
IMPROV IN THE STREETS: MISSIONAL LEADERSHIP AS PUBLIC IMPROVISATIONAL IDENTITY FORMATION

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Abstract: This article argues that missional leadership in congregations is an improvisational and rhetorical practice of cultivating a fluid, public, and gospel-shaped identity. Such leadership demands addressing, challenging, and subverting the paradigms that keep congregations from understanding their life together as participating in the mission of God in the world. Drawing from the work of Lesslie Newbigin, the author argues the church must discover ways to tell the story of the triune God in a public arena. Conceiving of leadership as a practice rather than a person, the author suggests these ways may be fluid, dynamic, and messy, but just as an improvisational music session comes together to yield a unique artistic experience, so the church can draw on its many theoretical and theological resources to cultivate a public identity which embodies the good news of God in Jesus Christ.

Introduction

I often read and work in several neighborhood coffee shops. One of the shops I frequent has a group that meets on Tuesday nights for an acoustic guitar jam session. On these nights, a group of anywhere between three to ten friends and strangers will gather to play an array of popular and obscure country, folk, and rock songs. At times the mix of guitars, violins, and banjos does not cohere and group spins into some level of disarray. But inevitably a melody breaks out as the musicians learn how to play and sing together within that moment in time. One might say that those who gather improvise their way into a musical identity in a two-hour jam session every week despite a number of challenges, such as the presence of strangers who arrive and want to teach the group new material, or the transfer of leadership roles throughout the session. The physical

capacity of the coffee shop provides another challenge when on busy nights the group must adjust to space restrictions and huddle together just to listen over the heightened noise level. In addition, the ever-changing mix of instruments provides an ongoing set of opportunities and limitations for the group. The nature of this musical event depends each week on a number of fluid and contingent factors.

This music group demonstrates the improvisational and fluid nature of identity formation in communities of public practice. The porous boundaries and the public meeting space determine the shape and activity of the group in some important ways. The members of the group must expend significant energy each week to adjust to each other and the space. Thus, the identity of the group (the music it plays and the particular roles in the group) is a *task* for the group rather than a *status*. Moreover, it is something negotiated each week based on a number of contingencies. Their identity, then, is fluid and improvisational.

Congregations are also public communities of particular practices.¹ Like all other communities, congregations have a particular identity that takes shape within complex sets of relationships. The current “missional church” conversation in North America addresses the church precisely on this level, arguing that North American congregations must develop a *missional* identity. That is, the church must learn to understand itself in relationship to the *missio Dei*, the life and mission of God in the world. The literature has carefully developed a trinitarian ground for mission that demonstrates both the public and dynamic nature of the gospel.² It has called the church to both a public identity

¹ See Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass, eds., *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2002).

² Newbigin’s influence is essential here. See Lesslie Newbigin, *Trinitarian Faith and Today’s Mission* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1964). Lesslie Newbigin, “The Trinity as Public Truth,” in *The Trinity in a Pluralist Age*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing,

and a vocation that is faithful to the gospel. But it has not paid enough attention to the processes of identity formation in relation to the task of leadership. In this article, I will explore this set of topics and argue that missional leadership in congregations is an improvisational and rhetorical practice of cultivating a fluid, public, and gospel-shaped identity.

I will argue that the missional church conversation that began with the writings of Lesslie Newbigin helpfully points to the public vocation of the church *vis-à-vis* the universal claims of the gospel. Newbigin successfully critiques the dualisms of enlightenment-modernity and the monist tendency in religious pluralism to make a public claim for the gospel in a pluralist society. However, the *kind* of public that emerges in Newbigin's writings and the way in which congregational identity is constructed over and against the public is problematic both theoretically and theologically. After providing an overview and critique of Newbigin, I will provide theoretical and theological warrants for considering missional leadership as an improvisational and rhetorical practice of cultivating a fluid public identity.

Missional Leadership: The Processes of Congregational Change

This article aims to bring particular theoretical and theological perspectives into the missional church conversation in order to demonstrate the implications of these perspectives for missional leadership and missional leaders. Although the missional church conversation has produced few books on missional leadership *per se*, two books warrant attention as demonstrating the implications of *missional* for *leadership*. In *The Missional Leader*, Alan Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk assume that missional leadership involves cultivating change

1997). It is also reflected in the collaborative volume *Missional Church*. See Darrell L. Guder and Lois Barrett, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*. The Gospel and Our Culture Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1998).

processes in congregations.³ Their assumption is that congregations have either acquiesced to the consumerist narratives of society, or they have closed themselves off from meaningful encounters with those outside the congregation. Missional leadership, then, means addressing, challenging, and subverting the paradigms that keep congregations from understanding their life together as participating in the mission of God in the world. The change process for Roxburgh and Romanuk is *cultural* and *pneumatological* in that God's future for congregations is to be discovered by paying attention to the work of the Spirit among God's people.⁴ Thus, leadership—particularly for Roxburgh and Romanuk, the leading of transformative change processes—is not the property of an individual charismatic personality or compelling vision. Similarly, Craig Van Gelder provides a vision for congregational leadership that understands the primacy of God's agency in creating the church *and* reconciling the world to Godself.⁵ Congregational ministry and discernment, then, cannot be abstracted from the *context* of the church in the world. Drawing upon the social sciences and particularly organizational theory, Van Gelder argues for leadership that is theoretically informed but also theologically framed by being responsive to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Both of these works provide significant contributions to the existing church leadership discussion. Both identify the ongoing and transformative processes of cultivating a missional identity and living in a way that engages the world as the congregation learns to discern and participate more fully in the mission of God. However, neither of these works considers the way in which the public vocation of a congregation shapes the cultivation of congregational identity. I will argue that Lesslie

³ Alan J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁵ Craig Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church: A Community Led by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007).

Newbigin's insistence on the public nature of the gospel and vocation of the church to live as a hermeneutic of the gospel compels us to consider the *public* nature of the church. This leads us to consider leadership as an improvisational and rhetorical practice of identity cultivation.

Lesslie Newbigin: Public Truth in a Pluralist World

Newbigin argued throughout his career that the church in the West faces a public crisis of nerve. In *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, Newbigin argues that the plausibility structure of enlightenment-modernity secularism is one that reduces the public claims of the Lordship of Jesus Christ to personal, private values.⁶ The enlightenment-modernity plausibility structure de facto rules out religious narratives as expressions of truth because they are not based on empirically observable facts. For Newbigin, this is epistemological hypocrisy. He spends the beginning chapters of *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* developing Michael Polanyi's view of personal knowledge to expose the *belief-laden* heritage of all *facts* in order to clear public space for the Christian gospel to make *truth-claims* in the pluralist intellectual climate. By rejecting the enlightenment-modernity dualisms between fact-value and public-private in relationship to belief and religious truth, Newbigin hopes the church can again embrace the gospel as an inherently public claim to truth. He believes the church has given up its public nature and missional-ecumenical identity by relegating itself to the realm of private belief.

A public gospel, in contrast, is the good *news* of the in-breaking of the Reign of God in Jesus Christ. It is news that is embodied in both the ecumenical and missions movement—for the Reign of God seeks to unite all people to participate in and bear witness to what God is doing in the world.⁷ Moreover, Newbigin upholds

⁶ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1989).

⁷ Newbigin, *Trinitarian Faith and Today's Mission*, 11-21.

the Christian gospel as the universal story for humanity and turns to election as a way of discussing the “scandal of particularity” inherent in such a claim to truth.⁸ The doctrine of election also allows him to claim that the universality and publicness of the Gospel do not circumvent the church. One Newbigin commentator remarks:

In this strong ecclesiological emphasis, Newbigin lays down a foundation for public theology which is often rather neglected elsewhere. His public theology insists that Christians’ contributions to public affairs must be theologically based and distinctive. Otherwise it is well for us to hold our tongues. And the institutional church must take seriously for its own inner life the message it addresses to the broader society, trusting that in some way the life and worship of the church, in all its weakness and confusion, may manifest the attractive truthfulness of the message proclaimed.⁹

Newbigin’s analysis deeply informs the missional church conversation. It is a theologically-driven conversation that assumes the primacy of the God-world relationship for understanding the vocation of the church as a people who participate in God’s mission in the world.

This inherited framework, however, also contains certain difficulties. Although it challenges modernist dualisms, its argument proceeds on essentially dualistic grounds. Newbigin’s assertion of *public truth* is an objective, universal claim over and against other claims to truth. That is, Newbigin’s argument levels the

⁸ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1995), 66-90.

⁹ Duncan B. Forrester, “Lesslie Newbigin as Public Theologian,” In *A Scandalous Prophet: The Way of Mission after Newbigin*, ed. Thomas F. Foust, et al. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2002), 12. In this aspect of Newbigin’s work, he is partially in step with the work of Hauerwas, concerning the importance of the church as a counter-culture or “hermeneutic of the gospel.” See Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 222-33. Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989).

epistemological playing field in order to assert the universal validity of his own claim. Although this articulates *a* missional identity for the church, it is one that imagines the public as a realm of conflicting truth claims that threaten the coherence of the gospel-story to which the church bears witness. Missional leadership is thus something that cultivates an identity within the church in relationship to a certain context rather than one that is in dialogue with the narratives and divergent claims of that context. Newbigin roots this insistence in a revelational understanding of trinitarian theology.

Against the threat of pluralism, Newbigin argues the church needs to recover trinitarian theology in order to reassert the uniqueness of the Christian gospel in contradistinction to pluralist relegation. The church must discover the way in which the story of the triune God tells the story of the world. The Trinity is necessary for the uniqueness of the gospel in that Christ reveals the unity of God's work both in the world and in the regeneration of humanity. One cannot preach Christ without preaching Him as the 'only begotten' Son of the Father who rules over all creation. Thus one cannot engage in evangelistic conversation without also encountering the Holy Spirit at work in the name of Christ out in front of the evangelist.

The evangelist who preaches Christ is simply bearing witness to the decisive event in human history. In Christ, the cosmic reign of the Father has come even though it is hidden. "The coming of the Son is the event by which the Father has chosen to bring all things to the point of decision, to the issue of judgment and salvation."¹⁰ This is an event continued in the mission of the disciples and the church, whereby "the Father is bringing human history to a decisive moment" wherein all of humanity is confronted with a decision for or against God the Father.¹¹ The Father as revealed in Christ, then, rules over the world, but is not bound slavishly to world

¹⁰ Newbigin, *Trinitarian Faith and Today's Mission*, 36.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 37.

processes. The Father “governs all things and directs them to their true end.”¹² That is, the Son functions to reveal the Father’s lordship over all creation. Thus, the public claim of the gospel has nothing to fear by secularization; for in the Son, all things are revealed within the plan of the Father and the agency of the Spirit. The publicness of the church is as a creation of the Spirit to be a sign, agent, and foretaste of the in-breaking Reign of God.¹³ Rooted in this call for the gospel as public truth, Newbigin insists that the congregation must recover its vocation as a “hermeneutic of the gospel” and thus its public identity as the people of God.¹⁴

Implications of Newbigin’s Thought

Thus far, we have situated Newbigin’s trinitarian ground for mission in his concern that the church confess the public and universal truth of the gospel. Against those articulating a pluralist theology of religions, Newbigin holds that the Trinity reveals the uniqueness of Jesus Christ in that the Christian God is not a monist entity that ties together all things. Rather, the particular story of Jesus Christ reveals the particular plan of God manifested in a particular people in time and place. That is, the Trinity unveils the scandal of particularity so central to the Christian story. Yet, the story of Jesus Christ is also the story of the Son of the Father who is Lord over all. In this way, the Trinity also provides a theological framework for the universal horizon of the gospel, and thus the scandal of particularity is followed up by Newbigin’s insistence on the logic of mission. But what does Newbigin mean by public? What kind of public emerges as a result of Newbigin’s trinitarian thought? How does congregational identity function in relationship to this public?

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Lesslie Newbigin, *Sign of the Kingdom*, American ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1981).

¹⁴ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 222.

By *public* in relationship to truth, Newbigin means truth claims that are universally binding. The public nature of the gospel is a claim regarding the universal truth that Jesus Christ is Lord. As stated earlier, Newbigin's numerous critiques of enlightenment modernity criticize the way in which the realm of value-belief has been disconnected from the realm of fact. A privately held Christian belief is no belief at all. The self-evident nature of scientific observation is self-delusion.

In this way, Newbigin epistemologically clears the public playing field so that Christians can again claim as true that God the Father revealed Himself in Jesus Christ. But what kind of *public* does Newbigin imagine? It is, undoubtedly, a sphere that Newbigin understands to be pluralist and secular, for he does not foresee or attempt a renewal of Christendom. But neither does Newbigin imagine a pluralistic public sphere where divergent claims to truth can rest alongside each other. His conception of truth—as a public claim with universal intent—means that the public sphere is always subject to competing *totalistic* stories about the way things are.¹⁵ Newbigin hopes to de-center the plausibility structure of enlightenment-modernity in order to create space for competing truth claims. This is what makes Newbigin's proposal pluralist rather than being an account of pluralism.

Two immediate implications for the cultivation of congregational identity flow from Newbigin's understanding of public truth and the public sphere. The first is that the religious stories and claims to truth can be cultivated *apart from* whatever other competing stories are

¹⁵ The competitive nature of this sphere is clearly a sub-text in Newbigin's writings. He emphasizes the *suffering* of the church, and the upside-down nature of the reign of God that exposes the powers and principalities of this world. But the implications of his understanding of *belief* and *truth* as all-encompassing, universal claims are hard to miss. The competition of totalistic narratives of reality is a key part of Michael Goheen's analysis of Newbigin in his argument for reading Scripture as one story. See Michael W. Goheen, "The Urgency of Reading the Bible as One Story," *Theology Today* 64, no. 4 (2007).

being told. These stories meet in the public sphere, and both make totalistic, public truth-claims; but they are not understood in relationship to each other. There is a sense in Newbigin that the public claims of the church first take shape within the church and then engage the public sphere. Even though he affirms that the gospel is culture-bound and language-bound, he identifies the church as the hermeneutic of the gospel and suggests it embodies and bears witness to the culture/language-imploding reality of the gospel. The cultivation of a congregational identity that is faithful to the gospel means attentiveness to the gospel for the sake of engaging the world. But how does the church cultivate a missional identity?

Newbigin's answer to this question is rooted in his Barthian emphasis on the revelatory value of trinitarian doctrine.¹⁶ For Newbigin, Trinity is understood in terms of the ruling, redeeming, and sending *action* of God. That is, Trinity describes for Newbigin how God can be an absolute subject in an age of pluralist secularism, for the Son reveals the plan of the Father whereas the Spirit—sent by Son and Father—brings all things to fulfillment.¹⁷

¹⁶ See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G.T. Thomson, vol. 1.1, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1960). Barth famously begins the *Church Dogmatics* with the doctrine of revelation and trinitarian reflection. For Barth, revelation is both the *agency* and *presence* of God in Jesus Christ. He states: “God reveals Himself. He reveals Himself *through Himself*. He reveals *Himself*. If we really want to understand revelation in terms of its subject, i.e., God, then the first thing we have to realize is that this subject, God, the Revealer, is identical with His act in revelation and also identical with its effect. It is from this fact...that we learn we must begin the doctrine of revelation with the doctrine of the Triune God” (296). Barth then proceeds to describe the revelatory action of God as the Father sending the Son, with Father and Son sending the Spirit to bear witness to the Word of God in scripture, church, and world. Revelation, and thus truthful theological reflection, exists within and because of the agency of Father, Son, and Spirit. Thus, for Barth the trinitarian move secures the freedom of God *vis-à-vis* correlative natural phenomena and human religious practices and reflection. Newbigin follows this logic. See Forrester, “Lesslie Newbigin as Public Theologian.”

¹⁷ The claim to Absolute Subject is different from the claim of *primary subject*. Clearly, the missional church movement assumes the dynamic agency of God in the world. But the conception of Absolute Subject carries enlightenment

This is an historically Western understanding of the Trinity, whereby God's life *in se* is understood in terms of relations of origin and God's action *ad extra* is understood processionally (the Father sends the Son, Father and Son send the Spirit). The arrows, so to speak, only go one way from the Father to the Son to the Spirit, and then finally from the church to the world. Missional identity, then, is something received from God and cultivated within the life of the church so that the church can embody the life of the gospel in (and to) the world.

The second implication is that a successful missional identity involves discerning and telling a coherent story regarding the particular relationship between God's universal history in Jesus Christ and the current events of world history.¹⁸ In light of the totalistic nature of conflicting truth claims in the public sphere, the church must also bear witness to the story of God by accurately discerning how current events fit into the universal story of Scripture.¹⁹ Newbigin often turns to the "mini-apocalypse" of Mark 13 at this point in his argument.²⁰ For Newbigin, Mark 13 helps the church to understand that Christ precipitates a crisis in world history; for the in-breaking of the Reign of God has both raised utopian hopes—"many will come in my name" (Mark 13:6)—and brought all of human history to a focal point—all persons will be judged according to their relationship to Jesus Christ. It is the coming of Christ that reveals the unfolding march of human history toward a decision for or against God. This is the "Christocentric universalism" that Newbigin challenges the church to affirm.²¹

assumptions of autonomous personhood and subject-object conception of action. See Gary Simpson, "No Trinity, No Mission: The Apostolic Difference of Revising the Trinity," *Word & World* 18, no. 3 (1998). See also Dwight J. Zscheile, "The Trinity, Leadership, and Power," *Journal of Religious Leadership* 6, no. 2 (Fall 2007).

¹⁸ See Goheen, "The Urgency of Reading the Bible as One Story."

¹⁹ Newbigin, *Trinitarian Faith and Today's Mission*.

²⁰ Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*.

²¹ Newbigin, *Trinitarian Faith and Today's Mission*.

Here Newbigin's thought has a teleological feel. Although he is clearly constructing an apocalyptic eschatology to explain in Scriptural terms the movement of world history, it tends to be more *teleological* than *eschatological*.²² Newbigin imagines in Christ's announcement of God's Reign the turning point or dividing line of human history. It is Christ's announcement of the Reign of God with his death and resurrection that now unveils what must come about; God has revealed Godself and now persons will encounter this God in history's cataclysmic last days. What makes this move teleological is that Newbigin assumes some level of *coherence* on the part of the church in telling the story of human history. He assumes that in Scripture and the revelation event of Christ that all the pieces for making sense of the end, so to speak, are in play. What will come is what *must* come. History is marching toward its end that must be because it is what God the Father has decided.

Newbigin and Missional Leadership

The challenge that both implications present for our discussion of Christian leadership, however, is that they do not account for the plurality of stories and practices that make up any congregation *and* the partial, fluid—

²² I am drawing from Pannenberg in this distinction. For Pannenberg, the classical distinction between *eternity* and *time* muddled eschatology in an aporia. A *teleological* view of future identifies that we in some sense already have the pieces for our future: "Aristotle defined freedom as having in oneself the end for which one is... Even for us, being our own future is of the essence of freedom. But we do not have our future in ourselves. It lies beyond our present. Hence we are not the origin of our freedom in terms of the future" (410). See Wolhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols., vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1991), 405-15. Newbigin would probably agree with the sentiment of this statement, but he did not develop any substantive eschatology in his writing that demonstrates the *newness* of what God *will freely do* and the implications of that for the present. Kenneson also sees Newbigin as lacking a robust eschatology. See Philip D. Kenneson, "Trinitarian Missiology: Mission as Face-to-Face Encounter," in *A Scandalous Prophet: The Way of Mission after Newbigin*, ed. Thomas F. Foust, et al. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2002).

even fragmentary—nature of public discourse. Practices certainly embody a tradition, but even in a hierarchically arranged and moderately sectarian environment, practices and the stories that inform identity are continually under negotiation from those inside and outside the community.²³ Organizational theories such as Social Network Theory demonstrate the multiple organizations and sets of relationships that persons and organizations participate in.²⁴ Moreover, the pragmatist ethical tradition identifies the negotiated and weak nature of any social cohesion.²⁵ We do not need to agree on ontological first principles in order to participate in a social practice together or agree on a particular ethical agenda. Similarly, the cultivation of any public identity for the church is a fluid and shifting identity shaped by forces both from within and without. The coherence of the story that the church *does* tell might never be as singular or as linear as Newbigin suggests.

But these challenges do not negate the important impulse in Newbigin's thought and the missional church conversation. Whatever identity the church has—public or otherwise—must be shaped because of and in relationship to story of Jesus Christ and the triune God. The problem is that one-to-one relationships between narrative and practice, between word and referent, or

²³ See Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology*, Guides to Theological Inquiry (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997).

²⁴ Martin Kilduff and Wenpin Tsai, *Social Networks and Organizations* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2003).

²⁵ Jeffrey Stout's appropriation of the pragmatist tradition is particularly useful here. He makes the case that public discourse *is* a legitimate practice and tradition in Northern America, which means that attempts to set religious communities and traditions over and against the incoherent or totalist *secular sphere* rely on an illegitimate picture of what constitutes public discourse. See Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*. New Forum Books (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004). Kathryn Tanner also argues for the necessarily weak nature of social cohesion, because people often do not need to agree on first principles to act together or find some level of shared meaning. See Kathryn Tanner, "Public Theology and the Character of Public Debate," in *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 1996, ed. Harlan Beckley (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1996).

between action and response are difficult to maintain. It seems as if the quest for fidelity to the gospel revealed in Christ forces the church to choose between competing totalisms: the Christian or the secular story.²⁶ Yet—and this is the point of the previous paragraph—such ideological purity is impossible to *define*, let alone *practice*.

Newbigin already gets us a long way toward addressing this problem. He is, after all, the one who made the case quite convincingly that there is no *pure* gospel, but only the gospel embodied in a people and culture and language.²⁷ But for Newbigin this does not hopelessly imminentize the gospel into the conventional wisdom of the age. The gospel threatens to break and critique the linguistic and cultural forms that hold it because it is not the property of the church, but rather the gift of God. Similarly, Newbigin's understanding of mission in relationship to the doctrine of election presents a compelling picture of the intersubjective reality of the gospel:

There is no salvation except in the mutual relatedness that reflects the eternal relatedness-in-love which is the being of the triune God. Therefore salvation can only be the way of election: one must be chosen and called and sent with the word of salvation to the other. *But therefore also the elect can receive the gift of salvation only through those who are not the elect.*²⁸

What Newbigin does not do, as far as I know, is place these two insights into conversation. What if we understood Christian fidelity to the gospel as something that can only emerge in openness to the *other* as gift of God? How would this critique Newbigin's understanding of *public* and the *public identity* of the church? What is missional leadership in light of *this* understanding of church and gospel?

²⁶ See Goheen, "The Urgency of Reading the Bible as One Story."

²⁷ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*.

²⁸ Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, 77.

Emphasis mine.

In the next two sections, I will point toward the theoretical and theological resources for developing a more fluid, dynamic, and messy understanding of Christian identity *vis-à-vis* the world. I will do this by taking these broader concerns about congregational identity and a public gospel and envision them through the lens of missional leadership. By reframing missional leadership as a *practice* of cultivating a fluid, public identity, I hope to outline the kind of theoretical and theological work that needs to be done to push the missional church and missional leadership conversation further in this direction.

Christian Leadership and Cultivation of Identity

Peter Northouse begins his overview of leadership theories by defining leadership as “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal.”²⁹ By defining leadership as a process, Northouse wants to emphasize the interactive and nonlinear nature of leadership, where a leader influences and is influenced by the group. Although Northouse does not qualify the definition further, it could certainly suggest a fluid sense of both agency *and* roles. If leadership is a process, whereby one influences another in a way that a group achieves a common goal, is it possible that the role of leader can be a shifting role as the group negotiates some common action? This is certainly the expanded vision of leadership offered by Heifetz and Linsky.³⁰ The concept of *practice* can help clarify at this point by articulating the way in which an outcome (common action through the exercise of leadership) can be produced through socially-complex activity that is not reducible to subject-object, agent-group dichotomies.

²⁹ Peter Guy Northouse, *Leadership: Theory and Practice*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2007), 3.

³⁰ Ronald A. Heifetz and Martin Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002).

Leadership as a Practice

The Aristotelean concept of *practices* has enjoyed academic prestige in the past few decades. It has proved particularly helpful to conceptualize the way in which traditions and stories are embodied in particular communities of shared action and the way in which these communal practice-traditions give shape, meaning, and coherence to lives.³¹ Practices have also proved useful for theologians to get beyond agent-object, individual-group, theory-praxis dualisms in a way that imagines the church as a community of practice that embodies the Christian tradition by apprenticing people in particular activities.³² In this way, the concept of *practices* has been used to assert the identity of the church as a counter-culture, or as demonstrating an *alternative public* or *polis* in competition with other publics.³³

³¹ The retrieval of practices is due, in part, to the influence of the virtue ethics of both Alasdair MacIntyre and Stanley Hauerwas. A crucial starting point for defining practices, though, is found in MacIntyre. See Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 187. A practice is “any coherent and complex form of a socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.” MacIntyre appeals to the game of chess as an example of a practice with a standard of excellence, such as fair and competitive play, and a set of goods—the improvement a certain type of analytical skill and “strategic imagination.” As a historically extended and communal practice, one must learn chess from another so as to develop the proper virtues that enable one to perform the practice according to the standards of excellence. In MacIntyre’s example, he argues the “good” of winning a prize or social status in the game of chess is not a “good” of the practice because it is not internal to it. These goods external to chess can be sought in numerous venues and so are not goods inherent in the practice of chess.

³² See Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).

³³ See Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony*. Reinhard Hütter, *Suffering Divine Things: Theology as Church Practice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm.B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2000).

However, these uses of *practice* depend upon a hierarchical and Aristotelean master-apprentice conception of a virtuous social community. It is the master that imparts to the apprentice the capacity for excellence in the practice and thus the goods of the tradition, whereas the apprentice does not significantly contribute to the exercise or excellence of the practice. They also assume some level of incommensurability between the traditions of rival communities of practice. Thus, the historically-continuous argument about the goods of a practice that constitutes a tradition is an *intra-community* argument. One must be apprenticed into the community—and learn the language—to understand and to provide any significant influence on the tradition.³⁴

It is easy to see why such a conception is valuable in the kind of social environment that Newbigin exposes. However, this understanding of practices is fundamentally untenable. It errs by not taking into consideration the amorphous and fluid boundaries that exist between various *storied* communities of practice, which take place simply on account of these communities sharing language and some level of public discourse and action with rival communities.³⁵ Anyone who has spent time in congregations can attest to the divergent meanings that persons will draw from shared practices, and the different ways in which tradition is appropriated

³⁴ I have in mind particularly the work of MacIntyre who has made the incommensurability of traditions most apparent in this framework. See Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition: Being Gifford Lectures Delivered in the University of Edinburgh in 1988* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990). This kind of incommensurability is *not* universally accepted among those who write about practices. For example, there is great diversity in the Bass and Volf volume. However, this provides its own challenges in that practices can (in that volume at least) mean almost anything. See Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass, eds., *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*.

³⁵ Kathryn Tanner, "Theological Reflection and Christian Practices," in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2002).

because of the fundamentally different paths that people have walked.

But this is not to say that the category of *practice* is useless. Rather, we must be very clear what we mean by it. For the task at hand, I argue that a congregational *practice* is a shared activity in a community that focuses an on-going, historically-continuous argument regarding the goods of a tradition *to be actualized* in a particular place or time. There are three important implications for this definition. First, it is a shared activity that focuses an argument regarding the goods of a tradition. In this way, I agree with Kathryn Tanner that cultural symbols and activities focus an argument rather than embodying social cohesion.³⁶ For example, the symbol of the American flag only constitutes social cohesion in a shallow sense.³⁷ When persons on the right or left are pushed to say *how* the symbol functions or *what* it means, the fragility of the cohesion is revealed. Similarly, practices in a congregation such as sacraments, hospitality, worship, and theological/spiritual discernment do not provide immediate cohesion or meaning. Rather, they focus an argument regarding what that practice *should* mean or do. Second, practices focus the argument on the goods produced by the practice in relationship to the broader Christian tradition—prioritizing, of course, Scripture. Third, the goods of the practice in relationship to the tradition are always *contextualized* in that any meaning, cohesion, or virtue that a practice produces cannot be understood apart from its ambiguous relationship with broader cultural influences.

If missional leadership is a distinct *practice* within a congregation, then, we might think of it in this way: missional leadership is the discursive practice whereby congregations discern their identity by negotiating a plausible telling of the Scriptural story for their particular place and time. By understanding it as a practice, missional leadership becomes something bigger than the

³⁶ Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology*.

³⁷ See Tanner, “Public Theology and the Character of Public Debate.”

missional leader. And by focusing on it as a practice that produces goods associated with *identity*, we are able to carry forward the valid concern of Newbigin for the reclamation of a gospel-centered identity in the Western church. But what is meant by *identity-formation*? What is at stake in naming leadership as a practice of identity formation?

The Improv and Rhetorical Processes of Identity Formation

Missional transformation requires that congregations construct an identity that is faithful to the public declaration of Christ regarding the nearness of the Reign of God. Such an identity necessitates a way of life that is public and engaged in the world. Newbigin refers to the congregation in such terms as a hermeneutic of the gospel.³⁸ Roxburgh and Romanuk refer repeatedly to the discernment of the church regarding God's activity in its *context*.³⁹ I have argued thus far that missional leadership is a *practice* of cultivating a public identity which embodies the good news of God in Jesus Christ. But neither the concept of practice nor the theological constructs of Newbigin help to articulate the way in which ecclesial identity is shaped and formed. For a sending Trinity, an appeal to church practices does not account for the way in which any public identity—even the construction of boundaries—is a social and relational negotiation.

Organizational sensemaking literature has drawn together a number of social-constructivist, hermeneutical, and cultural-linguistic perspectives on organizational life. Sensemaking describes the way in which organizational realities are at least in-part enacted, that is, socially-constructed. Building upon linguistic theories, sensemaking points toward a much more fluid understanding of leadership and organizational life:

To talk about sensemaking is to talk about reality as an ongoing accomplishment that takes form

³⁸ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 222.

³⁹ Roxburgh and Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World*, 20.

when people make retrospective sense of their situations in which they find themselves and their creations. There is a strong reflexive quality to these processes. People make sense of things by seeing a world on which they already imposed what they believe.⁴⁰

Two important implications emerge from sensemaking. First, the phenomenon of sensemaking points to the self as socially conditioned in that sensemaking is “grounded in identity construction.”⁴¹ That is, “the sensemaker is himself or herself an ongoing puzzle undergoing continual redefinition, coincident with presenting some self to others and trying to decide which self is appropriate.”⁴² The process of sensemaking, then, is grounded in persons acting in a way that projects an identity and then learning by observing the consequences. The person is both active *and* reactive in *receiving* and *constructing* identity. Sensemaking asks “How can I know who I am until I see what they do?”⁴³

Second, sensemaking demonstrates the way in which language and action *enact* the very conditions with which the sensemaker must reckon. This is especially true of organizations. Often, obstacles faced by organizations are realities created by the decisions, practices, and language of the organization. Indeed, organizations are socially-constructed, *enacted* realities.⁴⁴ The phenomenon of enactment means that traditional distinctions between stimulus and response—or, for our present discussion, influencer and influenced—and traditional talk about the *result* of a process must be held loosely. Communities are continually creating and interpreting. To speak of a result

⁴⁰ Karl E. Weick, *Sensemaking in Organizations*. Foundations for Organizational Science (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1995), 15.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 20.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁴⁴ I am intentionally presenting two ontologies in this sentence. Weick argues that talk of sensemaking oscillates between social-constructivist and realist ontology, because it is an attempt to understand the activities of those who are not ontological purists.

or influence is to make an artificial break in an ongoing process of “relatings.”⁴⁵

Sensemaking dynamics are also present in light of organizational identity, for organizational identities and institutionalized processes of interaction are socially-constructed and fluid realities whose participants are engaged in other social matrixes beyond the organization. Although leadership in an organization certainly involves concern for results and common goals (as artificial as they might be amidst the ongoing relational processes), its primal function is to cultivate plausible corporate identities. The fluid set of identities any organization has at a given time must plausibly cohere with present structures, goals, partners, market, etc. Leadership, so understood, is not a process that results in organizational control dependent on an *accurate* read of the corporate identity within a given matrix of relationships. Such a quest fails to address with honesty the fluid nature of social reality. Leadership, rather, is an intersubjective, corporate practice of testing, shaping, and grasping fluid corporate identities. There are, of course, those in *positions* of leadership, and they hold an important, but not determinative role in identity-formation.

The organizational realities described by sensemaking demonstrate both the improvisational and rhetorical nature of missional leadership. As a practice of cultivating identity, it is a relational process rather than an objective status. It involves ongoing negotiation between cultural, biblical, and traditional materials. Even a counter-cultural identity exists as a cultural production and recognizes itself as such. A congregational identity conceived as resident-alien is achieved concretely by recognizing itself as standing against or apart from some set of cultural practices, narratives, and habits. One might say that such an identity is achieved by the imaginative and innovative use of existing cultural materials. This is part of what the incarnation means for the church. Missional leadership operates in such an economy of

⁴⁵ Weick, *Sensemaking in Organizations*, 33.

enactment and response, both within the congregation and in the broader public. So the cultivation of a missional identity is also simultaneously a movement of cultural hermeneutics.⁴⁶ It is in important ways “parasitic” upon cultural symbols and narratives.⁴⁷

The world, then, is constitutive of a missional identity in dynamic and unpredictable ways. As Newbigin and others demonstrate, the Scripture that gives shape to the discursive theological practices of the church is not a clan-history but rather a *cosmological* story of the world created from and within the life of God. Moreover, the text might be considered *missional* in that it emerged from within communities struggling to discern the same identity issues in relationship to how they could discern the Spirit of God at work in the world.⁴⁸ That is, Scripture invites the church to consider the horizon of the world in considering its own faithful response to God’s grace in Jesus Christ. The church, then, exists *within* the world.

The experimental and fluid nature of identity-formation means that leadership is *improvisational* in nature. Like the musicians in the coffee shop, leadership in congregations involves a continual process of learning what it means to be the church together in a particular time and place.⁴⁹ This improvisation is primarily discursive, in that the formation of a fluid identity is a

⁴⁶ Graham Ward’s work is helpful here. See Graham Ward, *Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁴⁷ Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology*, 112-19.

⁴⁸ Although the search for a “grand narrative” is problematic, Wright’s prejudice to read the Scripture as a missional text is fruitful. See Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006).

⁴⁹ This is an important place where the church can learn from *learning organization* literature, which is part of the literature-base that funds Cormode’s and Van Gelder’s work. See Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, rev. and updated. ed. (New York: Doubleday, 2006). Chris Argyris, *Knowledge for Action: A Guide to Overcoming Barriers to Organizational Change*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993).

surprising process that draws from diverse resources and voices; for even though Scripture remains the authoritative voice, the multiple ways in which it is appropriated and its story told means that a cacophony of voices will take congregational identity formation in unpredictable directions.

The discursive nature of improvisational identity means also that missional leadership is a rhetorical task in at least two important ways. First, those who exercise missional leadership in congregations function as *rhetors*.⁵⁰ Since missional leadership is a process of cultivating conversation and discernment around the identity of the congregation in relationship to God's dynamic activity in the world, those who exercise such leadership must draw from the biblical, congregational, and cultural narratives in an *ad hoc* manner to make an argument for a particular way of life in the church. A successful argument provides reasons that cohere with Christian tradition and practices (*logos*); appeal to the hope, intention, and desire cultivated by the gospel (*pathos*); and are given by persons who concretely demonstrate some kind of congruence with such an identity (*ethos*).⁵¹ But since such an argument is oriented toward the participation of the congregation in the world, it will also draw upon cultural frameworks and materials. The *logos-pathos-ethos* of a rhetorical argument is constructed with a concrete audience in mind.

But the construction of an argument and the actual discourse of argument are two different things. An argument is constructed with an *ideal* audience in mind. This audience is an imaginative construct in the same way

⁵⁰ Patrick R. Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger: A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 130ff. Keifert suggests that worship planners should be considered *rhetors* who draw upon biblical and cultural resources to cultivate in worship a public imagination, a space for the kind of evangelical conversation that moves persons toward a public identification with Christ.

⁵¹ For an extended argument regarding the relationship of rhetoric and theology, see David S. Cunningham, ed., *To Teach, to Delight, and to Move: Theological Education in a Post-Christian World* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2004).

that the *social* is such a construct. The delivery of an argument, however, is an intersubjective event. In a concrete interaction, the one hearing an argument unfold can cross her arms in suspicion, turn away in disgust, nod in agreement, or cut the speaker off mid-sentence. All these actions contribute to the unfolding of the argument and the whole action of identity-formation in important ways, for such responses may cause the rhetor to change tack or even abandon the argument.

The intersubjectivity of discourse draws attention to the second way in which missional leadership is a rhetorical practice. A rhetor does not only adjust her argument for the audience, but she also creates space for a response. As others respond, she moves from rhetor to audience, thus creating a rhetorical event. Missional leadership cultivates space for such rhetorical practices of “*dialogical* thickness,” wherein “many voices—some invited, some unwelcome, some acknowledged and some not—sound in an unsorted cacophony whereby we are led to where we had not intended to go, wherein things are called into existence that do not yet exist, and wherein things we have treasured and relied on are brought to naught.”⁵² Missional identity is created and re-created in and through such an event. It is ad hoc and improvisational. Yet it is also an act of spiritual discernment as the discourse is focused around the participation of the congregation in the mission of God. Missional leadership, then, is an *improvisational and rhetorical practice of cultivating a fluid, public, and gospel-shaped identity*.

Conclusion: The God Question

The theological questions that this approach raises require significantly more space than what is left here. However, in the critique of Newbigin, I have demonstrated places where I think missional leadership needs further theological reflection. I have noted that

⁵² Walter Brueggemann, “Dialogical Thickness in a Monologic Culture,” *Theology Today* 64, no. 3 (October 2007): 323.

Newbigin works with a Trinity firmly planted within the Western tradition and from the assumption of the *revelatory* (read objective) value of the Trinity. If, however, the missional church conversation can participate in the recent theological reflection that has drawn from the Eastern tradition, then *processional* understanding of mission imbedded in missional church logic can be fruitfully critiqued.⁵³ Moreover, moving toward a social understanding of the Trinity and a relational ontology has significant implications for how *truth* and *public* are understood.⁵⁴ Truth becomes an intersubjective reality rather than something objective that a knowing subject can claim or hold over-and-against another.

The question of fidelity to the gospel and revelation also requires missional theologians to rethink the flat, apocalyptic eschatology of Newbigin. I hinted earlier that Newbigin works with a *teleological* eschatology. What this means is that history is understood linearly, as marching toward its fulfillment in the judgment seat of Christ. But the resurrection and a robust pneumatology invite us to consider the ways in which God is—in Moltmann's terms—*the coming One* who is both *adventus* and *novum*.⁵⁵ God is *coming* and God is *breaking through* with what is altogether new and mysterious. With a more robust eschatology, the church does not simply look backwards to what God has already revealed about the future in Scripture (i.e. the judgment seat of Christ), but also anticipates what new thing it is that God is doing. This requires an open future, porous boundaries, improvisational orientation, and profound hope in the God who raised Jesus from the dead.

⁵³ For an overview of the discussion and what is at stake, see Zscheile, "The Trinity, Leadership, and Power."

⁵⁴ Kenneson, "Trinitarian Missiology: Mission as Face-to-Face Encounter."

⁵⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*, 1st Fortress Press ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996).