the theme of obedience and introduces the politics of forgiveness in order to articulate how the community of watch-care discerns a response to a transgressor who breaks the bonds of community. Embedded in McClendon’s language is a cephalic conception of community that is also shared by Midtown. Midtown’s benevolent activism and appeals to stewardship emphasize obedience. Indeed, the framework of the foster home only makes sense with Christ as the ‘head’ and those in the intimate family as ones who extend the care and concern of Christ. But who are these transgressors? In McClendon’s framework, they could be anyone. But is this really the case? Are they not more likely to be those outside the ‘inner circle’ of the intimate family? Are they most likely to be new to the community and with less interest in maintaining certain community practices? What if the inside family members transgress the bonds of community? Who will discern the response or negotiate the politics of forgiveness? It is hard to imagine. A cephalic conceptuality of both community and practice tends to reinforce inner-outer, family-stranger dichotomies. Forgiveness—when related to the boundaries of a gathered community as McClendon does—is something extended in the same way that the foster home extends benevolence. Thus, even though McClendon provides a theology of the social for Midtown in a way that can expand their reflection on the Gospel, certain assumptions about relationality rooted in the good of intimacy keep Midtown and McClendon working with a bounded and buffered community—even if they emphasize the messiness of foster care or the porousness of the politics of forgiveness. The foster children are rarely mistaken for the natural born.

Another problem that emerges for both watch-care and the foster home in light of McClendon’s discussion is their ambiguity regarding eschatology. I pointed out in the
foster home account that the imitation theologic within the foster home breaks down when time is considered. For Christ’s saving presence is within each member of the intimate family, but Christ’s model for action and outreach is situated behind the present action. The way in which the regeneration narrative funds Midtown’s sense of Christ’s immediacy suggests a realized eschatology that is in keeping the holiness-sanctification tradition. But the way in which Midtown’s action is directed by the logic of imitation suggests a lack of historical differentiation between text and actor, Christ and church in a way that flattens eschatological hope. Midtown does not work with a realized eschatology, but rather a timeless eschatology, a great undifferentiated ‘now’ in which what was is now and what is now is what was; for Christ is ‘in’ the hearts of Midtown, as God’s love is alive-in the neighborhood through Midtown. Just as Jesus walked, so also Midtown walks. The problem with this conceptuality is not that it expects too much of God, but rather that it expects too little. It seems to share with historicism a sense that the future works-out from past material. Reality itself is contained within well-managed boundaries. Of course evangelicals—Midtown included—have eschatological-apocalyptic language. But this is fundamentally about the end of time, an apocalyptic rupture in reality and fundamental discontinuity in the timeless ‘now.’ Like D.L. Moody, the good of intimacy through an imitation anthropology encourages Midtown to fill their lifeboats for the coming flood. But this apocalyptic language does not consider God’s future as breaking into Midtown’s present.

Thus, lost in the undifferentiated now is the robust hope of Christian promise traced through the Scriptures and focused on the cross and resurrection. For, as Moltmann argues, the faithfulness of the God identified in the resurrection “forms the
ground of the promise of the still outstanding future of Jesus Christ. It is this that is the
ground of the hope which carries faith through the trials of the god-forsaken world and of
death."80 The undifferentiated now of Midtown's imitation, then, does not hope for a 'still
outstanding future' because the 'now' is modeled after the past and empowered by
Christ-in-me. But for Moltmann, Christian hope requires a messier reality:

...hope has the chance of a meaningful existence only when reality itself is in a
stage of historic flux and when historic reality has room for open possibilities
ahead. Christian hope is meaningful only when the world can be changed by him
in whom this hope hopes, and thus is open to that for which this hope hopes;
when it is full of all kinds of possibilities (possible for God) and open to the
resurrection of the dead. If the world were a self-contained system of cause and
effect, then hope could either regard this world as itself the fulfillment, or else in
Gnostic fashion transcend and reflect itself into the supra-worldly realm. That,
however, would be to abandon itself.81

Midtown's undifferentiated now, it seems, fits Moltmann's second option for the world
as a self-contained system. Christ is active, but within the heart and as a model in the
past. We will see in chapters five and six how this aspect of intimacy has a significant
impact on both the public and missional strands of Midtown's lived theology.

McClendon anticipates this problem and designates his third theological strand to the
'way' of Jesus, in which he articulates the Christian hope and promise. We will consider
this theme in chapter six.

The Evangelical Strand in the Pew

I opened chapter three describing Midtown's seating arrangement and commented
on a man who sits in the back of the church stage-left. He sits alone and sometimes serves

80 Moltmann, Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology,
85.

81 Ibid., 92.
as an usher. He is unkempt. He stinks. He is a man in Midtown’s story without a history. I asked a few people in the church about him and was unable to get a clear story. In my brief conversations with him he remained a mystery to me as well. I have seen him walking the streets on odd days, though, dressed the same as he is on Sundays. It is safe to say that this man would not be confused for one of the ‘natural born.’ He is a foster child, a community member. Within the evangelical strand, this man is a project, an extension of the care of the intimate family. But if Midtown begins to consider the presence and activity of God in its sociality, to consider the Gospel as lived out in its community, what role does this man have? How is this man who sits alone, this man without a history, this man who rarely showers—how is this man part of the Gospel in and among Midtown?

Conclusion

This chapter provides a ‘thick’ description of the good of intimacy in Midtown’s life and practice. I explored the ways in which ‘intimacy’ emerged as a good within the research as what interprets and orients both interpersonal relationships (as a family) and one’s personal relationship with God. Since goods emerge from within practices and are sustained (while also informing narratives and practices) by narratives and practices, I explored the good of intimacy in relationship to the regeneration and heroic missionary conventional narratives as well as the shape and theology of Midtown’s practice. I concluded with the metaphor of the ‘foster home’ as a way of describing the shape of Midtown’s life together in relationship to both the needs of the intimate family and the active sense of engagement with the neighborhood. I considered this metaphor theologically in light of our paradigmatic Baptist-evangelical theologian’s theology of
Christian sociality as a community of watch-care in order to explore both the theological resources and liabilities in the foster home metaphor. I concluded that McClendon can help Midtown to articulate the Gospel in relationship to social realities rather than personal/interior ones, but I also argued that intimacy has some limits as a good. It creates a cephalic and bounded sense of community—despite its best intentions—and it tends to obscure Christian hope through an undifferentiated eschatology. Of course, this chapter does not intend to summarize evangelicalism in general, but rather to tell the evangelical strand of Midtown’s lived theology.

In the next chapter, we will consider the public strand of Midtown’s lived theology by exploring the second good highlighted by Midtown’s informality in worship: the good of hospitality. However, although ‘hospitality’ emerged from attending to Midtown’s ‘come as you are’ ethos, it is not a ‘strongly valued good’ in the sense that intimacy is. Rather, it is a ‘pre-reflective’ good embodied in actual practice. I will provide an account of this in chapter five while also noting the ways in which the practices of hospitality problematize the good and practices of intimacy.
CHAPTER 5
THE PUBLIC STRAND: HOSPITALITY AS GOOD

Introduction

Midtown's youth ministry leadership team is a passionate and energetic group of youth ministry veterans. One leader has worked with the youth pastor at Midtown for more than ten years, and a few others—now adults in their late twenties/early thirties—began coming to the youth group as 'community kids' in high school. This kind of stability in leadership (the youth pastor has served at Midtown for more than twenty years) is offset by the erratic attendance of many students. The leaders consider about ten of the forty-fifty youth in attendance on a Wednesday night to constitute the 'core.' These students attend nearly every church function they can, and consist of both 'church' kids—those whose parents attend on a Sunday morning—and 'community' kids—those whose parents do not attend on a Sunday and who may or may not attend Sunday services themselves. Roughly seventy-five percent of the youth group, then, changes from week to week. Sometimes this is because students are temporarily 'suspended' from attending due to behavioral issues, or because some students' living situations are unstable from week to week due to poverty or family crises. Attendance beyond the 'core' also fluctuates around basketball season. Midtown fields a basketball team that competes in a church-league; this tends to be a big attraction for students in the neighborhood.

During the first part of my focus group conversation with the youth ministry team, they downplayed the instability and eclectic nature of the youth group. Many stories
followed the 'heroic missionary' narrative, including regeneration stories to punctuate the effectiveness of Midtown's outreach. Some years ago, Midtown realized that they had few families with adolescent children. The youth ministry needed to adapt—by learning to 'reach out' in its immediate community—or die the slow death of a four-to-five person Bible study. In the memory of one leader, this transition was momentous racially, socio-economically, and ecclesially. The group went from being primarily white, middle class, and churched to majority African-American, socio-economically mixed, and un-churched (perhaps 'less-churched' would be more accurate). The transition was made through the initiative of individual leaders 'getting connected' and involved in the local community, in offering rides to kids from around the city, and in developing the basketball team. This active, heroic, missionary activity has led to a number of 'regeneration' stories within the ministry. The team emphasized the kinds of drug problems and behavioral issues that a large number of 'outreach' students bring into the group. And they told stories about students (some of the leaders included) being freed from drug abuse, the dead-end of poverty, and a criminal record because of their conversion and encounter with Jesus in the youth group.

But as the conversation shifted away from the conventional narratives which articulate a 'vocabulary of tradition' for the youth ministry and toward what I will call (following Karl Weick) a 'vocabulary of coping'—real-time reflection on present, concrete dynamics of the ministry in light of their context and tradition—a kind of ambiguity was subtly introduced.\(^1\) The team had a strong sense of mission and expressed

\(^1\) Karl E. Weick, *Sensemaking in Organizations*, Foundations for Organizational Science (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1995), 106-32. Weick lists five different 'vocabularies' related to sensemaking in organizations. The two I found helpful in both constructing my focus group questions and discerning responses were the vocabularies of tradition and coping. For Weick, vocabularies of coping are
confidence in the importance and success of the work they were doing. However, when pressed, they had very few stories from present experiences that fit into either the heroic missionary or the regeneration narrative. Rather, they spoke about long-term and incremental change among students. One leader spoke about the value of remaining consistent while students’ lives fluctuated somewhat unpredictably. Another confessed: “we have some success stories...not as many as I’d like...” Reflection on present ministry practices and experiences was decidedly less clear, more ambiguous, and much less dramatic than both the regeneration and heroic missionary narratives would suggest.

A similar dynamic took shape amidst the children’s ministry team and other teams engaged in the practice of ‘outreach’ or ‘social engagement’ ministries. The children’s ministry team, at the time of the focus group, was celebrating the fact that twenty-one children had expressed interest in baptism as a sign of their commitment to Jesus Christ as ‘personal Lord and Savior.’ I asked for other stories of transformation and/or success with children. Most of them followed the regeneration narrative—a child from a troublesome background confesses Christ and is changed for the better. But when I asked them to talk about God’s work in their midst for the past few weeks, an ambiguity similar to the youth ministry team surfaced. When children are not being converted, their stories changed quite significantly. Their ‘vocabulary of coping’ that accounts for the way in which they make sense of present action questions the good of intimacy. How is intimacy related to present practices of ministry at Midtown?

related to theories of action (or practice as I have been using it in this work). It is the way in which communities make sense of ongoing activities. Vocabularies of tradition draw from the language of predecessors, and thus works through more stylized and rehearsed narratives.

2 Youth Ministry Team Focus Group, facilitated by the author, April 1, 2009.
For both ministry teams, the experience of ‘outreach’ is one of ambiguity in relationship to the good of intimacy. Although the regeneration narrative—which emphasizes personal piety and reinforces the ‘good’ of intimacy—is a powerful script for these teams, their practices of ministry tend to improvise well beyond its limits. In the third chapter, I thematized Midtown’s public worship as an informal affair, by which I meant to draw attention to the way in which various ‘forms’ and rituals in worship were open to improvisation any and every Sunday. I proposed that this improvisational/informal character to worship points toward two separate goods in the life of the congregation. On the one hand, it reinforces feelings of familial warmth so central to the good of intimacy. On the other hand, it creates a ‘come as you are’ ethos that does not limit, assume, or coerce persons into familial relationships, but rather creates space for diversity, ambiguity, and the messy realities of human life. In the focus group work, I discovered that the ‘come as you are’ ethos is most directly embodied in Midtown’s various ‘public’ and ‘outreach’ ministries. Moreover, the way in which groups ventured ‘off script’ when reflecting on the ambiguities of their actual practice suggested that ‘intimacy’ could not be the only framework for interpreting Midtown’s life and ministry. Rather, I found that groups willingly moved away from the intimacy scripts such that the public strand of Midtown’s lived theology can largely be described as an innovation of the evangelical strand. In this chapter, I will explore all three phases of the focus group work in order to create a ‘thick’ description of the good of hospitality as it emerges within Midtown’s practices of public presence and engagement.
Chapter Outline

I will argue that Midtown’s practices of engagement—though they are ‘scripted’ to be an ‘extension’ of the family, to engage in a kind ‘foster care’ for the community—create the possibility for active improvisation within the conventional scripts which sustain the good of intimacy. As such, Midtown’s ‘outreach’ ministries project a good different from intimacy; Midtown’s outreach for the sake of ministry-to-others and the maintenance of boundaries is improvised in response to various challenges and relationships to become engagement for the sake of ministry-with-others, which I will call ‘hospitality.’ Hospitality, of course, is a rich word in Christian tradition; one liturgically and sacramentally associated with the Eucharist. In the case of Midtown, hospitality describes an orientation, a pre-reflective good expressed in the ministries of outreach and care. As such, the account of hospitality here might seem ritually and liturgically ‘thin.’ Yet, the basic movements of hospitality are present. A host creates space for a stranger, and both host and stranger encounter something new in the process.

It is this encounter, this newness, that characterizes the public strand of Midtown’s lived theology. However, since the outcome of such hospitality has rarely matched the

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4 I am drawing upon Pat Keifert’s work on hospitality in Welcoming the Stranger for this framework. See Keifert, Welcoming the Stranger: A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism, 57-73. Keifert provides an overview here: “Provision of hospitality to the stranger is full of dynamic conflict. It requires a decentering of our self-centered lives that is most disturbing. It requires risk and wisdom, since the stranger can and does do us harm. It means that we must be prepared to have the tables turned, to discover that we are the guests in need of hospitality” (59). Alongside his theme of the ideology of intimacy, he also emphasizes the way in which hospitality requires space for the other to remain ‘other.’ As this chapter develops, I think it will be obvious how each of these elements are present in Midtown’s practice.
expectations generated by the regeneration and heroic missionary scripts, Midtown has drawn upon its pragmatic roots to create partnerships and sustain relationships that stretch the foster home to its breaking-point. Midtown’s public strand, then, stretches and innovates the evangelical strand’s commitment to intimacy. But it is rarely thematized by Midtown theologically. Drawing upon two evangelical theologians, I will close the chapter by placing Midtown’s public strand into the theological conversation and concerns raised in the previous chapter. I will demonstrate that Midtown’s public strand *bears witness* the presence and activity of God in its neighborhood.

The argument will progress in three movements. First, I will provide an overview of the focus group phase of my research. Second, I will account for all three phases of the focus group work in relationship to this implicit good of hospitality. I will explore the way in which the first set of ministry team focus groups improvised with the intimacy narratives. By calling attention to this gap between the vocabularies of tradition and coping, I want to suggest that Midtown’s hospitable practices problematize the intimacy narratives. This leads to the final two phases of focus group research, where groups—in focused conversation with each other, scripture, and their ministry contexts—generated two new theological metaphors to make sense of their ministry. Third, this chapter concludes by considering the theme of ‘witness’ for bringing theological resources to clarify Midtown’s lived public theology.
Focus Groups Overview

Since I employed a 'data saturation' strategy from the psychological phenomenology research methodology, I completed three different rounds of focus group conversations, with each round building on the other. The groups were not always the same, but they did include some overlap in terms of participation. Additionally, the questions and interpretations from each round helped inform the subsequent questions and activities in the next round. That is, the metaphors and concerns of previous focus groups were brought into new focus group conversations to involve the congregation in reading and interpreting the data. I discovered soon into the process, however, that when previous reflections, interpretations, and concerns are brought back into a community, that these reflections become a real 'text' in relationship to other texts in the community. As such, the three rounds of focus groups proved not only to be descriptive or reflective exercises, but also generative and projective. The good of hospitality, as it is presented here, does seem to be both a good embodied (albeit pre-reflectively) in Midtown’s practice and a good generated by our focus group conversations when Midtown’s practices were reflected upon in light of Scripture and experience. I will provide a brief


6 I am drawing here upon Ricoeur’s argument that the phenomenon of ‘distanciation’ that the reader/interpreter encounters in a text can also characterize past human action. Just as a text becomes ‘other’ from its author when it is put into sentences, paragraphs, and a ‘work’ to become a ‘world of the text,’ so also meaningful human action, when retold or reflected upon is ‘distanciated’ from its immediate actors and (perhaps) meaning. Action, also, can be a text. See Ricoeur, “The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text.”

7 Gilbert Bond calls this kind of ‘pre-reflective’ good embodied in practices “the implicit theological sensibilities embedded in a collective body’s acts of faithfulness” (137). See Bond, “Liturgy, Ministry, and the Stranger.”
overview of the three stages of focus group research before accounting for the good of hospitality as both embodied in practice and as also generating new narratives and theological symbols.

Ministry Team Focus Groups

As mentioned above, the first round of focus groups involved Midtown’s various ‘outreach’ ministry teams. These focus groups attempted to provide space for ministry teams to reflect theologically on their practices of ministry. Five different ministry teams participated in these focus groups. Leaders from the ‘loaves and fishes’ team (a team that serves meals to needy families in cooperation with an ecumenical organization), childcare center, children’s ministry, tutoring, and youth ministry teams were included in this round of focus groups. All five teams had one or two persons who did not regularly attend Midtown who were still included as leaders on the team; and all five teams had a good deal of history together, with most members serving together over five years. Each conversation lasted between 40-75 minutes, with the ‘loaves and fishes’ conversations the shortest because of time constraints. Furthermore, each conversation took place within the context of their ministry site so that we could process what took place during that specific day and not just their ministry ‘in general.’

I planned schedules specific for each ministry team and honed them as I learned from each group. The basic strategy for each schedule was the same. Guided by phenomenological research strategies, I structured the focus group schedule around two of Karl Weick’s ‘vocabularies’ of organizational sensemaking.8 At first blush, the

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8 That is, I drew upon Weick’s ‘vocabularies of tradition’ and ‘vocabularies of coping.’ See Weick, Sensemaking in Organizations, 106-32.
connection between phenomenological research and organizational sensemaking might not be apparent, but I saw in Weick’s identification of ‘vocabularies’ by which organizations structure, create, and reflect their experience helpful in thinking through what it is that I am attending to in the focus groups. Various kinds of phenomenological studies focus on both ‘data saturation’ as well as attentiveness to narratives.\(^9\) Data saturation mirrors the Husserlian imperative regarding ‘free imaginative variation’—that one must attend to ‘the things’ from multiple perspectives.\(^{10}\) And attentiveness to narratives points toward the growing realization in the social sciences that when persons make sense of the world, this sensemaking takes on a narrative shape.\(^{11}\) However, as I argued above, many phenomenological research methodologies seem content to stay with Husserl’s concern for the way things appear to the consciousness of the individual. Obviously, the way things appear to my consciousness is not the hope or intention of this study. My use of ethnography is intended to help attend to a cultural-linguistic-socio-theological phenomenon. This means attending to what Midtown does, but also what it says about what it does, and what it means by what it does, and what it says about what it

\(^9\) See Groenewald, “A Phenomenological Research Design Illustration.” And Spichiger, Wallhagen, and Benner, “Nursing as a Caring Practice from a Phenomenological Perspective.” Spichiger, et. al. emphasizes the way in which narratives don’t simply interpret, but also pass on wisdom in the nursing profession.

\(^{10}\) Free imaginative variation is an important step for psychological phenomenology, but not as much in nursing studies. This was not included in my research design, since it assumes knowledge generation as only part of the consciousness, rather than socially-emergent. However, I see ‘data saturation’ as functioning somewhat analogically. Free imaginative variation is an attempt to study and interpret ‘things’ from multiple angles. Reality, so to speak, is plural. Data saturation is also a strategy that affirms this, albeit in a much messier and socially-constructive way.

\(^{11}\) Ricoeur’s work in *Time and Narrative* argues this cogently and forcefully. See Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*. Weick also sees narrative as a primary genre for sensemaking as well, even though he draws upon other categories as well. See Weick, *Sensemaking in Organizations*, 106-32.
means by what it does. In short, since focus groups are linguistic-verbal events, I am
attending to a kind of social-theological-sensemaking of particular ministry phenomena.

Weick develops a number of different kinds of social-organizational
‘vocabularies’ for sensemaking.\(^\text{12}\) Given the tension that emerged within the interviews, I
focused the schedule around two vocabularies: the vocabularies of tradition and the
vocabularies of coping. Most of the schedules consisted of three parts. The first I called
the ‘introduction’ and was used to establish rapport as well as to begin identifying the
vocabularies of tradition that individuals and the group might draw upon. The questions
asked for leaders to talk about how they got involved in the ministry and why they are
there. It also asked for them to talk about the history/story of the ministry in which they
were engaged. The second section I called “theories of action/social maps.” This section
intended to orient groups toward vocabularies of coping. In this section, they were asked
to talk about successes and failures in the ministry, to evaluate their current practices and
how they saw God active and present in their ministry. The final section of the schedule I
called “Symbolic frameworks/Tradition,” and this section was designed to bring groups
back to vocabularies of tradition, to connect their ministry to the larger life of the church,
and to ask about how they see and experience God in the ministry.

\(^\text{12}\) Weick describes the “substance of sensemaking” in terms of three things: “cue + relation +
frame (107)” Different vocabularies of sensemaking, then, are created by different kinds of social
cues/experiences being related differently by and to different frames. He articulates six different kinds of
vocabularies: (1) Ideology: vocabulary of society, (2) Third-order controls: vocabularies of organization,
(3) Paradigms: vocabularies of work, (4) Theories of action: vocabularies of coping, (5) Tradition:
vocabularies of predecessors, and (6) Stories: vocabularies of sequence and experience. See Weick,
_Sensemaking in Organizations_, 111-27.
Sunday School Hour Focus Groups

The next round of focus groups took place during the Sunday School hour over a four-week period. This group was self-selected, in that persons were invited church-wide to attend if they had any interest. A consistent ‘core’ of 10-15 persons attended every week, with the group averaging twenty persons over four weeks. This set of four focus groups contained members of various ministry teams, church leadership boards, visitors to the church, old, young, family, and inside strangers. Each week provided a slightly different mix of persons, but each group represented a fairly diverse cross section of the congregation. I intended this round of focus groups to begin to provide a feedback loop for the themes, tensions, and metaphors that had emerged so far. Based on what I outlined above, I identified three different themes that I wanted to reflect back to the focus groups. However, rather than reflect these themes directly and ask for comment, I sought to initiate a theologically-constructive conversation. Since my research question is ‘what are the contours of an evangelical, public, and missional theology that are generated by a congregation as it engages in civil society,’ I wanted to intentionally situate this next round of focus groups within a generative and projective frame of reference. I wanted to reflect back to these focus groups the descriptive and generative elements of previous interviews and conversations, but to do so in a way that looked forward, to the possibility of God’s presence and work amidst the ministries, vulnerabilities, and experiences of Midtown. I attempted to do this by creating an intertextual conversation between Scriptures chosen around the themes/images identified earlier in the research project, reflection on the neighborhood and congregational life, and personal experience.
In my methodology chapter, I note the way in which Bernstein picks up on Gadamer’s concern for *phronetic* communities as communities of truth-seeking conversation. For Bernstein, these communities are located at the margins between different kinds of discourse, in which communities must make judgments between claims and experiences, relating (or perhaps translating) them into the present set of questions and concerns in order to make and test a truth claim. In Gadamer’s language, Bernstein understands phronesis as the conversational ‘play’ between different horizons of interpretation for the sake of an emergent *understanding* that is some kind of ‘fusion of horizons.’ The Sunday School Hour Focus Group, then, drew upon three different distinct horizons: Scripture, context, and experience. Drawing upon Ricoeur, I will call these ‘texts,’ since the term text emphasizes its otherness, or ‘distanciation’ from the community confronting (and being confronted) by it.

I chose three Scriptural texts as conversation partners to work along with three different reflection exercises in order to bring the ‘text’ of congregational community, world, and personal experience into *intentional* conversation with the Scriptural text and each other. Scripture passages were chosen to address areas in which previous interviews and focus groups identified ‘gaps’ in theological reflection or surprising disjunctions between theology and practice. The first week, I brought Isaiah 61 because the interviews and focus groups suggested that ‘gospel’—understood as personal conversion—and the ongoing social ministry of the church were not always clearly

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14 Ricoeur, “The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text.”

15 These ‘texts’ are most likely present in any conversation. The goal here was to make this reflection more explicit.
related. Although the ‘missions’ model provided a good deal of impetus for congregational activism, groups did not connect gospel to ‘holistic’ ministry, or Jesus to ongoing care for others apart from concern for piety. Isaiah 61, with its programmatic connection of ‘good news’ to both ‘preaching’ and ‘rebuilding,’ along with its announcement of jubilee picked up by Jesus in Luke 4 seemed to provoke or challenge some of the theological differences in previous focus groups. The second week, I brought 2 Corinthians 4 because previous groups articulated a sense of vulnerability in relationship to their ministry. Although I did not disclose the way in which previous groups and interviews articulated a feeling of vulnerability when reflecting on congregational ministry, the group unanimously grabbed onto Paul’s exhortation ‘do not lose heart’ that appears twice in the passage. This was a fruitful and constructive conversation. During the third week, I brought Psalm 104 because focus groups and interviews lacked any sense of space in relationship to God’s presence and activity. I wondered how reflecting on God’s sustaining care for the world might provoke a different sense of Midtown’s work in the neighborhood. The final week, we processed the different threads of conversation from the previous weeks.

My instructions for each Sunday School Hour focus group were simple. I told them that we were going to carefully listen to each other, to Scripture, our experiences, and our community in the hope that we might hear from and understand God more truly. I began each session with an exercise encouraging reflection on the past week and the ministry of the congregation before reading the text out loud. After a couple readings of the text, participants were instructed to find a partner in the room to discuss their reflections on the text. In their dyads, they made a note of where their attention was
drawn in the text, as well as how this attention might or might not relate to their initial reflection exercise. After the dyads had 10-15 minutes to reflect together and write their responses, we spent the final 20-30 minutes of the focus group discussing their answers and raising further questions. After doing this for the first three weeks, we spent the final week reflecting on the questions and insights gathered over the previous three weeks, with the group reflecting back to me what they considered the most urgent and insightful metaphors and questions to emerge from our focus group sessions.

Retreat Focus Groups

The last set of focus groups took place at the church retreat near the end of May, 2009. These focus groups were designed to be another generative ‘feedback loop’ from the Sunday morning groups. The retreat was an important part of the overall process because it was (perhaps) the most diverse set of people who participated in the research. About 45 people attended the retreat; the leadership considered roughly half the group ‘community’ people, meaning that they are the ‘recipients’ of Midtown’s ministries but not regular attenders. Ten of the twenty or so ‘community’ members were participants in Midtown’s student ministry. Another four ‘church’ persons at the retreat were persons with special needs who do not serve in any ministries but tend to ‘show up’ any time the church offers anything. This group was diverse on nearly every imaginable level.

Continuing the work of the previous round of focus groups, I wanted to create space for reflective and generative conversation around the Scriptural text, personal experience, and the ‘text’ of Midtown’s community. Because the Sunday morning focus

16 This was a modified form of what Church Innovations calls “Dwelling in the Word.” See “Dwelling in the Word,” http://www.churchinnovations.org/06_about/dwelling.html (accessed February 3, 2010).
groups generated really interesting questions around terms like 'gospel' and 'ministry,' 'hope' and 'ambiguity,' I wondered what would happen if we reflected together on an entire gospel rather than rhetorically-isolated texts. What might a group retelling of a gospel text help Midtown to articulate? Learning from the previous round of focus groups, I also wanted to help make the reflection more grounded in the concrete realities of Midtown's context as well as to provide a way for those less predisposed to theological discourse a way to be involved. After reading Creative Explorations,\(^\text{17}\) I settled on a three-step process for each group and chose the book of Mark for both practical and theological reasons.\(^\text{18}\)

A week before the retreat, a group of high school students who (mostly) live in the neighborhood were given disposable cameras and instructed to take pictures of where they see things like God, fear, power, and love in the neighborhood. I brought these pictures to the retreat and gave groups of them to each of the five groups along with a section of the book of Mark. The groups were instructed to begin by brainstorming their initial responses to the pictures in light of three questions:

What initially strikes you about this set of pictures? What do you see? Where might God be present? Where might God be hidden? What questions do these pictures raise for our church? How might they challenge our church? How might they encourage our church?\(^\text{19}\)

\(^{17}\) David Gauntlett, Creative Explorations: New Approaches to Identities and Audiences (New York: Routledge, 2007).

\(^{18}\) Practically, it is a short, concise, and rich narrative in which the Kingdom of God and response figure prominently. The other gospels are much longer. This way, I could give groups manageable pieces and we could still get through the entire book. Theologically, the book holds onto a number of tensions and ambiguities through its terse prose that I thought would fit well with what I was learning about the congregation.

\(^{19}\) Retreat Focus Group Instruction Sheet, created by researcher, May 22-24, 2009.
After five minutes of brainstorming, they organized the sticky-notes into clouds of ideas and discerned together the 'gist' of their brainstorming session. Then they were given the following instructions:

In light of the questions generated in the previous step, read the text out loud in your group two times. Use the following questions to guide your discussion.
What catches your attention in this passage?
How does this passage address the questions raised by the pictures? How do the pictures address this passage?
How is the good news of the kingdom of God demonstrated in this passage?  

Each of the groups narrowed down their reflection on the text and pictures to a single question: “What question does this passage raise for our church as we consider our presence as the church of Jesus Christ at this particular time in our neighborhood?”  

Once the question was formulated, the groups were given a box of Legos and modeling clay to fashion a response to the question. Later in the day, each of the groups told their part of the book of Mark by retracing their steps from the constructed response back through the text and the pictures. The group responded to this somewhat complex set of instructions well. The conversation was rich and generative.

**Problematizing Intimacy**

The first round of focus groups (ministry teams) problematized intimacy’s conventional narratives. As I stated above, this began to draw attention to the good of hospitality while also setting up the trajectory for later generative work. The ministry team focus groups ventured ‘off script’ when the conversation turned to its vocabularies of coping. That is, the present experience of ministry in and with the neighborhood did

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20 Retreat Focus Group Instruction Sheet, created by researcher, May 22-24, 2009.
21 Ibid.
not fit easily into the regeneration and heroic missionary narratives on at least three levels. (1) Apart from a few exceptional cases, there were not a lot of clear connections between heroic missionary action and conversion (regeneration stories) in Midtown’s community outreach. Rather, leaders were aware of some social-systemic challenges involved in working in a diverse urban setting. The stories of ongoing ministry involved ups and downs, starts and stops with a reliance upon networks and institutions—schools, help from Universities, partnership with other churches, etc.—for the stories of ‘transformation’ or success that they did experience. This calls into question the ‘regeneration’ account emphasizing a decisionist conversion as successful ministry; for even though ministry teams had few regeneration stories to tell from present experience, they still insisted that their ministry was ‘successful’ and ‘faithful’ to God’s leading. But it also questions the assumption of a ‘heroic’ individual who figures so prominently in the heroic missionary narrative. The weekly ‘successes’ within these ministries could not draw clear lines between the action of individuals and the changes reported.

(2) Midtown’s reliance upon a host of ‘others’ for meeting needs in the neighborhood not only complicated the ‘heroic’ understanding of ‘mission,’ but also undercut the benefactor-client understanding of missionary action. When the benefactor does not have the excess ‘riches’ to give, one wonders if ‘he’ can still be called a benefactor. Ministry leaders largely recognize this reliance upon others for staffing and funding ministries as a practical issue, thus leaving the theological resources for a benefactor-missions understanding of ‘outreach’ untouched. But as focus groups searched for theological language to make sense of current practice, the benefactor-missions model

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22 The masculine pronoun seems appropriate there.
was no longer articulated. This is closely related to the third element of experience that problematizes the intimacy narratives: (3) Midtown’s anxiety regarding finances makes ‘benevolence’ a difficult goal to maintain. Questions and anxieties regarding Midtown’s sustainability showed up in both the congregational interviews and focus groups. Can a congregation that gives like Midtown continue to make budget? Groups were firmly committed to ‘giving’ without expecting anything in return; but they also yearned for a sense of focus regarding giving, acknowledging that the present form of benevolent action might not be able to continue if the financial numbers do not improve.

These three types of experiences were difficult for the focus groups to articulate within the regeneration and heroic missionary narratives. When they could not draw upon the conventional narratives to articulate their experience, two particular kinds of metaphors emerged instead. Although they were not always articulated as direct theological reflections, I will argue that they do, in fact, create significant theological possibilities. In place of ‘regeneration,’ ministry teams used metaphors of ‘sowing’ and ‘growing.’ And instead of the ‘heroic missionary,’ teams turned to metaphors of ‘presence’ to articulate the shape and form of their ministry.

Regeneration and Sowing Seeds

As I mentioned above, at the time I conducted the Children’s ministry focus group, twenty-one children indicated interest in baptism. At one level, this opportunity fit into Midtown’s regeneration narrative. A number of children (about half considered ‘community’ kids, or those whose parents do not come to the church) “made a decision” to follow Jesus, and then indicated that they wanted to publicly identify with this decision.
through baptism. In response to this level of interest, the leaders created a baptism class; thirteen students attended over a six-week period and seven students chose to be baptized when the class concluded. The leaders celebrated this interest and energy among the students. However, they acknowledged that a large part of their ministry is not oriented toward seeking conversions and encouraging baptism. Rather, they saw their ministry as "holistic" and, when asked to share stories of recent 'successes,' they talked about people like Janet, who attends infrequently and who has an extremely unstable home life. Now in the seventh grade, she still comes to church and, despite little parental guidance, has managed to steer clear of trouble. Janet, they said,

...is a huge success story. Full circle, here we have a family whose parents have both been in and out of jail. We have called DHS [Department of Health Services] on that family twice over the years related to Janet. And she still knows where to come, that we are a good place for her. Anytime she gets back into a space where she can get here, she gets here. When things are hard at home, she knows how to walk here.

Janet is not a 'regeneration' success story. This is a success story only because relationship is sustained through nearly impossible conditions—a young person whose parents are in and out of jail, and whose apparent parental neglect and abuse has caused leaders to contact the state on Janet’s behalf. This does not have the ‘empirical’ evidence of a 'regeneration transformation.' Nor does Janet make a decision for Christ. The children’s leadership team certainly hopes for this kind of regeneration story for Janet;

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23 Children’s Ministry Team Focus Group, facilitated by author, April 22, 2009. Baptism is seen within Midtown as an act of obedience that comes after one makes a decision to follow Christ. As such, it is a public identification of one’s new identity.

24 All names are changed to protect identity.

25 Children’s Ministry Team Focus Group, facilitated by author, April 22, 2009.

26 Ibid.
but given her existing circumstances, they want her to stay in school, develop healthy relationships with adults, and stay off the streets. They celebrate her ‘success’ because they continue to be in relationship with her; and she continues to find ways to survive in difficult circumstances.

The youth ministry leadership team articulated a metaphor that could also be assumed in Janet’s story. When asked a similar question about recent or ongoing stories of success, they began by sharing conventional regeneration narratives. But when I asked for more recent stories, or to tell me about a student currently involved in the ministry, the shape of stories changed. They also spoke of ongoing relationships in difficult circumstances, about the small victories when students make good choices. And then one leader said:

I think success is not necessarily ...a huge success is when we see fruits, obviously...but I think a lot of it is the sowing. If we see them as a senior in high school that is a success whether they have made a commitment or not, that’s a success because they have come...they want to be here...I think of a student that I butted heads with the entire time that he was here but I know that today he is a Christian and following Christ...and that would have never happened if there hadn’t been a place where he could come and hear the Word and what it is...with the consistency of the staff. I don’t think that it would have ever happened in his life. 27

This is still a story that ends in some kind of regeneration narrative, but that served as a form of justification for the ongoing ‘sowing’ of the staff. It proved as a kind of cautionary tale, to not underestimate the impact of remaining consistent in student’s lives; an encouragement to take the long view.

‘Sowing’ also emerged as a metaphor for the ‘Loaves and Fishes’ team. They serve a meal every-other-month in partnership with an ecumenical agency by the same

27 Youth Ministry Team Focus Group, facilitated by author, April 1, 2009. Italics mine.
name. As such, they participate in an ongoing ministry of care for families in need. Although they have maintained relationships with some of the families who come for the meal, the dynamics of the ministry make such relationships rare. But they had a strong sense of God’s provision for ‘success’ in the ministry though ‘sowing.’ They told me that they get to ‘sow seeds’ of care to these families and trust God for the results. They emphasized that the team works with these families every other month, but God cares for them all the time.²⁸

As a metaphor for coping with the present circumstances of ministry in a diverse and (in some instances) needy urban neighborhood, *sowing* characterizes a fundamentally different anthropological and theological vision from ‘regeneration.’ As such, sowing helps to characterize the way in which the public strand problematizes the evangelical strand. For the ministry teams could not make sense of their work in terms of regeneration, but rather through an appeal to sowing. As the metaphor of sowing continued to be developed through the research process, it became a way for Midtown to talk about the missional strand. Thus, I will leave the metaphor of sowing until the next chapter.

The Heroic Missionary and Perduring Presence

The actual practices of Midtown’s ministry teams also had difficulty matching the expectations aroused by the ‘heroic missionary’ narrative. Certainly, they all had instances of individuals who boldly ‘extended’ the care of the congregation, who tirelessly ‘won over’ a person and ‘led them to Christ.’ But these stories tended to be the rehearsed ‘tradition.’ They did not have many recent instances of this sort of activism to

²⁸ Loaves and Fishes Focus Group 2, facilitated by author, March 5, 2009.
draw upon. Rather, ministry teams tended to be constituted by persons drawn from
partnerships with a variety of other institutions. The tutoring program relies upon
volunteers from a local University; the youth ministry has two or three key long-term
leaders who do not attend the church and whose ‘personal faith’ is not entirely known;
Midtown’s MOPS ministry (Mother of Preschoolers) has created a leadership team drawn
from a number of local churches; the childcare center employs a number of people not
associated with the church and even from different faith traditions. In chapter four, I
articulated the ‘heroic missionary’ narrative as one that helps to maintain the boundary
between the intimacy of the ‘family’ and the needs of the community. Practices of
benevolence combine with a vision of Christian action as fundamentally an imitation of
Christ’s model in stories about heroic individuals who are sent ‘out’ from the intimate
warmth of the family in order to extend the riches and goodwill of the family to those on
the ‘outside.’ Midtown highlights a number of ‘heroic missionaries’ and communicates
their ministries within such logic. Midtown is Christ to the neighborhood; God’s love is
alive in the neighborhood in and through Midtown. But in practice, Midtown lacks
enough ‘heroes’ to meet the needs in the community and finds, instead, a number of
‘strangers’ who make good partners for the work Midtown seeks to do. Many of these
ministries could not continue if Midtown did not have such partnerships in place.

I had an extensive conversation with one ministry leader about this phenomenon.
He described his framework for building such partnerships in this way:

The question is how much information does a person need to have to come and
work with kids. The example was whether a parent, a mom or dad, could come to
the church and work with tutoring or something. Could parents ever come and be
a part...even if they weren’t Christian, choosing not to be...but because they see
the church as something good, as a good place for their children to be. Is it okay
for me to partner with them even if I don’t know what their long-term
commitment is going to be? Is it alright for my Christian volunteers who haven't quite formulated what their role is going to be in the church, or what their commitment is to the church, who maybe do not come on Sunday but who want to help out on Wednesday? I know a lot of churches in which this does not happen...but I have to recognize the journey of the volunteer too, their own spiritual journey. And, my job is not only to mentor or foster relationship with my students, but to mentor and foster relationship with my staff. Many on my staff are on a journey, maybe just a step or two ahead of my kids; but that is battle line ministry. We are tutoring our staff and not just our kids. So we don't have any what you would call 'strict' formalized discipleship plans, but rather this whole thing is discipleship, it really is.29

This sense of reliance upon the 'other' and the 'stranger,' then, is not simply a practical decision on the part of the church to keep ministries operating, it is also reflects a commitment to Midtown's presence with the community and not just ministry to the community. This ministry leader sees his job as "fostering relationship" with both staff and student as a way of acknowledging and embracing the journey that each person in the ministry is on.30 Despite his use of the term 'journey,' I'm going to use 'perdurating presence' as a metaphor for how Midtown's practice subverts the 'heroic missionary.'31

The metaphor 'presence' emerges in other ministry team conversations as a way of characterizing the importance of their work. Rather than the regeneration and heroic missionary narratives, they see their work primarily as being 'consistent' in the

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29 Interview with a ministry leader, interviewed by author, March 10, 2009.

30 Ibid.

31 By 'presence,' I mean to emphasize a kind of sustaining, enduring relationship of being-with. I do not mean it in the metaphysical sense. But I realize that this might be problematic. Heidegger characterized the modern project as a 'metaphysics of presence'—meaning that the ways in which we treat the world as if it is all at our disposal is due to an assumption regarding being as the presence of beings for our use. In this sense, 'presence' is a metaphor for both a subject-object relationship and a substantialist ontology. Thus, for both Derrida and Marion, this 'metaphysics of presence' is a philosophical problem difficult to overcome. This is part of the context for their exchange over 'the gift' in God, the Gift, and Postmodernism. See Marion, "In the Name: How to Avoid Speaking of 'Negative Theology.'" Marion, Derrida, and Kearney, "On the Gift: A Discussion between Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion, Moderated by Richard Kearney." See also Gary Aylesworth, "Postmodernism," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2005), http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/postmodernism/ (accessed February 4, 2010); Heidegger, Being and Time: A Translation of Sein und Zeit, 49-106.
community. This is certainly a chastened sense of agency, and leaves a fairly open-ended result. One leader put it this way:

I see a need for these community kids to have significant figures in their lives that are consistent that shows them respect and love unconditionally and that we show up every Wednesday. We hope and pray they show up every Wednesday. And just to really provide that standard and example for those kids that need all supplement relationships. So many of our community kids come from diverse backgrounds and different families so there is a need for a program in their lives, not that it replace relationships in their lives but to supplement them in a positive way.\footnote{Youth Ministry Team Focus Group, facilitated by author, April 1, 2009.}

By way of a consistent, perduring \textit{presence}, they hope to “show them respect and love unconditionally.”\footnote{Ibid.} Most of the work is “showing up every Wednesday.”\footnote{Ibid.} A similar theme emerged in the Loaves and Fishes and Children’s Ministry teams as well. What is important is maintaining a particular kind of presence, one that is respectful, consistent, and which cares “holistically”—attending to educational and familial concerns.\footnote{Children’s Ministry Team Focus Group, facilitated by author, April 22, 2009.}

The metaphor of ‘perduring presence,’ then, underscores the practice of ministry as \textit{with} and \textit{among} rather than simply \textit{to}. The concern for consistent presence means that a host of strangers who share a similar concern are invited in to staff and help run programs. This means that ‘presence’ significantly limits the ‘extension’ of the intimate family, for many of the agents of this extension—those ministering \textit{with} the church—do not share in the intimate family. Ministry-with means that those who are not even necessarily ‘foster children’ or ‘natural-born children’ are providing the nurture and care of the ‘foster home.’ Midtown’s perduring presence, then, depends upon the perduring
presence of others in the community on behalf of Midtown. It is a ministry-with that is
genuinely reciprocal. Moreover, the goal of presence-with creates a more nuanced and
ambiguous set of concerns regarding ‘successful’ ministry. One can still see undertones
of the community as a ‘target’ for the benevolent presencing of the congregation, but
even in the quote above, the leader demonstrates an understanding of the way in which
students participate in this ‘presencing’—hoping that they will come consistently every
week as well.

Hospitality and the Public Strand

I ended chapter four reflecting on the way in which the good of intimacy orients
Midtown’s practice of ministry as a ‘foster home.’ This was, of course, a metaphor that
helped to integrate Midtown’s imitation anthropology, benevolent action, and pragmatic
ethos with the narratives sustaining intimacy as a strongly valued good. In this chapter, I
draw attention to the ways in which Midtown’s current practice of ministry does not fit
the conventional narratives of intimacy and thus disrupts the metaphor of ‘foster home.’
Midtown’s practice of ministry in the neighborhood, it seems, embodies a good other
than intimacy, which I call ‘hospitality.’ Stated to the extreme, this other ‘good,’ creates
an alternative interpretation of Midtown’s life and ministry; at the very least, it subverts
the good of intimacy by creating a social reality that is not easily mapped onto intimacy’s
conventional narratives. Thus, I call this good ‘hospitality’ because Midtown’s ministry
actions participate in the creation of a liminal\footnote{Liminality is a term that comes from cultural anthropology and the work of Victor Turner. Alan Roxburgh gives an introduction to the conceptuality and uses it to talk about congregational leadership. I am using liminality in this sense. See Alan J. Roxburgh, \textit{The Missionary Congregation, Leadership & Liminality}, Christian Mission and Modern Culture (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1997).} social space marked by a deep ambiguity
and an awareness of reciprocity, partnership, and even life among strangers. It is not an overstatement to suggest that such a good in practice stretches the foster home to its breaking point. Moreover, by framing the good of hospitality within the narrative strand of Midtown’s public lived theology, I want to demonstrate how Midtown’s practiced hospitality creates a chastened public life on the margins of the intimate family.\(^{37}\)

In *The Company of Strangers*, Parker Palmer gives a simple definition of a ‘public’ and ‘public life.’ For Palmer, ‘public’ denotes a vision of human unity and interdependence, it is

> the fact that [although] we are strangers to one another—and will stay strangers for the most part—we occupy a common space, share common resources, have common opportunities, and must somehow learn to live together. To acknowledge that one is a member of the public is to recognize that we are members of one another.\(^{38}\)

Our public lives, then, are our daily life with and interaction among strangers; our shared life with a host of others. Palmer sees voluntary associations (including the church) as places for training in and experience of such a public life.

He lists, among a number of others, three outcomes of public life that are also reflected in Midtown’s ministry teams.\(^{39}\) First, a public life is made possible by strangers meeting on common ground. For Midtown’s ministries, this common ground is often in and around the church building, which is most definitely a public building open to the

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\(^{37}\) I say “chastened public life,” so that I do not overstate what kind of life has emerged at the boundaries of Midtown. It is not, in the end, a neighborhood association. Moreover, it has not generated this public life intentionally as such. These relationships and dependence upon strangers has emerged mostly out of practical considerations.


\(^{39}\) Ibid., 40-46. In total, Palmer lists ten characteristics of public life. Midtown shares in many of these, but not all. But the three I mention here are substantially reflected in Midtown’s life and enough for the argument I’m making here regarding a chastened public life.
neighborhood. Throughout the day, people come and go—for the food shelf, childcare center, neighborhood meetings, basketball games in the gym, tutoring, day-camps during summer break, etc. The church functions as a kind of community center. And the use of this common space is made possible by a number of persons from the community who are not part of the intimate family sharing in the leadership of various programs and ministries. Second, Palmer states that public life is constituted when scarce resources are shared and abundance is generated, marking both the formation of a mutual life and sense of responsibility. Midtown’s perduring presence is a kind of resource to the neighborhood that is also shared by the neighborhood. Its volunteer base extends well beyond the confines of the intimate family. Third, Palmer articulates how a public life generates both a shared vision and set of projects among strangers. This is also true within Midtown’s ministry teams. Strangers participate in the ministry because a shared concern or vision is generated in relationship to a need or project in the neighborhood; and Midtown has learned to both encourage and rely upon such relationships.

Midtown’s ministry teams and engagement in the neighborhood, then, have generated a kind of public life on the margins of the intimate family. Although much of this still revolves around the church building, a common life with and among strangers is fostered and sustained that is not easily accounted for within the heroic missionary and regeneration scripts. Moreover, the image of ‘foster home’ seems to fall short when one considers the publicness of Midtown’s practiced hospitality; for the foster home relies upon intimacy as its starting point, in which the care radiates outward from the intimate center. If Midtown’s ministry teams have generated a kind of public life at the margins of
the family, then the ‘care’ or even ‘ministry’ moves in both directions at once—from the family into the neighborhood and vice versa.

However, this public life created at the margins of the intimate family is not understood by Midtown theologically, and thus it is not adequately claimed as part of Midtown’s identity, or as a possible God-given gift to Midtown. Throughout the focus groups, when ministry leaders ventured off the regeneration and heroic missionary scripts, they struggled to find adequate God-language. Rather, Midtown’s Deweyan-pragmatic heritage informed their reflection in precisely the same way it does in relationship to Midtown’s choice of music. For those in the focus groups, Midtown’s inclusion of strangers to help lead ministries and its innovation in relationship to the regeneration and heroic missionary scripts is a story of experimental responses to a changing urban environment by an aging congregation. God is only referenced when a regeneration or heroic missionary story can be told.

As the research process moved from ministry team focus groups to the Sunday School Hour groups and the retreat, groups were able to find theological language for the experience of this public life through the metaphors of sowing and perduring presence. This is due, at least in part, to the way in which the focus groups subverted the foster home boundaries by overcoming both family-community and interiority-sociality dichotomies through an open-ended discernment conversation. That is, groups were always a mix of Midtown ‘family’ and ‘community’ members. Moreover, by setting up a process by which we discerned God’s presence and activity communicatively, theological language was socially-generated and tested in a way that challenged assumptions regarding the primacy of personal interiority. Groups did engage in a lively and open
give-and-take. Midtown's Deweyan heritage came to life around theological metaphors and texts of Scripture. During the first Sunday School Hour focus group, one participant had a hard time adjusting to such an activity. He wanted someone (presumably an 'authority') to "dissect" the text and teach on it. The fact that we were reading it and allowing the words to "wash over" us was difficult in its communicative open-endedness. This was certainly a subversive practice. But Midtown was already practiced in this kind of conversation in relationship to 'practical' matters such as worship style. We simply innovated these practices of open-ended, experimental conversation for theological discernment. And by including both 'insiders' and 'outsiders' together in the same group, the 'community' members were given space amidst those in the 'family' to discuss the shape and identity of the church. The practice of these conversations—as a public conversation—challenged both levels of the inner-outer bifurcation.

The good of intimacy and the evangelical strand of Midtown's lived theology led us to the problem of sociality within the evangelical-pietist tradition. Can intimacy, with its emphasis on the personal and interior, inform any theology of the social? Is the Gospel at all related to Midtown's intimate family? If so, how can Midtown talk about that from within their sense of intimacy? Drawing upon McClendon's community of watch-care, I pointed toward a vision of the social that begins—like Midtown—with a sense of the personal and intimate. That is, practices of face-to-face relationality in which persons develop long-term and authentic relationships generate certain virtues and habits of

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40 Sunday School Hour Focus Group 1, May 3, 2009.
41 Ibid.
community life. Intimate and personal relationships within the church, then, construct a certain kind of politics of forgiveness which is distinctly Christian and thus bodies-forth the good news of reconciled relationships. Through the personal we can begin to theologize the social. But new problems were also opened up. The first is the problem of boundaries. A theology of the social from within the good of intimacy favors a cephalic interpretation of community formation and maintenance. Talk of boundaries, then, is always relative to a certain group at the 'core' or on the inside. This is the problem of Midtown's foster home. The second problem is that of eschatology and future. I raised a question regarding whether the imitation logic and the good of intimacy have robust Christian hope. Do they have a future? Midtown's public strand addresses the first of these concerns and the missional strand will address the second.

Thus, in the final section of this chapter, I will consider the problem of boundaries raised by the theological account of the community of watch-care and practiced in Midtown's outreach and our focus group exercises. Something other than watch-care is lived in this public generated at the boundaries of Midtown's intimate family. How can Midtown talk about God's presence and activity here? Can we understand Christian sociality from the margins? In addressing these questions, I will bring forward the two heuristics for public theology given in the first chapter in order to provide better context for what kind of lived public theology Midtown bodies-forth in its practiced hospitality. I will argue that Midtown's public life shares with the ecclesialists a concern for bearing witness and with the correlationalists a hope for mediating and overlapping spaces which introduces the theme of reciprocity. These two features of Midtown's lived public
theology further underscore the tension developed in the previous chapter regarding human sociality and the Gospel; an observation that will lead into chapter six.

Two Kinds of Public Theology

During the church retreat, the metaphor of perduring presence emerged from within the group working on Mark 8:14-9:1. This text begins with Jesus chastising the disciples for not understanding him—"do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear" (Mk. 8:17). Jesus then reminds the disciples of his provision of excess at the feeding of the 5000 and the feeding of the 4000 before Jesus' two-part healing of the blind man and Peter's confession of the Christ. The group picked up on Jesus' reiteration of "do you still not understand" (Mk. 8:21)? The pictures they had from the neighborhood featured a police car next to a young African American male, a bank, and the mansion of a well-known politician. They were concerned that these symbols of great institutions were damaged in the neighborhood. Banks were known to have given bad loans, government did not work for the people, and the people who were supposed to be protected by the police often viewed them with suspicion. They heard in Jesus' voice a rebuke to the church as well: 'do you still not understand?' Their initial question from the text was: "How do we get out of our 'institutional church' and take up the concerns of God, being the living, growing, loving church in our neighborhood?"  

Initially, this question looked and felt like one a technician might ask—how do we 'fix' what is wrong. Additionally, it is a common question asked within free-church and evangelical traditions. The 'institution' can be projected as the enemy of the 'real' and

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42 Retreat Focus Group 4, May 23, 2009.
'organic' church.\textsuperscript{43} But as the group began to respond to the text, context, and question with modeling clay, something happened. One person began by building a tree—wanting to emphasize the way in which the church 'lives' and 'grows.' But as she was making it, another member of the group began to focus on Jesus' object-lesson for the disciples' short-memory: that even though the disciples had forgotten to bring bread, Jesus provided more than enough in other such situations. When the group reported on their project at the retreat, they said that this text suddenly helped them to see what the disciples slowly realized as well: "we have what we need."\textsuperscript{44} They communicated this realization by building a church-building over the tree to emphasize the way in which the life of God in the congregation both draws upon and challenges, stretches, and expands Midtown's history, traditions, perspectives, and sense of place.

The way in which this group worked through the text alongside their concern for broken institutions in the neighborhood provides a picture of both Midtown's experience of liminality and the way in which it gained theological language in the focus group work. Attention to broken institutions in the neighborhood could have gone a different way. The group could have drawn from the benevolence frame for action and an imitation anthropology to assert the church as a 'model' to other social institutions. And this would have been a warranted move. Midtown has a great reputation in the community, and is perceived to be working for the people. But rather than follow this

\textsuperscript{43} This is a bit of a simplification of the position, but that is how it is often articulated. The work of Howard Snyder is informative here and influential among evangelicals. See Howard A. Snyder, \textit{Liberating the Church: The Ecology of Church & Kingdom} (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983); Howard A. Snyder, \textit{The Problem of Wine Skins: Church Structure in a Technological Age} (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1975); Howard A. Snyder and Daniel V. Runyon, \textit{Decoding the Church: Mapping the DNA of Christ's Body} (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002).

\textsuperscript{44} Retreat Focus Group 4, May 23, 2009.
trajectory, something new emerged. The words of Jesus did not stay as past model for
action, but rather addressed the group directly—‘do you still not understand?’ Initially,
this question pushed the group to another comfortable space in evangelicalism—criticism
of the ‘institutional’ church. Their conversation began addressing the various ‘gaps’ they
imagined between how a living, growing, organic church should be and how the
institutional church is. But as the conversation continued, they recognized the hopeful
tenor of the text—we may have forgotten the bread, but Jesus provides what we need.

The resulting image was one of great tensions. They wanted to emphasize the
unpredictability of the whole thing. Who knows how the tree will stretch and expand the
institution, its traditions, and practices? Who knows how the existing institution will form
and shape the way in which the tree grows? A rich ambiguity emerges here; and in this
ambiguity the clear lines from model to action are called into question by a Jesus who
directly questions the group; so also, the ‘benevolence’ model of action-toward, which
projects intentions of care and maintains some kind of clear authority structure are also
called into question. Institution, context, people, and a living God are all impinging on
the other.

The metaphor of perduring presence comes in precisely at the point where the
church hears ‘do you still not understand’ alongside the broken institutions in the
neighborhood. In this question, the group recognized that they, too, are implicated in the
brokenness of the neighborhood. Their initial response was to cover up this reality by
appealing to an ‘ideal’ or ‘organic’ church apart from the broken ‘institutional’ one. But
the words of Christ again spoke to them and encouraged them to look at the provision of
Christ in the midst of brokenness, and to begin thinking about an organic, growing church
in the midst of these ambiguous institutions. As such, perduring presence articulates the continued presence of the broken church and the broken partners in the neighborhood. The words of Christ 'you have what you need’ encouraged the group to identify their current matrices of relationships, their presence-with a host of broken others as crucial for the identity of the church. The metaphor at this stage is not completely developed, but it does contain the resources for a thicker theological account of this public opened up by Midtown’s partnership in and with the neighborhood. How do we think theologically about sociality at the margins of the community of watch-care?

**Ecclesial Public Theology: Embodied Witness**

In the first chapter, I introduced the correlationalist and ecclesialist public theologies. The ecclesialists understand public theology according to an embodied, ecclesial way of life. This framework is formed partially in reaction to social theories that assume a shared public or common space for Christian discourse beyond the practices and narratives of the church; for ecclesialists are suspicious of the way in which a mediatory public discourse places Christian claims within an indifferent or even hostile rationality. Thus, they do not have a conception of ‘the’ public, but rather numerous ‘rival’ publics each characterized by its own rationality and language. Theology, then, is public precisely as it is embodied in a Christian community of practice: the church. The inability of the church to engage in mediatory discourse means for ecclesialists that its relationship with others is understood almost entirely in terms of witness before a "watching world." Of course, this conceptuality fails to account for the fluidity of

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relationships, practices, and narratives within any society and the way in which even ecclesial identity is formed in relationship to other cultural narratives, symbols, and practices. In this, Kathryn Tanner is right that Christian identity is always “parasitic” upon other cultural forms. The ecclesialists fail to take seriously the question ‘what difference does the world make to the church?’—other than to answer it negatively.

McClendon brings these ecclesialist concerns into his mediation of the Baptist tradition by connecting “the morality of bodily creaturehood” and the “work of Christian witness.” What McClendon means to do here is to bring biological, embodied existence into his MacIntyrian-virtue-ethics framework. Here, McClendon acknowledges that the boundaries of the community of watch-care are not surrounded by a moat, for persons formed and informed by church practices do, in fact, engage in a host of other relationships and practices throughout their lives. Their bodies are not only bound to ‘the’ Body (the church). The theme of ‘witness’ helps him to connect the reality of embodied, ecclesial ‘scattering’ to the formative priority of the community of watch-care. To illustrate embodied creaturehood as Christian witness, McClendon turns to what he calls the virtue of presence, or “being there for and with one another.” Although one might be present ‘in spirit,’ presence largely denotes a body with another body, and as a virtue, it is also an acquired “strength or skill, developed by training and practice,” for presence is more than being-with, it is also being-there emotionally and attentively. And as a

46 Tanner, Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology, 111.
47 McClendon, Systematic Theology, 86.
48 To be fair, MacIntyre does attempt to address this concern from within his own framework. See MacIntyre, Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues.
49 McClendon, Systematic Theology, 115.
Christian virtue, it participates in the Gospel of the Incarnate Word.\textsuperscript{50} In learning to be present to and with one another, then, the Christian community “bear[s] one another’s burdens” (Gal. 6:2).

As noted above, presence emerged as a metaphor in Midtown’s reflection on its own ministry. In the face of challenging circumstances and ambiguity, ministry teams appealed to their presence-with and concern for the neighborhood. An ongoing, persevering, perduring presence characterized—in some focus groups at least—Midtown’s ministry in the neighborhood. Theologically, presence articulated God’s provision to the church what it needs to participate in God’s work building up the broken places. But the thinness of the theological account here is noteworthy, particularly how Midtown’s presence is disconnected from the Gospel. For building broken places is rarely connected to God’s peace or wholeness. Peace is still (within the good of intimacy) an internal reality that God grants to the heart. But given the work placed before the congregation, the hopes of the regeneration narrative can be overshadowed as the congregation seeks a faithful presence. The congregation does not seem to connect presence and witness. McClendon’s account helps with this. Midtown’s bearing-with and presence-with the neighborhood is an act of embodied witness. According to McClendon, it is no longer only a set of pragmatic experiments that stretches the foster home out into the community; but rather the lived expression of a virtue given to the community of care by the Holy Spirit and in Christ who also bears-with Midtown.

McClendon’s conceptuality, then, can help Midtown make sense of their public life, for the term ‘witness’ draws upon the description of the disciple’s ministry in Luke-

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 116.
Acts, as the narrative trajectory moves from the disciple’s witnessing Jesus’ resurrection/ascension, to the scattering of the church into Samaria (Acts 8) and among the Gentiles until Paul “bear[s] witness” in Rome (Acts 23:11). That is, the theme of ‘witness’ in Luke-Acts testifies to the bodily transgressing of ecclesial boundaries for the early church. Philip runs for his life and finds himself among the Samaritans and then later as the traveling companion of an Ethiopian official. Peter finds himself eating and drinking with Cornelius and his entire household. McClendon helpfully draws attention to the embodied nature of these accounts. ‘Witness’ is not just the transmission of a message across some or other boundary, but rather a physical and emotional presence-with. Witness can be described, then, as the bodily scattering of the church. Furthermore, witness-as-presence also identifies God’s presence-with and presence-in the bodily scattering of the church. Again, throughout Acts, these encounters are occasioned by the work of the Spirit. Peter did not set out to be a guest of Cornelius’s, nor did Philip seek out the Samaritans. Both were surprised when these persons out beyond the ‘boundary’ received the Holy Spirit. This is a kind of ‘witness’ within which Midtown lives and with which Midtown can identify. These ‘scattered’ relationships out beyond the boundaries of the intimate family are a presence-with the neighborhood that bears witness to God’s work building up the broken places.

Thus, McClendon’s ecclesialist commitment to embodied witness both shares in Midtown’s concern for presence while also providing resources for interpreting this presence as participating in the Gospel: Midtown’s embodied presence as bearing witness to God’s healing work in the neighborhood. The ecclesial account, however, is decidedly one-sided. For McClendon, it is the virtuous church that provides presence. The church is
the bear-er and so the witness-er. But implied in the metaphor of presence (though under-developed in McClendon) is the relationship between the metaphors of presence and bearing to passion. What difference does the neighborhood make to the church? And how is it that Midtown’s presence-with and bearing-witness is passionate, or suffers the presence of the other? And how does attending to these questions shape what we mean by embodied witness in the first place? This brings us back to the connection between perduing presence and brokenness in the narrative given above. Earlier in this chapter I showed how the foster home is stretched to the breaking point, and I suggested that Midtown’s practiced hospitality generates a public life at the margins of the intimate family. Clearly, McClendon and the ecclesialists provide a theological account of what Midtown brings to such a public—as a community that bears witness. But if all that happens in this public is that Midtown bears witness to a receptive audience, it can no longer be considered a public with integrity. Thus, Midtown’s account of its public witness needs more than what the ecclesialists can provide.

**Correlational Public Theology: Reciprocal Bearing-With**

The primary criticism of the ecclesialists against the correlationalists is that something of Christian identity and uniqueness is given away in the ‘mutually critical correlation.’ Midtown, in many ways, shares in this concern. And yet, the ecclesialist account of witness does not articulate Midtown’s experience at the margins. For Midtown’s perduing presence is made possible by a host of partners that arise from within the neighborhood. The ecclesialist account theologizes Midtown’s bearing and witnessing, but only accounts for the neighborhood as a receptor or obstacle to this witnessing. Midtown’s own imitation anthropology and foster home framework imagines
its witness in a way similar to the ecclesialists. But the problem of Midtown's margins persists, as it did in chapter four’s account of the community of watch-care. A cephalic conception of community negotiates and reinforces boundaries in relationship to a 'core' or an 'inside.' If Midtown’s practiced hospitality is indeed more than an extension of Midtown’s influence in witness, and if Midtown’s partnerships are to be understood theologically and not just as a practical consideration, then we must reconsider the ecclesialist conception of community and boundaries in order to think theologically about the public strand of Midtown’s lived theology.

As outlined in chapter one, correlational public theology seeks common (or perhaps overlapping) space for a mediatory discourse. Correlationalists see theology as inherently public, which means that it necessarily brings resources for and makes claims on our common life. Furthermore, correlationalists understand that Christian identity is fluid, which means that ‘other’ discourses and claims also can contribute to theology and the practice of the church. David Tracy articulates this negotiated relationship as “mutually critical correlation.” Similarly, Duncan Forrester talks about such theology as ad hoc, responsive, and responsible. The hope for such theology is a kind of generative common life, a space for human flourishing. Thus, the mediatory hope of correlationalist public theology is not that of moving between separate ‘spheres’ such as church and public, but rather the creation of new mediatory or overlapping spaces for the participation of the church in creating a more whole common life and vice versa.

Midtown also seeks a certain kind of common life for its neighborhood. This is what is at stake in its concern to ‘build up the broken places.’ Moreover, this concern has led Midtown to seek a number of partners within the neighborhood for this task. It is in
and among this public generated by seeking partners that hospitality emerges as a good. And it is in these hospitable communities on the margins of the foster home that Midtown participates in a mediatory presence, or a kind of embodied mutually-critical-participation between church and neighborhood.

Miroslav Volf offers a Christological-ecclesiological perspective that can clarify the theological issues for Midtown. In *After Our Likeness*, Volf articulates a free-church ecclesiology rooted in a non-hierarchical social metaphor for the Trinity. Although Volf is not concerned with correlationalist public theology, he does seek a vision of community that cuts between “hierarchical holism” and “ecclesial individualism.” As such, Volf argues for a communal and reciprocal understanding of personhood that both conditions and makes possible (ecclesially, that is) the evangelical, free-church insistence on the goods of “voluntarism and egalitarianism.” For Volf, a free-church ecclesiology begins with a cry of protest—’we are the church!’—against more hierarchical and/or totalizing ecclesiologies. Volf also wants to take into account recent Baptist/Anabaptist communitarian accounts of Christian identity (Yoder-Hauerwas-McClendon) by building on their critique of individualism and voluntarism without giving up on egalitarian and voluntaristic protest of the free-church: we are the church.

The course that Volf seeks to chart between two mutually-exclusive options—communitarian holism and individualism-voluntarism—corresponds to the ambiguity that Midtown’s partnership with the neighborhood creates. In charting this course, Volf

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52 Ibid.

53 Ibid., 10-11.
makes a crucial differentiation between Christ and church in order to articulate a vision of personhood and church that is thoroughly relational and reciprocal. Midtown’s public, it seems, bodies-forth this kind of reciprocity, but Midtown has not considered the possibility of Christ meeting them within this public exchange, for the cephalic vision of community places Christ *within* and can over-identify Christ-and-church.

Volf differentiates Christ and church to demonstrate the ecclesiality of the local church against ecclesiologies that would subsume the local within the universal-Catholic. Volf wants to assert the plurality of ecclesial communities without projecting this plurality onto the singular person of Christ. Thus, he argues that in the same way ‘body of Christ’ serves as a metaphor to assert the *communio* of diverse people made possible in the Spirit of Christ, so also local and universal church are “partially overlapping entities,” in which the ecclesiality of the local church is contingent upon its participation in the universal, and in which the universal-eschatological church is anticipated by local churches. Volf employs this strategy throughout his work. By affirming plurality and difference and then drawing upon the category of *communio* to articulate reciprocal indwelling, he charts a theological course between individual-community and local-universal dichotomies. The church is thus a “polycentric” community, in which identity is continually under negotiation and given to the church by the Spirit and in Christ. The ecclesiality of the church, then, is not substantively ‘located’ somewhere inside the church, but rather given in relationship with and in Christ. This is the ‘payoff’ from Volf’s appropriation of a non-hierarchical social Trinity for free-church ecclesiology:

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54 Ibid., 141.

55 Ibid., 198.
differentiation and plurality can be thematized according to the gift of communion and mutual-indwelling. This basic structure of relationship I will call reciprocity, and it opens up a whole new way for Midtown to think theologically about its public life: that its practice of ‘mutually critical participation’ is indeed theological and not simply an expedient solution to its own activistic goals.

Christ, as an ‘other’ in whom the church dwells, turns the cephalic foster home—pun intended—on its head without letting go of Midtown’s evangelical commitment to some kind of personal relationship with Christ. For in Volf’s conceptuality, freedom is constituted within reciprocal relationships, and so ‘personal’ faith is at once personal and also ecclesial. So also, the public at the boundaries of the intimate family does not need to be absorbed into the structures of intimacy and watch-care to be ‘named’ or ‘given’ by God. Difference does not need to be bridged for Christ to be present. Christ’s church is a differentiated, pluralistic, polycentric communion in the Spirit. And the public in which Midtown participates can be seen as one more set of relationships in which Christ gives ecclesiality, in which God’s new creation can be anticipated. But to make this final move regarding the new creation, we must consider the themes of eschatology and mission, which I will do in the next chapter.

We can now return to the question that began this discussion of correlational public theology. What difference does this public make for the church? How is it that Midtown’s passionate bearing witness through the good of hospitality is indeed theological and ecclesial? Or is something inherently lost as the foster home is stretched beyond recognition? If indeed Christ comes to the church as an ‘other’ and gifts the church with ecclesiality, then this public can begin to be seen as a possible gift to the
intimate family rather than an extension of the family’s witness. As such, *bearing witness* itself becomes a reciprocal metaphor and brings us back to the initial frameworks given to us by hospitality.

Pat Keifert emphasizes in *Welcoming the Stranger* how hospitality is an act that brings host and stranger into a kind of reciprocity.\(^56\) The host must receive the stranger, and yet the stranger must also receive the host. And in the exchange, the host can be surprisingly de-centered, and even subverted as host.\(^57\) Keifert draws upon numerous biblical images that play on this fluid reciprocity. In the postscript, Keifert tells a story about encountering a stranger alongside the Emmaus road encounter from the Gospel of Luke; where, on the way to Emmaus the disciples hosted a stranger and then invited him to their home. But at dinner, the stranger turns into the host and he transforms the table into the Eucharist.\(^58\) It is in this reciprocity that they finally recognize Christ in their midst. They turn to each other and ask ‘*did not our hearts burn within us?*’ The encounter with a stranger is one such event where God reveals Godself; where the ‘new’ can emerge. This human relationality or reciprocity that is revealed in hospitality is not only a theological conceptuality. In philosophy, the same phenomenon could be called “reverse-intentionality;” which is a recognition of human contingency and sociality.\(^59\)


\(^{57}\) Ibid., 59.

\(^{58}\) Ibid., 155-57.

\(^{59}\) Westphal, “Vision and Voice: Phenomenology and Theology in the Work of Jean-Luc Marion,” 117-21. See also Westphal, “The Importance of Overcoming Metaphysics for the Life of Faith.” Westphal draws upon Marion to argue that phenomenology names ‘the call’—or the human situation as the state of the call, which is “reverse intentionality.” And it is theology that seeks to identify the caller. I am working analogically here, suggesting that perhaps the ‘stranger’ in the movement of hospitality also ‘names’ the state of the call, thus opening the way for a new kind of theology that begins at the margins of Midtown, in mission, so to speak.
Heidegger, our ‘thrownness’ is considered a common starting point. The ‘namer’ is first the ‘named.’ The ‘actor’ is always first ‘acted-upon.’ Lamin Sanneh articulates something similar for missiology in his study of Scripture translation in Western Africa. Sanneh demonstrates how even ‘colonial’ mission enterprises, when they translated the message of Scripture both ‘relativized’ the ‘home church’ and ‘de-stygmatized’ the ‘native’ cultures.

What these frameworks have in common is the acknowledgement of reciprocity in an exchange between persons and groups. Subject-object, host-hosted, missionary-mission distinctions are simplifications in light of these perspectives. The foster home framework, with its extension of benevolence attempts to limit this reciprocity in the name of extending God’s love into the neighborhood. But Midtown’s experience as it engages in practices oriented toward hospitality is of a very different kind of foster home. As for those who minister together as an ‘extension’ of the home articulated in the focus groups, it is a home in which ‘natural born’ and ‘foster care’ children are much more difficult to differentiate than intimacy would suggest. And this public life that emerges at the margins of the intimate family is a space in which ‘the stranger’ becomes a transformative agent rather than ‘client.’ Like the Emmaus road encounter or Marion’s ‘reverse intentionality,’ Midtown’s act of mission ‘bites back’ on the very frameworks that initiated it; creating a liminal space at the margins of Midtown’s community. In the liminality of this hospitality, the ‘new’ just might emerge. We will pick up this theme in the next chapter.

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60 That is, after Dasein in Being and Time. See Heidegger, Being and Time: A Translation of Sein und Zeit.
In thinking again about the man who sits in the back pew stage-left, the public strand of Midtown’s lived theology identifies the importance of Midtown’s presence-with this man as a form of embodied witness. And by drawing upon Volf’s conceptuality of personhood and community-building in relationship to reciprocity, Midtown can even identify the importance of this man’s presence-in the congregation. But the question remains ‘for what’? What kind of future is there for the perduring presence-with and –in between this man and Midtown?

**Conclusion**

In Midtown’s practices of engagement, another ‘good’ seems to be at work which creates an alternate social reality than what would be expected from the good of intimacy. Midtown’s intentional engagement with the neighborhood and their ability to practically think-with and meet needs in the community has created a set of experiences that do not reinforce the ‘foster home’ arrangement, but rather generates a kind of public life on the margins of the intimate family. However, this public life at the margins is rarely accounted for theologically by Midtown. Rather, the congregation discusses its practiced hospitality in Deweyan-pragmatic terms. I end the chapter by exploring perduring-presence, one of the theologically-suggestive metaphors which emerged from the focus groups, in relationship to Midtown’s public life and both the ecclesialist and correlationalist approaches to public theology. The ecclesialists—through McClendon—offer ‘embodied witness’ as a theological theme for Midtown’s embodied ‘scattering’ out into partnerships and relationships in the community. The merits of this conceptuality are obvious. For Midtown can now identify these relationships—and their perduring presence in and with them—as bearing witness to the building work and presence of God.
in the neighborhood; that their presence-with bears bodily witness to God’s love alive in
the neighborhood. But the ecclesialist conceptuality does not quite account for the nature
of Midtown’s public life, for even this embodied witness is made possible by the
perduring presence of a host of others in partnership with Midtown. Drawing upon the
correlationalists, I argue that this public life is a kind of ‘mutually critical participation’
between Midtown and its partners in which these partners do contribute something of
value to Midtown’s life and identity, which is thematized theologically as reciprocity. I
suggest that the way in which Volf works with the themes of differentiation and
reciprocity to mediate Christ-and-church, individual-and-community could also be
fruitful in Midtown’s reflection, such that the ‘other’ might begin to be understood as
‘gift’—which is exactly the kind of relationships Midtown already embodies in its public
life.

I have articulated the theological problem posed by Midtown’s engagement in and
with civil society as one of social embodiment. That is, how can the various concrete
relationships which constitute Midtown’s life and ministry be understood theologically?
This is a question that emerges in light of the focus group work recorded in this chapter—
for in the research it became clear that Midtown works with a kind of practical atheism
when it comes to its public life. We first addressed this problem in the evangelical strand
by demonstrating how intimacy generates the virtues necessary for the politics of
forgiveness and a community of watch-care. Such a community embodies the good news
of reconciliation and forgiveness. But it is constituted through the reinforcement of
boundaries, and so not fully able to articulate Midtown’s public sociality, which we
accounted for in this chapter. In the next chapter, I will draw upon the metaphor of
sowing in order to articulate the missional strand of Midtown’s embodied sociality and to bring the public and evangelical strands into a more coherent relationship.
CHAPTER 6
THE MISSIONAL STRAND

In the hands of God we will fall
Rest for the restless, and the weary
Hope for the sinner
In the hands of God we stand tall
Hands that are mighty, to deliver
Giving us freedom

Introduction

The ethnographic phenomenological research method that shaped this study opened up a particular way of attending to the lived theology of Midtown Baptist Church. Throughout this study, I sought to combine the research practices of ethnography with a phenomenological posture in the attempt to bring the lived theology of an evangelical congregation into two different kinds of discourse. First, I drew upon phenomenology in designing a research process with the hope of bringing Midtown’s lived theology into conversation so that it could be articulated within the community. During the research project, my phenomenological and theological prejudices oriented the process toward open-ended and discerning conversations that generated reflection on Midtown’s practices of ministry and community engagement. That is, I learned from phenomenology the social event-fullness of knowing, that attending and listening with care to an other can be revelatory, can be a gift. And I brought to Midtown the intention to do the work of

theology in a way that takes the congregation seriously and works with an alternative framework for evangelical theology than revelational positivism or an interior retreat to revelatory experience. Thus, I first brought Midtown’s lived public theology to the discourse of open-ended, public conversation. As such, Midtown’s lived theology in its evangelical, public, and missional narrative strands first emerged within and was brought to articulation in conversation throughout the church. The method, then, bodied-forth in its practices of conversation and discernment the kind of theological concerns found throughout these pages.

The research practices of ethnography informed the second way in which I seek to bring Midtown’s lived theology to discourse. The work of the ethnographer is not just in participant-observation, but also in writing an essay. And it is in the essay—the interpretation of the interpretation—that a mediatory discourse, or perhaps an overlapping space, is both found and created between the community being studied and other such communities. The work in these pages is the fruit of both kinds of discourse.

However, I do not address these ethnographic-phenomenological concerns in the second chapter until after a lengthy theological argument within which I articulate the theological commitments embedded in the project; for this is not primarily a phenomenology or an ethnography but rather a work of theology. I argue for the basic incarnational shape of theology rooted in an understanding of the missio Dei—that the life of Father, Son, and Spirit has been poured out for the sake of the world in Jesus life, death, and resurrection. The lasting implication of this for theology is that the nuances and narratives ‘on the ground’ amidst human communities, actions, and relationships matters theologically; we understand God more truly in attending to the world in which
God has poured out the Holy Spirit, and by discerning amidst people whose life is shaped by the narrative of Jesus’ cross and resurrection.

These three methodological lenses—theological, ethnographic, and phenomenological—have been focused through the three narrative strands considered in the research question, such that this account of the theology generated by Midtown as it engages with civil society is told as three (up to this point, two) different theological narratives, each with their own moments of disclosure, theological partners, and unanswered questions. But these three narrative strands tell different parts of the same theological journey reflecting on the practices of the same congregation. In order to tell the story of the research, the strands have been somewhat artificially separated, the goal of this chapter, then, is to weave them back together in order to account for the lived theology generated by an evangelical congregation reflecting on God’s presence and activity in their practices of ministry and outreach.

However, I have not yet accounted for the missional strand for three reasons. First, as I will demonstrate in this chapter, the missional strand generated the least data. The theological problems and unanswered questions left from the evangelical and public strands point toward Midtown’s need for more direct reflection on God’s presence, activity, and passivity in and with the world and not only the church and individual. The focus groups opened up a possible metaphor that could bear such fruit for Midtown, but it is emergent and so-far undeveloped. In this chapter, I will both describe the emergence of this metaphor and point toward theological resources that could begin to do this work for Midtown. Second, this research project engages Midtown with a strong missional prejudice. The attentiveness to a single congregation as a theological partner emerges
from an understanding that God has claimed and identified with worldly, embodied, creaturely existence as demonstrated decisively in the person of Jesus Christ, his death on the cross, and his bodily resurrection from the dead. The 'scandal' of the Gospel is this cross, and the resurrection the Gospel's 'foolish' hope (1 Cor. 1:23). Since a missional theology has initially framed the research question and the choice of methodology, then, it is important to return to this frame in light of the data that has been reported. Organizationally, it makes sense to return to the missional strand at the end in light of the wealth of data that has emerged regarding Midtown's evangelical and public strands. And finally, the missional strand has been saved for the last chapter because I want to suggest that some of the missional theological resources—such as a relational-vocational anthropology and a more robust eschatology—can help Midtown to make sense of its deep (and sometimes crippling) ambiguity it finds between its evangelical and public strands. That is, the under-developed missional strand just might generate the spiritual-theological narrative from which Midtown can journey into God's future in faith, hope, and love.

Thus, there are two parts to this chapter. First, I will trace the previous two narrative strands, noting the ambiguities and questions opened up along the way in order to 'set the stage' for the missional strand. Second, I will account for the missional strand through the metaphor of sowing and the subsequent anthropological-eschatological possibilities that the metaphor creates for Midtown.

**The Evangelical and Public Strands**

Chapter three provided an initial thick description of Midtown in its practices of public worship in order to draw attention to two contradictory interpretations of
Midtown’s informality. For in public worship, Midtown relies upon colloquial language and extemporaneous, improvisational speech performances as a way of communicating warmth, closeness, authenticity, and familial intimacy. I argued that this expression of informality draws attention to the good of intimacy in Midtown’s understanding of relationality with both God and one another. But Midtown’s informality is also expressed as a kind of openness to chaos, strangers, and outbursts within the service. Interruptions in the ‘flow’ of the service by those with special needs or from a hard life on the streets are not unexpected and rarely cause consternation from others. That is, Midtown’s informality also unveils a ‘come as you are’ ethos, a kind of practiced hospitality that I call the good of hospitality and address in chapter five.

I also argue in chapter three that Midtown’s practices of public worship disclose three different theories of practice that shape Midtown’s sense of agency and theology. Two of these theories of practice—benevolence and imitation anthropology—are linked directly to Midtown’s evangelical-pietist heritage and so inform in a more-or-less conscious way Midtown’s sense of ecclesiality and mission/outreach. The other theory of practice is a Deweyan strand of American pragmatism, and although it is accounted for by Midtown through an appeal to its Baptist roots (as congregationalism), it functions in the congregation non-theologically as a common-sense and experimental approach to shared problems.

Chapter four, then, describes the good of intimacy as it emerges within the first round of interviews and is reflected in the ‘Reading Team’ report generated by the interviews. For Midtown, the good of intimacy is the horizon that interprets and directs a largely sentimentalized and romantic notion of relationality within the congregation.
Interpersonal relationships are described with the metaphor of family, and one’s relationship with God is described in terms of direct, intimate interiority. However, since this is a project that seeks to bring to discourse Midtown’s lived theology as it engages civil society, focus group work found two conventional narratives (or maybe social scripts) that sustain and reinforce the good of intimacy in the midst of Midtown’s activistic engagement with the community.

The first I call the ‘regeneration narrative,’ which is part of Midtown’s Pietist heritage that prioritizes spiritual interiority over external relationships or sociality as such. That is, the regeneration narrative constitutes an inner-outer bifurcation within the individual and also—by extension—the Christian community. God’s presence and work is in the heart and is thus hidden from view. So also, Christian nurture and identity is within the intimate family and not in the world. The second narrative is the ‘heroic missionary,’ which functions to manage the boundary between the intimate family and outer world, to serve as both an extension of the community and of the individual regenerate ‘soul’ who gives to support the work of the missionary. Both of these narratives have strong connections to Midtown’s Pietist tradition and the benevolence-missions posture of evangelicalism. They come together along with imitation anthropology in the metaphor of the foster home. Midtown is highly engaged in providing care to the neighborhood, but the good of intimacy means that such care is always an extension of the intimate family. As such, Christ (as the ‘head’ of the family) works from within the individual soul outward so as to extend the love and care of the family. Midtown performs a great service to its neighborhood, but it also tightly manages its familial boundaries.
I concluded this chapter by connecting intimacy with evangelicalism, stating that the evangelical strand of Midtown’s lived theology can be articulated through this discussion of intimacy, for evangelicalism also prioritizes the regeneration of the soul and the benevolent activism of the church. Turning to James McClendon, our paradigmatic Baptist-evangelical theologian, I suggest that the primary problem facing the evangelical strand is that of a theology of social-embodiment. For if the Gospel is only in relationship to interiority and regeneration stories, how is family intimacy to be understood theologically? How is God’s good news connected to social embodiment in the community and the good of intimacy in the foster home? In answer to this question, I draw upon McClendon’s account of the ‘community of watch-care’ in order to articulate how intimacy might generate virtues for the ‘politics of forgiveness’ that constitute such a Christian sociality and a more social-systemic understanding of the Gospel.

But watch-care also creates two new problems for the evangelical strand. First, working from intimacy to a socially-embodied understanding of the Gospel maintains focus on the boundaries of the community. Although McClendon acknowledges that communities—especially intimate ones—can become totalizing and that practices of formation can be perverted, I argue that his community of watch-care (and thus also the primacy of the good of intimacy for understanding Christian sociality/relationality) fails to correct for this by postulating a politics of forgiveness. For such a politics is made possible by the transgression of boundaries, which are always relative to a ‘core’ and a ‘margin.’ The second problem is that this community of watch-care continues to embody the inner-outer, imitation anthropology so prevalent in evangelicalism, and thus fails to
articulate a robust sense of hope; for Christian action is always predicated on what came before rather than an anticipation of the new.

This leads to the fifth chapter, where the focus group data suggests another good in tension with intimacy. I note the ways in which ministry team members venture 'off script' from the regeneration and heroic missionary narratives whenever they have to make sense of their current practices of ministry. Ministry teams often engage in long-term, consistent, and holistic care for a host of persons within the neighborhood without a clear-cut regeneration story to accent God’s presence or activity. And ministry teams are staffed with a number of neighborhood partners who are not part of the intimate family, nor are they heroic missionaries. When asked to give account of these phenomena, groups struggled to find theological language and initially accounted for them in terms of pragmatic experimentation. I suggest, then, that these practices of ministry create a social reality that is not easily mapped onto the expectations and demands of intimacy. Thus, these practices oriented by the good I call hospitality create a liminal space, a public on the margins of the intimate family that is not yet accounted for theologically by Midtown.

The good of hospitality, then, generates the data for Midtown’s public strand of lived theology. If intimacy helped to articulate a socially-embodied theology as a community of watch-care, then hospitality pushes us to approach the issue of sociality from the margins of ecclesial boundaries. Or, rather, if intimacy generates theological reflection on the gathered community, hospitality generates reflection on the scattered community. How is it that Midtown can articulate God’s presence and activity in this public created at the margins of the intimate family?
In response to this set of concerns, I place Midtown’s generative metaphor of perduring presence into the frameworks of both the ecclesialist and correlationalist approaches to public theology. From the ecclesialists, I show how Midtown’s practice of perduring presence *bears witness*—both bears-with the concerns and needs of the neighborhood and witnesses-to God’s work ‘building up the broken places’ in the neighborhood. But the ecclesialist perspective does not completely account for Midtown’s experience. For unlike the ecclesialists, Midtown’s perduring presence is not fully its own. Rather, its very presence is made possible by various neighborhood partners who help lead ministries, and this public at the margins of the intimate family is not simply ‘watching’ Midtown’s witness, but rather a participant-with Midtown. The correlational conceptuality of ‘mutually-critical-correlation’ helps to describe what Midtown embodies at these margins—as an overlapping and mediatory space. I end the chapter by suggesting—through Miroslav Volf—that the theme of *reciprocity* as imaged in the Trinity (mutual-indwelling) and through rough correspondence in the differentiation between Christ and the church, or the local congregation and the universal church (in Volf’s conceptuality, anyway) can help Midtown to identify difference and otherness as ‘gift’ and thus as given by God.

Thus, by way of summary, the over-arching story between these two strands has been the problem disclosed by the tension between intimacy as a strongly valued good and the subsequent interiority that it sustains and the pragmatic, practiced hospitality of the congregation. Since God’s presence and activity is imagined from the inner to the outer, Midtown’s framework for understanding its social outreach also functioned that way through the creation of the foster home. However, various challenges within the
neighborhood moved Midtown to innovate with the foster home such that it is no longer recognizable. But Midtown’s theological frameworks have not kept up. This gap between practiced hospitality and the intimate family, then is a ‘God-gap’ such that Midtown’s practiced hospitality embraces a kind of practical atheism. I have been calling the theological problem given in this tension a theology of social embodiment and have been bringing Midtown’s reflections, narratives, and history forward and into conversation with other theological resources in order to both clarify this problem and point toward how Midtown is, as a gift of the Spirit, bodying-forth an innovative response to this tension and perhaps forming community from both the inside-out and outside-in.

Missional Strand

The third strand for McClendon’s theology is the “God-given road or journey or way.”

In one of the places where he develops this strand, he points to the significance of road or way (hodos) for the gospel of Mark. The prophetic announcement at the front sets the stage: “I am sending my herald ahead of you; he will prepare your way (hodos).” Throughout the gospel, Jesus and the disciples are on the road (hodos) that leads, narratively, from Galilee to Jerusalem and then back again to Galilee. Throughout, it is Jesus who goes ahead on the way. And frequently, the disciples still do not understand.

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4 Mark 16:7-8: The angel says to the women “Go, tell his disciples and Peter he is going ahead of you to Galilee…and they fled…and said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” (NRSV)

5 Mark 10:38; 16:8

6 Mark 8:17
Sometimes, they are afraid. For McClendon, the Christian life is one on the way given by God in Christ. As such, Christian identity is formed in transit, along the way of Christ with fellow-travelers given in the community of watch-care who embody witness to the world. As a metaphor, ‘way’ or ‘road’ captures Midtown’s present state of liminality regarding the tension between the goods of intimacy and practiced hospitality, between the intimate family and its public life. It is certainly a congregation in transit, in which its two conventional narratives for interpreting and understanding relationality—relationship with God and one another—no longer correspond with Midtown’s embodied social relationships within and outside the congregation.

While the evangelical and public strands were able to attend theologically to both sides of the spectrum by accounting theologically for Midtown’s embodied sociality as an intimate family and a public on the margins of the intimate family, neither could make sense of the other. That is, the intimate family—as developed by McClendon and also imagined in the intimacy narratives—depends upon a cephalic and bounded sense of congregational identity whereas Midtown’s public life embodies reciprocity and mutuality in its perduring presence with various partners in the neighborhood. This is why, although McClendon’s ‘community of watch-care’ rightly articulated Midtown’s sense of intimacy in the family, his ‘embodied witness’ did not adequately account for the mutually-critical-participation of Midtown’s public life, the way in which practiced hospitality generates the possibility of the stranger as gift.

‘Way’ provides a helpful metaphor for introducing the missional strand because it emphasizes both the liminality and fluidity of Midtown’s experience between the

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7 Mark 10:38; 16:8
evangelical and public strand while also suggesting that this liminality is, in fact, God-given. Moreover, 'way' recontextualizes the theological conversation thus far within (potentially) an eschatological frame. It causes one to ask 'on the way to what'? Within such a metaphor, the journeying community of care—like the disciples on the road—follow in the path of Jesus to a future that he will show them. But McClendon’s use of way, as one with the community of care and bearing witness to the world provides a mobile metaphor while still reinforcing the static sense of boundaries problematized by Midtown’s public life. The metaphor of ‘way’ still tends to locate Christ within the boundaries of the community of care, while the world maintains its position as a target for the witness of the community on the way.

What is still needed for a theology of Midtown’s embodied sociality is a way of articulating how it is that God calls and meets Midtown out on the public byways and highways of its neighborhood. The problem of Midtown’s reciprocal perduring presence is that if these partnerships do not name some kind of loss of Christian identity for Midtown, how are they to be understood in relationship to God? As I mentioned in the first two chapters, missio Dei is a post-colonial theology of mission that de-centers the church as a site and primary agent in mission. When this perspective is brought into conversation with the kind of social Trinity argued for in this project, ‘mission’ becomes a way of accounting for God’s activity and passivity—God’s very life—rather than an activity of the church. The missional strand, then, helps us to place Midtown’s evangelical and public strands into God’s creative, redemptive, and reconciling mission in the world. One of the primary implications of considering missio Dei in relationship to Midtown’s embodied sociality, then, is that Midtown’s identity becomes contingent upon
this God who has poured out God’s life into the world rather than only the church. As such, boundaries formed in relationship to a ‘core’ become unnecessary, for even the resurrected Christ is an ‘other’ out in front of the church, awaiting her back in Galilee (Mk. 16:7).

Midtown did not generate as much data regarding the missional strand as the other two. Most of Midtown’s reflection moved toward either the evangelical or public interpretations of its life and ministry. However, the entire project—at one level—is a project in missional theology, for the movement in the focus groups toward making sense of Midtown’s practices of engaging civil society are attempts to articulate Christian identity in relationship to the world and God’s commitment to it. But the congregation had difficulty articulating this directly. However, with the emergent-missional metaphor of ‘sowing’ the key narratives of the evangelical strand—the regeneration and heroic missionary scripts—were subverted in a way that affirms Midtown’s present sense of ambiguity regarding the public strand. In what follows, I will articulate the metaphor of sowing by tracing the three missional moves made possible by the sowing metaphor in relationship to the evangelical/intimacy strand (church), the public strand (person), and the way in which the missional strand helps Midtown to embrace its present ambiguity (world). I will close this section by considering the limitations of the sowing metaphor, arguing that it tends to frame a story of loss because it fails to articulate the concrete Christian hope.

Church: From Benefactor to Accomplice

The heroic missionary script is an important part of Midtown’s evangelical strand, for it manages the boundaries of the intimate family while also mobilizing the benevolent
activism that characterizes Midtown’s engagement in the neighborhood. Although the public strand articulates a different set of relationships than expected by the heroic missionary script and the benevolence theory of action, it fails to challenge these aspects of the evangelical strand. Rather, the public and evangelical strands tend to sit in a tenuous relationship.

As the sowing metaphor emerged, however, it tended to subvert the benevolence theory of practice in relationship to the church, it performed the missional task of placing congregational identity in relationship to God’s work in the world. This can be seen through a focus group reflection on the parable of the sower at the church retreat. The model that the group constructed became a visual demonstration of Midtown’s practiced participation in the *missio Dei* even if they lacked the language, for this particular interpretation of the parable emerged from ‘strangers’ and ‘community’ persons insisting upon the integrity of the neighborhood as the group discussed it. That is, the Spirit moved the church through those that came from the outside.

At the church retreat, one of the groups worked with Mark 4:1-34 in light of a number of pictures from the neighborhood under the captions ‘love’ and ‘grace.’ Under ‘love,’ there were pictures of an adult bookstore alongside the church, a shopping area, and a picture of an advertisement for a local Christian radio station. Under ‘grace,’ the group had pictures of a flowering tree in full bloom, a home, an American flag, and a playground. The initial round of brainstorming and discussion on the pictures created the following questions:

- How do we work with the love that is already present in the neighborhood?
- How do we help without an ulterior motive?
- Does our church identify with the neighborhood, or are we trying to change its identity?
Why are we not as diverse as our community? It is interesting that the above questions focused so clearly on the identity and resources of the neighborhood rather than the church. Four members of this group were considered ‘community’ members. In reflecting on the group experience later in the day, participants remarked that the ‘community’ members challenged the initial interpretation of the parable. The community members kept the first question before the group, asking “how is it that the neighborhood has integrity on its own, apart from the church?”

After bringing this set of concerns into conversation with the parable of the sower in Mark 4, the group created a remarkable response with modeling clay. They made a planter full of seeds tipped over on its side. The seeds from the tipped-over planter rolled away in an expanding band across the table and down onto the floor. All the pictures taken in the neighborhood—the home, the playground, the flag, the adult bookstore, the church—were within reach of the band of seeds. And each picture featured a red heart, signaling the possibility that a seed might have found a place to grow. The group used this response to marginalize the sense of agency that the church has, emphasizing God’s activity in scattering seed and the fact that we just do not know how it is that God’s love might be present in our neighborhood. But the response also characterized the church as a place of growth, and as having a role to play in the ever-expanding ‘overflow’ of God’s love in the neighborhood: the picture of the church had a large heart on it, and green sprouts showed that the seeds had taken root. This response to the parable in light of their

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8 Retreat Focus Group 2, May 23, 2009.

9 To be clear, they did not call those four the ‘community’ members, but they did name those persons as the ones who pushed the conversation in a new direction.

10 Retreat Focus Group 2, May 23, 2009.
reflection on Midtown’s neighborhood demonstrates an emergent missional theology within Midtown. The benevolent activism of the church is subverted by its participation in the overflow of these seeds sown by God. For ‘The Sower’ scatters an abundance of seeds throughout the neighborhood. Midtown is simply a grateful participant, whose relationship with other such ‘sites’ of growth remains ambiguous and tenuous. The way in which the seeds spilled out beyond the pictures from the neighborhood and down to the floor can relate analogically to theological articulations of the missio Dei. For missio Dei functions similarly (although much more directly as a theological concept) by relegating the ‘God-church’ relationship to ‘God-world.’ Mission, then, becomes God’s Triune life for the sake of the world, a life in which the church also lives. The church, then, participates in the mission of God but it does not initiate it or create it. As a recipient of the ‘seeds’ within a global and local ‘harvest,’ the parable demonstrates Midtown’s life as caught up in something much bigger, as participation in God’s ‘sowing,’ and thus serves as a theological alternative to benevolent activism.

Person: From Imitation to Vocation

Second, although the public strand—with its focus on embodied, reciprocal witness—articulated a challenge to the more ‘buffered’ sense of self and community in the evangelical strand, it struggled to place reciprocal personhood in relationship to

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11 In some expressions, missio Dei marginalized the church so that the God-world relationship became the only one of interest. But the work of Lesslie Newbigin, the Gospel and Our Culture Network, and now the Missional Church conversation have worked to rectify this. See Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*. See also Guder, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*; Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit*.

12 In an essay with some of my colleagues, we connect missio Dei with the metaphor of participation, emphasizing mission as congregational participation in the Triune life of God in and for the world. See Hagley et al., “Toward a Missional Theology of Participation: Ecumenical Contributions to Reflections on Trinity, Mission, and Church.”
God's presence and agency out ahead of the church. That is, reciprocal personhood helped to thematize theologically Midtown's experience of the neighborhood's perduring presence along with its own, but it did not directly implicate God in this reciprocity. The reason for this is that the public strand does not directly address the imitation anthropology so critical to a cephalic, buffered view of community. The sowing metaphor, however, begins to do this by both problematizing the regeneration script and the imitation anthropology. I suggest that the subversion of the imitation anthropology moves toward a relational-vocational anthropology. The person, then, is understood theologically in relationship to participation in God's call. I will end this section by pointing toward an alternative anthropology that understands human personhood in these terms rather than imitation.

**Sowing and Regeneration**

The metaphor of sowing often emerged in focus groups as a way of de-centering conversion as a goal in ministry. Rather than tell stories about a 'decision' someone made for Christ, sowing places the practices of ministry against the horizon of God's ongoing care for a person. Leaders certainly hope that persons will someday make a decision regarding Christ, but that is assumed to be in God's hands, part of some future hope or even trust on the part of the ministry team. That is, sowing rarely needs—nor even expects—empirical evidence of transformation and change to identify the work of God. In a sense, God's regenerative work is identified as a hope while the team focuses on initial, concrete concerns around a person's home life, education, and choices.

The first Sunday School hour focus group picked up on this set of concerns in relationship to Isaiah 61. The focus group took place right after a Lenten congregational
study of global poverty, so the question of ‘the good news to the poor’ was a focused
concern for the congregation. One of the conversation dyads read the text this way:

I read the first paragraph ‘bind up the broken hearted’ and saw it as Christ coming
to bring salvation. And when it switched to ‘they’ ‘instead of a spirit of despair’ I
saw this as followers of Christ. And they are to be responsible to go out into the
world and rebuild the broken places. It is, in a sense, Jesus’ commission to his
followers. And in the end, it goes back to ‘I’ this is Jesus talking again, who is
‘clothed in righteousness’ who is ‘the bridegroom’ and who will plant and grow
‘seeds’ to bring it to completion. But it is an invitation to his followers, to go out
and continue the work that Jesus has started.\textsuperscript{13}

This reading proved to be a moment of cohesion and clarity for the group. The comment
clearly articulated something that brought a number of concerns together for many. But
what is striking about it in relationship to the concerns of the regeneration script is the
way in which salvation is \textit{Christ’s} mysterious work. There is no heroic figure imitating
Christ in this text. Nor does Christ’s “invitation” into the “work he started” bear any of
the usual marks of ministry practices for the sake of regeneration.\textsuperscript{14} The ‘they’ in the
text—interpreted here as the church—are to “rebuild the broken places.”\textsuperscript{15} The focus
group assured me that \textit{this} is exactly the kind of work Midtown does. Christ does “plant
and grow seeds,” but it is Christ also who will “bring them to completion.”\textsuperscript{16} It is the
work of Christ that marks both the beginning and the end of “they” who are “invited” into
Christ’s work.\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Sowing}, as a metaphor, begins to show cracks in the logic of imitation
and personal decision, while simultaneously reinforcing the organic sensibilities of

\textsuperscript{13} Sunday School Hour Focus Group 1, facilitated by the author, May 3, 2009.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
regeneration—that 'growth' is a kind of mysterious gift. So also, sowing depends upon Christ for a future. The end of any rebuilding project depends upon the hope of Christ, who bears the "garments of salvation."\(^{18}\)

In the same way that sowing de-centers the 'moment of decision' in the regeneration narrative, it also subverts the inner-outer bifurcation so essential to Midtown's vision of regeneration. As evidenced in the quote above, the world becomes something other than a target for the overflow of inner riches. In this framework, the church is still actively rebuilding, but this invitation to rebuild comes from a Christ who has started something and who must be trusted to bring it to completion. The inner-outer bifurcation tends to conflate Christ and Christian through the logic of imitation. But when Christ is sowing the seeds and must be trusted to "bring them to completion," the possibility that Christ is other, and that even the world might teach the Christian something, is opened up.\(^{19}\) This was reflected in a few other places in this same conversation. At one point, a member of the group pushed back on the uni-directional language of the church in relationship to the community. Arguing that 'good news' is something that takes place amidst the poor, he said:

We saw in the reading that regardless of context, rich or poor...we have something to offer. We ask the question 'what can we do for the [neighborhood]'...but the question must also be asked 'what can we learn from them?' What could we learn from them? We all have lessons to learn.\(^{20}\)

So also, another said later in the conversation:

\(^{18}\) Ibid.

\(^{19}\) Ibid.

\(^{20}\) Ibid.
...I think this points to what was said earlier, you know, about 'what is it in our neighborhood, how often do we miss Jesus in people around us because we make judgments or put stereotypes there, or because we miss their heart and miss who they are in Christ...’ What are we missing here? What can we receive from people if we can be open to hearing, what is someone saying?\textsuperscript{21}

These two examples do not show a fully-articulated vision of how one meets Christ out in the world, but it does show the possibility of encountering Christ in relationship with others and it deepens the theme of reciprocity developed in the public strand. At the very least, we can say that the way in which sowing de-centers the emphasis on personal decision while also subverting the inner-outer bifurcation of regeneration articulates the possibility for theological reflection not oriented by the imitation logic. But what kind of anthropology does the metaphor of sowing make possible? How might reciprocity be brought to bear on the imitation anthropology?

**Sowing and Anthropology**

I argued in chapters three and four that Midtown’s practices of intimacy and outreach are funded by two interrelated theological constructs: an imitation anthropology and benevolence framework for missions. I argued that the imitation anthropology shares in many of the features of a substantialist view of the \textit{imago Dei}. As I demonstrated earlier, this is not an uncommon position among evangelical theologians. It is not surprising to see it emerge within an evangelical congregation. This substantialist anthropology, however, understands both the human condition and Christology in terms of \textit{loss}. The memory of Eden underscores the ‘gap’ that exists between what humanity was and what it now is. A similar gap exists between Christ’s moral perfection and the present ambiguity of the church. The practices sustained by such a vision, then, are ones

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
of replication and bridging. The preaching moment bridges the model in the text and the present circumstance. So also, the radiating benevolence of the congregation functions similarly. The church literally has recovered something that the world does not. The church functions as a model for the world.

But, as the metaphor of sowing makes plain, such an anthropology and its subsequent shaping of Christology is not sufficient for Midtown’s experiences of reciprocity in its encounter with its neighbors. When arrows cannot easily be drawn from Jesus through the intimate family and into the world, Midtown found other ways of experiencing and accounting for God’s work; and they did this by sketching an alternative anthropology with implications for Christology and mission. That is, the sowing metaphor articulates how it is that Christ is in, among, and in front of the present struggle, ambiguity, or act of faithful ministry.

At first blush, this might look like a shift in Christology. At one level it is. But the Christological shift is due to an altered anthropology. Rather than understand Christian action in terms of replication (and thus reinforcing a sense of human action as ‘extending’ oneself onto a static ‘other’), sowing places action within a matrix of fluid and ongoing relationships. From Isaiah 61, the group affirmed their work of ministry within a context of Christ’s ongoing ministry. There were no ‘gaps’ being bridged from a model or lost innocence. Furthermore, ‘Christ’ functioned in-between the church and its ministry in the neighborhood. The church was ‘rebuilding the broken places,’ but this was in response to Christ already ‘out there’ declaring ‘good news to the poor.’ As we will see below, for the group working with 2 Corinthians 4, the phrases ‘treasure in clay jars’ and ‘Christ revealed in our mortal bodies’ helped the group to articulate the materiality of their work
in theological terms. They could say that this messy work with other human beings that rarely creates clear principles or applications from the Scriptural model is indeed where Christ is being revealed.

An Alternative Anthropology

This points toward a relational and vocational anthropology rooted in the imago Dei as the imago Christi. Relational understandings of the imago Dei are common in Christian theology. Humanity, in this telling, is irreducibly relational and social. The Fall, then, becomes a story of disordered relationships rather than loss of innate capacity. James McClendon, on the basis of a relational anthropology, argues against the doctrine of original sin through an appeal to both theological traditions and congregational practice. For McClendon, even sin must be “framed by the new that comes in Christ.” In this, McClendon articulates a doctrine of sin that does not deny Christ the fullness of humanity—for if Christ is “the true humanity promised in creation,” then the Fall is not something located in humanity as such, but rather “whatever denied, whatever misses the way of faithfulness to God’s rule embodied in Jesus Christ.” In his appeal to congregational practice, McClendon sees another view of sin already at work in free-church practices of baptism. The denial of infant baptism embodies a different

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22 For a concise overview of what I am referring to, see Grenz, “Jesus as the Imago Dei: Image-of-God Christology and the Non-Linearity of Theology.” In a later work, Grenz turned this essay into a book. See Grenz, The Social God and the Relational Self.

23 In Grenz’s chapter “From Structure to Destiny,” he provides an historical geneology of imago Dei through the “structuralist,” “relational” and “destiny” positions. The relational tradition, for Grenz, is opened up by Luther who articulates a vision of salvation which depends upon resources external to the believer. See Grenz, The Social God and the Relational Self, 141-82.

24 McClendon, Systematic Theology, 105-35.

25 Ibid., 124.
anthropology in relationship to sin; one that McClendon calls the "refusal of grace," the "rupture of our solidarity with one another in Christ" and "reversion" which "sinfully rejects the good proper to organic life and growth." That is, sin is a way of talking about disordered relationships with self, God, one-another, and creation. For McClendon, the Baptist tradition embodies this social-relational anthropology in its practices of Baptism and emphasis on the way of Christ, despite its typical language suggesting a substantialist anthropology. A similar tension is also present with Midtown; for Midtown's practices of engagement with the neighborhood subvert the imitation logic rooted in a substantialist understanding of humanity and the story of sin as one of innate loss of capacity.

But we can go a bit further. Stanley Grenz brings this relational impulse into conversation with New Testament Christologies that suggest Christ as the imago Dei. For Grenz, the two traditions help articulate a vocational understanding of the human condition; that is, "the humankind created in the imago Dei is none other than the new humanity conformed to the imago Christi, and the telos toward which the OT creation narrative points is the eschatological community of glorified saints." Thus, a vocational anthropology looks forward to the completion of creation in Christ and understands human vocation in terms of participation in the way opened up by Christ, the missio Dei. Something like this orientation seems present in Midtown's use of sowing. Ministry practices are brought into the horizon of eschatological hope rather than the kind of means-end calculus initiated by an imitation anthropology.

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26 Ibid., 134.

World: From Target to Partner

As hinted earlier, the sowing metaphor also addresses the horizon of the world by subverting Midtown’s assumption that the world is a passive ‘target’ for ministry. This is a crucial move for appropriating the public strand in relationship to the evangelical strand. For if the ambiguity of Midtown’s present experience of reciprocal perduring presence can be claimed as related to God, then the loss of clear boundaries can be seen as a part of God’s mission and call rather than a compromised identity. The sowing metaphor does not completely do this work, but begins by disturbing clear-cut connections between act and result. Moreover, it affirms the organic complexity of the world, granting Midtown’s ambiguity as life in all its rich texture. This affirmation of such ambiguity in relationship to the world, then, opens the possibility of God’s world as a generative partner for mission.

I have mentioned above that the sowing metaphor allows Midtown focus groups a way to articulate the ambiguity and uncertainty of their lives and ministry. For Midtown, ministry experiences that do not fit into the conventional narrative of regeneration create some anxiety in the system. This point could be overstated, so one needs to be careful here. However, Midtown’s concerns regarding sustainability are due, in part, to the growing realization that former markers for success—new middle-class Christian members who can make a significant financial and/or administrative contribution to Midtown’s ministries—are not happening with substantial frequency. Rather, Midtown’s congregational life is quite mixed socio-economically and culturally; what this means is that new members are not necessarily able or culturally predisposed to start giving a
(usually 10%) tithe to the congregation. Ministry successes are not translating into a larger intimate family, but rather a more diverse and complex foster family.

As such, the real work to be done by Midtown’s ministry teams is aimed at improving material, educational, and familial conditions of many in the community. The inner decision so central to the regeneration narrative is still important, but is simply one concern mixed in with a host of others. This is not unlike the way in which Midtown’s Pietist forebears have also addressed the outer so as to minister to the inner. But one cannot help but wonder if Midtown’s social context—as an urban congregation in an increasingly diverse and pluralistic city in a time when the generally Christian consensus of North America seems to be crumbling—calls for a break from the Pietist assumption regarding the priority of an inner decision. Does Pietism depend upon Christendom? As Midtown engages the lives of those in the neighborhood, and as the inner decisions made by persons are relativized in the face of Midtown’s holistic response to needs in the neighborhood, it seems as though there is something different about Midtown’s appropriation of Pietism—even if it is a new appropriation in action rather than conceptuality.

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28 By ‘culturally predisposed,’ I am not referring to different ethnic or socio-economic cultures, but rather persons who come into the church without a substantial evangelical background. The experience of the church is that they are not as likely to start tithing. This is just one more sign of the loss of Christendom for Midtown.

29 The loss of Christendom in North America is well documented and well known. It is a social reading that frames the ‘missional church’ literature. See, for example, Guder and Barrett, Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America. Hunsberger and Van Gelder, The Church between Gospel and Culture: The Emerging Mission in North America.

30 This is an interesting question, which I do not have space to explore here. Andrew Walls argues that evangelical renewal is parasitic upon Christendom—that it is a form of Christianity insisting that Christian society is not Christian enough. I wonder if a similar argument can be transferred to Pietism too, which has functioned primarily as a renewal movement within existing church bodies. See Walls, The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith, 79-82.
This is what I have argued above, that there is slippage between their vocabularies of tradition—their conventional narratives—and the ways in which they have sought to engage and minister in their neighborhood. And since their conventional narratives articulate a particular set of expectations around a particular good, the lack of empirical evidence that this end is being achieved can understandably create anxiety. This showed up throughout the interviews, and also in the Sunday School Hour focus groups around the issue of ambiguity. By ‘ambiguity,’ I mean a sense of the richness, uncertainty, and complexity of lived life. The sense of ambiguity sustained by the sowing metaphor oscillated between hope and anxiety. This was made clearest during the Sunday School Hour focus group that discussed 2 Corinthians 4.

The group experienced this text as an encouragement to ‘not lose heart,’ wondering “where was it that [the Corinthians] were losing heart...were they engaged in a particular form of ministry that was not well received by those around them?”\(^\text{31}\) With this comment, the group moved fluidly between the perceived frailty of the Corinthian congregation and Midtown’s experience of ambiguity. The group said that Midtown is a “no strings attached” kind of community.\(^\text{32}\) “Some churches will manipulate, or ask for something back if they offer a service to the neighborhood; but we do not, we will care for people whether they come back or not.”\(^\text{33}\) With comments like this, the group fused the text’s encouragement to ‘not lose heart’ and Midtown’s own sense of anxiety about the sustainability of the congregation; even pointing out a potential difference between a

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\(^{31}\) Sunday School Hour Focus Group 2, facilitated by the author, May 10, 2009.

\(^{32}\) Ibid.

\(^{33}\) Ibid.
form of ministry oriented by the regeneration narrative (‘some churches will manipulate…’) and their own. For the group acknowledged that this “no strings attached” and “non-manipulative” kind of engagement with the neighborhood requires a certain kind of financial largess that is no longer possible for Midtown.\textsuperscript{34}

Within this same conversation, the group noted the way in which the congregation is aging, and the fact that younger members do not have the kind of financial resources as the long-term, aging members. This is the crux of Midtown’s sense of ambiguity. The very people they minister to so effectively, the very practices within which they make connection with the lives and needs of others, do not provide clear marks of success, nor do they create relationships that promise to sustain future such ministries within the assumptions of benevolence. Their current interpretive framework of regeneration within an assumption of benevolent action does not render Midtown’s ministry as successful or sustainable. And yet, the group was united in thinking that 2 Corinthians 4 is an encouragement to “not lose heart;” that even though this set of practices with “no strings attached” produced unpredictable results, these practices were\textit{ exactly} what the congregation needed to be doing.\textsuperscript{35} Thus this sense of ambiguity creates the possibility for both anxiety and hope.

The phrase ‘treasure in jars of clay’ resonated with several in the group. One person commented

\textit{it is wonderful and surprising that we are considered God’s treasures even though we have so little to offer…it often seems that God entrusts wonderful things to

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.
those that seem to have less to offer...we might look at ourselves as aging, or frail, but God sees us as willing, and that is something.\(^{36}\)

So Midtown both identifies with and takes courage from Paul’s account of how he bends but does not break because of God’s sustaining promise. Another summarized this by pointing to verse ten, saying “his life is being revealed in our mortal bodies...so the other side of not being crushed is that God is glorified to those watching us suffer.”\(^{37}\) It is here, then, that ambiguity—with its accompanying oscillations between anxiety and hope—begins to help describe the way in which sowing as a metaphor works to subvert the interiority of the regeneration narrative for an affirmation of lived life in its complexity.

In these stories, participants are not appealing to empirical accounts of changed lives, nor are they retreating to the glories of inner experience. The ‘clarity’ and ‘authority’ that such accounts provide\(^{38}\) are inadequate for the “suffering” and insecurity the congregation experiences as it lives in and with its neighborhood.\(^{39}\) As demonstrated above, sowing muddles the clear lines of connection between heroic agency and personal decision, between obedience to Christ and empirical change in one’s life. It does not do away with interiority or concern for evidence of regeneration, but it allows for quite a bit more ambiguity on both accounts. As such, it is a metaphor that helps place Midtown’s ongoing practiced and lived encounters with their neighbors into a distinctly theological frame. On some accounts, they imagine that they are the ones sowing the seeds, and it is

\(^{36}\) Ibid.

\(^{37}\) Ibid.

\(^{38}\) Stoeffler, The Rise of Evangelical Pietism, 14-15. Stoeffler makes this point directly, that an appeal to inner experience provides an “unassailable source of authority.” I develop this theme more fully in chapter four.

\(^{39}\) Sunday School Hour Focus Group 2, facilitated by the author, May 10, 2009.
Christ who waters and makes them grow. Other times—as above—it is Christ who both plants and waters/grows. The church is simply invited to help the work. In this clearly ambiguous framework, the nuances and tensions of everyday life are able to be affirmed without being explained or broken down without remainder. That is, the ambiguity within the sowing metaphor creates the possibility for Midtown to attend to lived life theologically rather than seeing such life in terms of a clear-cut extension of an inner experience. Moreover, this opens the possibility for world as a partner, as a site for encounter with God.

Missional Hope: The Cross and Resurrection

One wonders, however, whether the above accounts of sowing do enough for Midtown. The regeneration and heroic missionary narratives are problematized by sowing—in part because the present ministry of the church does not generate the results expected by these narratives. The sowing metaphor, then, does the work of moving Midtown into a relational and vocational understanding of personhood, while also de-centering the activism of the church and recognizing the ambiguity inherent in their relationships in and with the world.

These are key missional moves, but they also have a thread of acknowledged vulnerability and loss. That is, sowing emerges as leadership teams work to make sense of the apparent fruit-less-ness of their work according to the narratives of intimacy. The loss of personal, activistic agency helps identify relational reciprocity; the loss of ecclesial ‘riches’ for benevolent largess helps the congregation to see other partners in the neighborhood and to identify God’s largess in sowing seeds throughout the neighborhood; and the loss of clear connections between agent and fruit, between heroic
missionary and result moves the congregation to consider life beyond the church in its
textures and ambiguities as claimed by God rather than a target. Sowing is a metaphor by
which the congregation *throws* itself, or, rather *is thrown* upon God’s faithfulness. If
Midtown does not see fruit, then maybe God does? The metaphor of sowing is a vague
articulation of hope that God might be faithful in and amidst the present tensions of
Midtown’s liminal space in the loss of these conventional narratives and the incoherence
of the foster home.

At this point, Midtown’s missional strand needs to do more than the metaphor of
sowing can accomplish. For the identity of the sower is always ambiguous. Is it the
church? Is it God? And the outcome of the sowing is always in jeopardy—will the seed
grow? Is it lodged in fertile soil? Will weeds come and choke it out? The metaphor
rightly helps Midtown to identify and even embrace the real ambiguities and tensions of
their ministry and context. And it also brings them to an act of faith—to trust in God’s
faithfulness. But it does not articulate a robust hope. It does not untangle the
undifferentiated ‘now’ given in the imitation anthropology from the Scriptural testimony
that Christ is raised from the dead. They do not articulate a sense of *future* for the
congregation that is *new* and *out ahead* of Midtown. That is, sowing does not provide
resources for specific and concrete *hope* amidst their present anxiety and liminality.

I want to suggest two possible spaces within Midtown’s reflection where this
missional strand can be thickened precisely along these lines. First, the metaphor of
sowing identifies Midtown’s anxiety and vulnerability, which should lead Midtown to
reflect on the narrative of cross and resurrection. Not only will this narrative help
Midtown to identify God’s presence and passivity within its liminality, but it will give
Midtown the concrete hope of the resurrection as the irruption of the new. By naming their present anxieties with the cross, they also anticipate the faithfulness and future of the God who raises the dead.

The theme of cruciformity emerged within the 2 Corinthians 4 focus group, as one person drew attention to the way in which the cross of Christ was connected to present suffering in ‘our mortal bodies.’ In this comment, the cross ceases to be only a prop for penal substitution and begins to be an act of divine identification. For in 2 Corinthians 4, Paul exhorts the church two times to “not lose heart,” while interpreting his own suffering within the theological dialectic of cross and resurrection (2 Cor. 4:1,16). As such, the cross names God’s saving act of atonement by identifying God’s location ‘outside the gate’ (Heb. 13:12) among sinners, the dispossessed, and the god-forsaken and not only in relationship to sin and divine justice. Midtown’s passivity in its changing neighborhood, then, can become more theologically concrete by turning to the narrative of the cross. For this passivity is not simply that of a scattered seed or fertile ground, but rather a participation-in the suffering responsiveness of the God of Jesus Christ.

But the narrative of the cross also provides Midtown with a concrete hope. For the Father’s faithfulness creatively and surprisingly bodies-forth in the resurrected Son. This is not the vague ‘liberal’ hope of continuous social improvement, nor is it the undifferentiated now of modeling the perfected moral example given in Scripture, but a rupture in the orders of creation, the breaking-in of God’s promised future. The vague hope in God’s perduring presence and faithfulness expressed in the metaphor of sowing is expressed concretely here. The Triune God is the passionate sufferer who creates anew, whose new creation has irrupted in time in the death and resurrection of Christ, and
whose future is breaking in—even now as the foster home is stretched beyond recognition and the congregation struggles with the loss of a framework.

The second space for Midtown to thicken its missional strand is through the metaphor of journey. Throughout the research process, Midtown had trouble communicating its theological frameworks without some kind of appeal to boundaries. The challenge posed by the good of hospitality is exactly this: how does Midtown account for God beyond the boundaries of the intimate family or personal interiority? Although the metaphor of perduring presence and the introduction of reciprocity goes a significant way toward challenging a cephalic conception of community and articulating the way in which public contributes to church, the boundaries-metaphor is still somewhat controlling. McClendon’s ‘way, road, journey’ metaphor that began this section, then, can be reclaimed in light of the metaphor of sowing to articulate the fluidity and movement of the church, with Christ out ahead, rather than only an embodied community bearing-witness-to as McClendon articulates.

**Conclusion: The Missional, Public, and Evangelical Strands**

I articulated the challenge in bringing Midtown’s lived theology to discourse in all three strands as a theology of social embodiment. I have called it this because the embodiment of Midtown’s sociality both internally (the family) and externally (the foster home and public at the margins) were generative and lasting but without theological frameworks to understand God’s presence, activity, and passivity in and among these relationships. Midtown *lived* a kind of engagement that was not interpreted theologically, and thus reflected a kind of practical atheism as reflected in chapter five with the
pragmatic innovation at the margins when the regeneration and heroic missionary scripts no longer worked.

In response to the research question, I have told the story of the research journey in three different narrative strands. The evangelical strand worked with the good of intimacy, and we moved from a consideration of this good to a theological consideration of Midtown’s embodied sociality as the intimate family in a community of watch-care bodying-forth a politics of forgiveness rooted in the forgiveness of the Gospel. Thus, we could name intimate, authentic, and face-to-face relationships as participating in God’s good news of reconciled relationships. But the evangelical strand could not address the issue of ecclesial boundaries and those who either transgress them or remain outside of them. How is the Gospel related to them? The narratives of intimacy in the evangelical strand could only consider them as passive targets at best or transgressors in need of forgiveness at worst. This led us to the public strand, where the embodied sociality at Midtown’s boundaries opened up social spaces not easily mapped onto the evangelical strand and the narratives of intimacy. We explored the metaphor of perduring presence which emerged in focus group reflections on practiced hospitality and considered the resources of both ecclesialist and correlationalist public theologies to consider how the metaphor of presence might articulate God’s presence and activity amidst this public sociality out beyond the intimate family. I concluded this section by suggesting that Midtown’s perduring presence shares in the ecclesialist conception of embodied witness while also bodying-forth the reciprocity assumed in a correlationalist position. Thus, Midtown’s public strand bears witness-with its neighbors in the generation of a common life. But such reciprocal witnessing is experienced by Midtown as a loss of its
regeneration and heroic missionary narratives, which leads us to the missional strand where the metaphor of sowing demonstrates Midtown's attempt to throw itself upon the faithfulness of God in light of the liminality created by the public strand. As such, the missional strand subverts and problematizes the regeneration and heroic missionary narratives without offering a concrete basis for Christian hope. I close this section by suggesting that Midtown explore its liminality with the narrative of cross and resurrection as a way of thickening this missional account.

These three strands can be brought together with the metaphor of participation or sharing to demonstrate both how they fit together and how the missional strand places the public and evangelical strands into a more generative relationship. By way of summary, Midtown's lived theology embodied in its sociality is a missional, public, and evangelical theology of participation as pilgrims on the way, as sharing with partners in reciprocal bearing witness, while sharing in a porous community of watch-care.

The evangelical strand identifies the man in the back row during services as a project. He is the recipient of the goods and services provided by the congregation. But he is not part of the intimate family and so is unrelated to the goods of intimacy and the identity of the congregation. The public strand identifies this man as a perduring presence in and with the congregation. This man both receives the goods/care of the congregation and also contributes the shape and identity of the congregation. The missional strand, finally, identifies this man as a participant sharing in and with the congregation, and as such a possible gift within the congregation for discerning God's future. As such, the man still receives care from the congregation and also bears-with the congregation, but in

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40 Thanks to one of my readers, Patrick Keifert, for pointing this out.
the missional strand both the evangelical and public strands are reconfigured within the congregational journey. God calls the congregation forward, and even strangers—or those who sit in the back pews—are embodied gifts given by God for the journey ahead.
I stated early in this extended essay that this project is not only an attempt to understand, interpret, and deepen the theology of an evangelical congregation, but it is also an experiment in doing evangelical theology differently. I hoped to draw upon the holiness-experiential tradition of evangelicalism and embody a more social and communicative process for generating theology. My research method indirectly asks the question ‘how can evangelicals generate theological discourse without retreating into personal interiority or grounding it in revelational positivism?’ By leading public processes of open-ended discernment around texts of Scripture, I hoped to initiate practices of theological reflection that built upon evangelical regard for Scripture without reinforcing either biblicism or an expert-paradigm for Bible teaching. Furthermore, by doing the generative theological work within open focus groups, I hoped to create space for communicative theological discernment, for moments of Marion’s ‘reverse intentionality’ and, perhaps, for ‘the new’ to emerge, for God to reveal Godself in conversation and not only deep interiority.

Whether this is a successful evangelical theology is for others to decide. But the process did generate new and moving metaphors for the congregation. Groups were energized throughout the research journey, and the practices of discernment and reflection I initiated took on a life of their own. Furthermore, the primary theological question thematized throughout this essay—which I call a theology of social
embodiment—is a question that was simply disclosed out in front of our conversation. It is not a theological theme that I would have chosen, and it is not implicit in the initial research question. As a theologian, I would argue that this disclosure out in front of the group as it became more energized looks like the generative, revelatory, and guiding work of the Holy Spirit.

In conclusion, the work recorded here raises at least a few broad themes for further questioning and research related to evangelical theology. Does ethnographic-phenomenology comport with the practices and theological prejudices of evangelicalism? Does the work reported here innovate with evangelical theology in a way that evangelicals recognize? Does this open up a path between evangelical pietistic interiority and revelational positivism? What do we make of this loss of the intimacy narratives for Midtown more generally with other evangelical congregations? Is the Pietist framework wed to Christendom? Are other congregations innovating with it similarly to Midtown? Such questions could certainly guide sustained and interesting research in, with, and among evangelical congregations.
APPENDIX A: READING TEAM REPORT

A REPORT TO MIDTOWN BAPTIST CHURCH
ABOUT ITS INTERVIEWS ON
CONGREGATIONAL MISSION AND MINISTRY
from
The Congregational Discovery Reading Team
Church Innovations Institute

How to Use this Report

This report gives the major findings of a self-study by members of the congregation about the character of worship, education, and general involvement of members, as well as the congregation's responses to community and congregational changes. It is based on 24 interviews, gathered in winter, 2009, by several members of the congregation.

We believe these findings should be taken seriously even though they are based on information from a moderate number of interviews. Leaders should consider their own reflections and use common sense about the issues raised in this report, building on the strengths of Midtown while addressing problem areas as opportunities for further growth as a congregation.

We believe that both the interviewers and those with whom they talked have the best interests of Midtown at heart and gave information they hope will help the congregation.

Our recommendations are meant as questions, not to tell the congregation what to do. We believe that your congregation's continuing work in mission may help it address some of the opportunities discovered in these interviews. We also believe the congregation’s leadership has the wisdom and ability to best address its own situation.

All of the people who took time to answer these interview questions, and most certainly the Listening Leaders who did so many splendid interviews, should be commended for their willingness to think seriously about your congregation's members’ past and present experiences of worship, learning, change, and mission. Such careful and helpful work will be of dramatic value as we all consider what God is up to in the community and what God is calling Midtown to do here. As we seek to build on strengths, we remember that God equips us for every good work and that we lead by the grace of God’s gifts to us.
Question 1: Tell a story about how you sense God’s presence and activity in this congregation.

24 interviews, 34 remarks
(the number after a response indicates how many people mentioned it)

- in times of poor health – 5
- in times of death – 3
- in youth activities – 3
- our proactive outreach – 3
- tithing to missions – 2
- the ladies at MOPS – 2
- church’s ministries – 2
- we don’t “play” church - we’re real – 2

mentioned once each (12): reconciled friendships, when in the military, food shelf, pastor invites in neighborhood kids, ministry of an itinerant preacher, students are mentored, a family crisis, Alpha drew us in, choir, preaching, scripture, accepted when others rejected

recommended questions to consider:

1. Responding to one another’s needs, especially long-term members’ needs, is a real sign of God’s presence for your people. How do you care for these long-term members so well? Is the same care available to newer younger members? How do you learn about the needs of people?

2. Is there a controversy about spending on missions? What are your missions and local outreach? We don’t hear many specifics about these outreach efforts, but they motivate quite a few of your members. How are decisions made about what work to support? How are the efforts of that support brought back home to the congregation so that they can identify with the effort?
Question 2: Describe an experience of profound worship you have had.
24 interviews, 31 remarks

- Easter experience (choirs, sermon) – 2
- music – 2
- a funeral – 2

mentioned once each (25): at a revival, a nurse at a bedside, when John T was choir director, interaction of the people, years ago at Wednesday night prayer, Joe T’s prayers, dedication of new sanctuary, few and far between, songs and prayers that meet my circumstance, when depressed, in a time of illness, scenery in Glacier Park, adult Sunday School taught by a Down’s Syndrome person, Camp sermons, 30-hour famine, ordination, “soul spa” at MOPS, campfire testimonials, a family baptism, when each worship element enhances the others, an Alpha retreat, little children dancing in the side aisle, seeing our diverse congregation (a slice of heaven), in Mexico, community Thanksgiving meal

recommended questions to consider:

1. Many of these answers describe moments of personal profoundness (alone in nature, during a depressed time), but quite a few happened because the person was in a group experiencing the event together (at the sanctuary dedication, seeing the diverse congregation). How does profound worship touch people individually? How does it come about exactly because many people are present?

2. Some years ago we know you had two services every Sunday, and some members refer fondly to previous choir directors. We also know, from other questions, that you have had to make some decisions about musical styles. How is that going for your congregation at present? When benefits have you noticed? Any challenges?

3. It is said here and elsewhere that many of your leaders are aging. What are you doing to train young people, even children, to help with worship leadership? Might seeing young people lead be a profound worship experience for people?
Question 3: Tell about the ways people fight in this congregation. Tell about a situation where you and other people were involved in a problem at church and how it was handled.

24 interviews, 58 remarks

never saw/was involved in one – 9

how people fight (32)
- obscurely or indirectly – 5
- criticizing while being nice – 2
- leaving – 2

mentioned once each (23): church doesn’t admit when it’s wrong, we don’t see a second side to a story, raised voices in business meetings, leadership tries to re-focus, smooth things over, people speak and then leave, get upset and withdraw, gossip, choosing sides, arguing outside church, lack a conflict resolution model, could have more transparency, confronters get their way, avoidance, staff works to make things right, agree to disagree, talk things through, learn of the problem and take care of it, wrote letter to a person who offended and heard nothing back, you have to pick your battles, church unclear of who is in charge of what at weddings, our diversity makes us preserve our fellowship, should dwell on what is right and pure instead of fights

what people fight about (17)
- worship styles – 2
- differing views on issues – 2
- between church personnel – 2

mentioned once each (11): personal lifestyle choices, homosexuality, church’s stance on children in church, a child’s temper tantrums, planning a wedding, pastor not fitting the congregation, bad behavior directed at me, in the youth group, blended service was not a good solution, the old clash with the new, something hurtful from the pulpit was never handled

recommended questions to consider
1. Members at Midtown really do not like to fight. They do anything possible to avoid it or be indirect about it, hoping that the issue will go away. While that is very typical behavior in churches, it can be dangerous for the great fellowship and responsiveness you so appreciate about one another. It can undermine trust in your community. Why do you think people avoid taking on tough issues?

2. It seems that there was a wedding planning experience that was very difficult, and then a planner was established. Is this a story of a breakthrough in resolution? Are there other examples of resolved issues? How did you accomplish them?

3. You are a multigenerational congregation. How do the generations get along? Have generational differences played into your traditional-contemporary worship styles decisions? What might you teach others about this?
Question 4: Tell a memory that has given you anxiety about the future of this church. Tell a memory that gives you hope.

24 interviews, 66 remarks

Sources of Anxiety (33)

- leadership and money come from the elderly – 6
- finances – 5
- enough volunteers? – 2
- old building – 2
- aging congregation – 2
- camouflaging our religion – 2
- no anxiety – 2

mentioned once each (13): losing reverence, scripture not quoted in entirety, many attend but few join, older board and staff may not have vision, I might have to move, is it good to own homes?, power consolidated among too few?, youth might drift away, method we used to change pastors, many relationships are superficial, are we ministering enough to our ministers?, used to have 2 full services and now just 1, overtaken by a mega-church?

Sources of Hope (33)

- young families – 6
- children under 12 – 3
- youth group strong – 3
- people are here for us when we need them – 3
- new young staff and leaders – 3
- faithful volunteers – 2
- MOPS – 2
- our outreach to neighborhood – 2

mentioned once each (9): reliance on scripture, a place to raise my kids, MOPS, service ministry, tutoring, ladies group, Daycare, people who caused trouble have left, faith in Christ gives me hope

recommended questions to consider:

1. Some anxiety comes from your fear of losing your identity at the same time as the older members die. How do you think that might happen? What might you do to name and claim your identity as Baptists and as Midtown Baptist Church and pass it through to the next generation? What groups in your church might do this work?

2. You have moved from having almost no children to having a very large number of them. This is a great opportunity that many churches would be eager for. How did it happen? What are you doing about it? What will be these children’s roles in your future?

3. You offer quite a few programs and opportunities. How do you guard against burnout? How are your leaders continually enriched and reinvigorated?

4. How does worship serve as a source of hope for your church? What is God up to in providing hope for you?
Question 5: Describe this congregation to someone new and tell how they would be nurtured here.

24 interviews, 84 remarks
- multigenerational – 12
- welcoming – 10
- caring – 5
- small groups – 5
- youth program good – 4
- connected to our community – 4
- spiritual depth here – 4
- fellowship – 3
- affirming – 3
- many ways to volunteer – 3
- Sunday worship meaningful – 3
- ethnic/economic diversity – 3
- friendly – 2
- inclusive – 2
- older – 2
- people and environment nurture – 2
- kids’ programs – 2
- like an extended family – 2
- excited to help out – 2
- pull together in times of need – 2

mentioned once each (9): warm, should remember names, listed in bulletin are people you can call upon, generous, don’t always greet folks, Sundays are for older and Wednesdays are for younger, nurture though fellowship/Bible study/outreach, difficult to be nurtured long-term if not related to a member, Bible-based, smaller

recommended questions to consider:

1. A wonderful and robust set of answers! If this question is the “brochure” for Midtown, look at the good things people say. Welcome, affirmation, meaningful worship are very present and important since they come up so many times. Your small size and connected nurturing are real assets. How do you use those assets to reach newcomers and bring them in? What does your welcome look like? What is your welcome gift? How do you connect once newcomers leave that morning?

2. How do you sustain nurture long-term? What are your small groups? People were fairly vague about those and your outreach work as well. What do you do? And what is compelling about what you do so that those activities nurture your members?

3. In other questions we hear that Midtown has spiritual depth, especially with your elders. How do you deepen your spiritual walk? What do you do to accompany one another on life’s spiritual journey? How might working intentionally on those things as a group affect bringing along the younger people into future leadership?
**Question 6: What tells you God is present here in worship?**

24 interviews, 35 remarks

- dedication of committed Christians – 4
- when I’m in need, I ask and someone helps me – 3
- love for big extended family – 3
- when people participate in worship – 3
- when people sing – 2
- prayer – 2
- the pastor’s sermons – 2
- I feel it – 2

**mentioned once each (14)** – when people do good, people volunteering, pastor comes to basketball games, diversity of persons coming together as a whole, sacrificial giving, forgiveness and love, thinking about what God has done in my life, when I come to worship he touches me, variety of music, symbols like the cross, when we have open mic, the choices of music and scripture and prayer, Good Friday service, I leave feeling better than when I came

**recommended questions to consider**

1. Your members here did not limit their answers to worship, as the question asked, but instead described people’s beautiful interactions at any time. Your people live their faith. This is a good thing! We are wondering, though, why they did not describe much about your worship service in this question.

2. Why do you think people attend worship at Midtown?

3. What are Midtown’s worship traditions? What does your service look like on a typical Sunday? What traditions have you let go of over the years? What ones have you kept? Many churches’ identity can be most clearly seen in how they worship together. What would a visitor think of your identity by attending your worship service?

4. God language is more common here than in any other question. That is probably natural, coming from the question itself. But do your members regularly talk about what God is doing? If they do, how did they get the freedom for this conversation? Is it something that Midtown has done intentionally? If they don’t, how might you work on habits that will create safe enough space for those kinds of sentences?
Question 7: Tell about how you and others feel about the changes in the neighborhood in the past 3-5 years.

24 interviews, 37 remarks

- increased ethnic diversity that Midtown doesn’t reflect – 6
- little or no change – 5
- church programs have positive effect in the neighborhood – 4
- I don’t know – 3
- less affluence – 2
- more traffic – 2
- have heard there are more drugs – 2
- aging church population – 2

mentioned once each (11) – transient residents, both owner and rental property, fewer churchgoers, younger people, increasing community needs, less safe, businesses have changed but not people, New HS a closer resource, constantly changing, not much change, light in a dark world

recommended questions to consider

1. Although the neighborhood hasn’t changed drastically in the past 3-5 years, it has changed ethnically more than Midtown has. Your people understand this. Yet Midtown is diverse in its own ways. How have you learned to live into increasing diversity in your community?

2. You have welcomed neighborhood kids brilliantly, and many claim real strides in affecting life in the neighborhood. This is a blessing. How exactly do you do it? We hear no specific descriptions. How might you plan into the future some sustainable continuing of those ministries? What partners might you have?

3. The current rise in economic difficulty will probably result in more need and place more pressure on not only the residents but the church checkbook. How will you choose what to do in response to economic pressures? How does Midtown find out about, design a response to, and carry out programs that offer help and hope?

4. One interviewee notes the image of being a light in a dark world. Does this metaphor fit Midtown? What other metaphors or Bible stories might describe what you do and how you do it?
Question 8: Tell about how you and others feel about the changes in this congregation in the past 3-5 years.

24 interviews, 43 remarks

hasn’t changed much – 7

positive or neutral – 22
- younger married couples – 8
- more children – 7
  mentioned once each (7): Midtown Alive, Service Ministry, new worship music, expanding outreach, turnover of couples, more connected with each other, more diverse in age and economics

negative – 14
- older people dying – 6
  mentioned once each (8): comedy skits, children running around, music changing, less respect for elderly, community brings kids with different faith needs, church politics, youth group dwindling, some have left

recommended questions to consider
1. Clearly you have received the gift of more young families and children. How blessed you are. How did they come to you? Why do they keep coming?

2. You have spiritually deep elders and a lot of young people. How do they now get along? There are some elders who feel neglected or un-respected. How might you connect old with young in a faith-mentoring relationship, or connect young with old in ways that allow the youth to teach the elders, and vice versa?

3. When the youth of the neighborhood have little faith background and the youth of the church have deeper faith training, what happens when they are together? How might they teach one another?

4. There is anxiety over finances, here and in other questions. This is true in almost every congregation. However, what might you do to lower anxiety about money? Are people concerned about spending money on good things and then running out? What might you develop as a response to this anxiety? Is it possible to do some intentional work in prayer to lower anxiety and raise confidence in God’s providence?

5. How much change has happened in your church and your neighborhood actually? How might you make use of your Church FutureFinder Report to actually measure the changes?
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