DESIGN THINKING FOR MISSIOLOGY:
AN AGILE FRAMEWORK FOR LOCAL CONTEXTUALIZATION

by

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ABSTRACT

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A Framework for Agile Contextualization
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A rapidly changing world and a rapidly changing global church are creating dynamic new pressures for local and global mission. Missiology seeks to understand how to bring the Mission of God into the world, striving to balance biblical faithfulness and effective cultural contextualization, toward Gospel transformation in the lives of people in all places. This complex challenge increasingly requires that our mission-in-practice be developed with adaptive leadership, innovation, and agility in a rapidly changing world. “Design Thinking” is an innovation discipline applied to organizational leadership emerging from the cultural and institutional ecosystem of Silicon Valley, concerned with agile innovation methodology and human-centered impact, grounded in the tools of the social sciences. This thesis demonstrates how the vocabulary, method, and insights of Design Thinking can provide a helpful, values-aligned framework for designing effective models of local mission, with sufficient methodological flexibility to serve a wide range of missions structures and applications in the 21st century.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The world seems to be changing today at an accelerated rate, and a number of broad social and economic trends are presenting new challenges to the Church in all parts of the world. The Church is sent out on mission to testify to the kingdom of God to the edges of the world, and the current challenge of that mission is the speed with which the world is currently changing. Global trend-acceleration, in almost every cultural context, raises new questions about how the Church might live out its mission faithfully and effectively today.¹

The World Is Changing Quickly

The world is changing because of a number of complex and inter-related factors, including unprecedented demographic shifts, rapid urbanization, and society-wide technological change. A few statistics can highlight some global macro-trends: First, the world is undergoing one of the most significant demographic shifts in history. World population grew

¹ An entire sub-genre of this sort of “acceleration” cultural commentary has been published in recent years. See, for example, Friedman’s The World is Flat and Thank You for Being Late and Hot Flat and Crowded, or Kevin Kelley’s What Technology Wants and The Inevitable, or Alec Ross’ The Industries of the Future, or Ford’s The Rise of Robots, or Florida’s The Rise of the Creative Class. Or maybe more adjacent to my interest here, Jenkins The Next Christendom, to name a very limited few.
from its first one billion people to its current 7.3 billion people in just the last 200 years.\textsuperscript{2}

Lower infant mortality and higher birth rates in emerging countries mean that roughly half of all of humanity is now under 25 years of age. Over 50\% of the growth of the world’s population in the next 30 years will be in 8 “global south” countries - D. R. Congo, Nigeria, Pakistan, Indonesia, India, Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Uganda.\textsuperscript{3}

Secondly, urbanization is perhaps the most noteworthy result of the modern population explosion: rapid industrialization, expanded consumer markets, and the move towards a post-industrial knowledge economy all drive the growth of cities. The world shifted from being predominantly rural to predominantly urban for the first time in history in 2007. In China alone, the population grew from 13\% urban in 1953 to 53\% urban in 2013. By 2050, 66\% of the world’s population are projected to live in cities. In countries with high degrees of income inequality and without a robust middle class, urbanization has been most pronounced. This most often leads to the elite and the poor in the same urban environment, often right next to one another.

The world is also changing because of the growing secularization of mainstream culture and cultural institutions. Globally, while religious affiliation is actually on the rise, the secularization of the formerly-Christianized western world is a significant cultural shift. The decline of Christianity in Europe has been widely commented on,\textsuperscript{4} and the trends in North America are lagging, but parallel. The broader movement towards pluralistic and secular cul-

\textsuperscript{2} United Nations Population Fund, \url{www.unfpa.org}
\textsuperscript{3} From Mandryk, Jason, \textit{Operation World}, during a panel on “the State of the World,” at the Lausanne Young Leader’s Gathering, Jakarta, Indonesia, August 2016.
\textsuperscript{4} See, for example, Jenkins, Philip, \textit{The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity}, Oxford University Press, 2002, or the Pew Research dataset on \textit{Global Religious Futures}. 

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tural paradigms in the West has forced missiologists and church leaders to rethink their most basic assumptions about the interrelationship between the church, culture, and mission.\(^5\) In the global south, the trend has been the growth of Christianity, predominantly charismatic, in Africa, Latin America, and Asia, prompting new missional questions arising from a young, “emerging” church.

The world is also changing because of the proliferation of new technology. Underneath the explosion of urbanization and the emergence of a global secular supra-culture is increasing access to affordable personal technology devices. This has democratized access to information, and facilitated the creative means of content production by anyone, creating a new online semi-meritocracy in the field of ideas. This has driven the rapid expansion of (some) cultural trends, given rise to a “technological culture” that crosses borders, and allowed the formation of technologically-mediated relationships and networks, strengthening the ability of niche interest groups to find and relate to each other around the world. Information is now for the masses, which correlates to low-cost and high-scale distribution of the best information - and the stakes have never been higher for those people and corporations who create the information and dominate the most popular distribution channels.

### New Pressure on the Mission of the Church

\(^5\) At a popular level, some notable contributions to “Post-Christendom” ecclesiology and missiology include Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America (Guder, 1998), The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church (Hirsch, 2006), Exiles: Living Missionally in a Post-Christian Culture (Frost, 2006), The Ministry of the Missional Church (Van Gelder, 2007), Missional Renaissance: Changing the Scorecard for the Church (McNeal, 2009), Introducing the Missional Church (Roxburgh, 2009), and The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st c. Church (Frost and Hirsch, 2013).
This puts pressure on the effective witness of the now-global church, as it bears witness to the Kingdom of God in an astounding range of situational contexts that are simultaneously merging into some macro global trends, and also diversifying into a seemingly infinite number of localized sub-cultures. For example, in “global” cities, there is increasingly a cross-boundary urban similarity, mediated by technology and travel, creating a type of standardized urban reality in the largest cities, separate from the suburban or rural communities outside the cities - meaning New Yorkers might have more in common with people in Paris than with people in Pennsylvania.

In light of the world’s growing cities (with their drive toward economic inequality), secularization (with its hegemonic materialist worldview), and technology (with its drive toward individualized access to everything), the church, especially in the West, faces real challenges of response. There is the challenge of plausibility and credibility in the face of secularization, materialism, and humanist ethics. There is the challenge of social replacement, with churches increasingly replaced by other personalized forms of community and spirituality, based on affinity, geography, workplace, or ideology. There is the challenge of economics, as even in places where Christian commitment is relatively high, people remain squeezed for marginal time and resources, with the pressure of the academic, social, technological, and economic commitments required to keep up in a rapidly evolving economy. The work of faithful presence is, in a sense, more difficult than it used to be.

These trends require a response if the church is to sustain its missional witness into the future. Churches and ministries responding to yesterday’s cultural conditions and answering yesterday’s spiritual questions will be unable to find the resonance they desire. The
good news of Jesus has not lost its power, but in many cases it has lost its clarity. New forms of intelligent, thoughtful mission are always needed, to connect the unchanging power of the Gospel narrative to the plurality of unique and rapidly changing contexts the church finds herself in everywhere.

We Are All Designing Mission, Are We Designing Faithfully?

Responding to these cultural trends is the question of contextualization. My fundamental assertion for grounding this study is that every Christian and every missional institution has a contextualized missiology, whether they realize it or not. Said differently - we are all designing our approach to mission in the world, but not always intentionally or reflectively. The question this assertion begs is whether one’s missiology is contextualized effectively, and under what conditions. The rest of this paper will explore the dimensions to that question, and then construct a design-based framework for a more intentional and adaptive contextualization methodology.

Words like “contextualization” and “missiology” have often been seen as the realm of overseas missionaries, but in a 21st-century global perspective, there is little functional difference between contextualizing “over there” and contextualizing “here.” Anyone who is

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6 I use the word “institution” in its broad sense. A missional community, a small church, a large church, parachurch organizations, nonprofits, funding bodies, and missions organizations are all institutions in this sense.

7 This is analogous to the way that anthropology developed as the social science for people groups far away, and Sociology developed initially as an observational social science for more advanced western European cultures - but even with substantial differences, they are methodologically and conceptually built on some of the same assumptions. See Taber, Charles R. To Understand the World, To Save the World: The Interface Between Missiology and the Social Sciences. Harrisburg, Pa: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2000.
doing the work of the Church, either vocationally, or as a lay leader, or in a para-church organizational context, is “doing missiology,” and has a particular framework, philosophy, and set of practices that they have developed, often implicitly or without much reflection. Contextualization is often implicit and assumed, based on existing assumptions about people, culture, philosophy, theology, economics, and more. Even further, contextualized mission-in-practice is rarely reflected on, evaluated, or realigned in order to adjust for impact, fruitfulness, and revival. If a person or a local ministry is deemed theologically or biblically “faithful,” or more likely, is operating at its maximum capacity with no room to breathe, they are rarely responsible for further reflection on their missiological assumptions. We keep working hard, and give the rest to God.

Yet in this climate, contextualizing mission effectively for a rapidly changing world is more important than ever, and is an essential question of stewardship. Jesus demonstrates a highly contextualized ministry through his incarnation into the Jewish world, and the apostles carried out the Great Commission with cultural contextualization at the very core of their early mission activity (seen at Pentecost, and beyond). Good contextualization can unleash spiritual power and revival, and connect the invitation of the Gospel to people’s hearts without rocks or weeds in the way. Good contextualization matters, and sharing the tools and frameworks of good contextualization for the entire church is important to make it faithful, fruitful, and well-contextualized at all levels.

**Design Thinking Can Improve Missional Contextualization**
However, churches and mission organizations are not the only institutions finding
themselves disrupted by a changing world, which means there are other analogues we can
evaluate for their responses. The private sector, the social sector, and the public sector all
have their own rapidly changing (but interconnected) environments that must be navigated in
order to remain viable in light of their own “mission.” Every organization must determine its
own means of responsive “contextualization” in order to keep customers, reach people, re-
main sustainable, achieve impact, and accomplish their mission into an uncertain future.

While the Church is a fundamentally different type of organization, these adjacent
elements can be instructive. Out of these challenges emerge a number of methods for rapid
learning and innovation, designed to help organizations solve human problems and deliver
value to people in fast, feasible, and sustainable ways as the world accelerates. The growing
demand for “adaptive” and “agile” organizational leadership has been a noteworthy trend in
the business world and beyond.  

A recent and very popular paradigm for developing competencies of organizational
agility in the face of complex problems has been the emergence of Design Thinking. This
approach takes the collaborative and exploratory methodology of designers, and applies their
framework beyond the traditional domains of design. Instead of visual arts or technological
engineering, design “thinking” is now applied to products, services, programs, experiences,
interactions, relationships, and systems. Design Thinking is a flexible framework that draws
its insights primarily from the observation and research tools of the social sciences, and pro-

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8 See noteworthy titles such as The Practice of Adaptive Leadership (Heifitz, 2009), The Lean Startup (Ries, 2011), Accelerate: Building Strategic Agility for a Faster-Moving World (Kotter, 2014), and Sprint: How to Solve Big Problems and Test New Ideas (Knapp, 2016).
vides a wider lens for re-framing problems, generating solutions, identifying real constraints, and quickly testing a hypothesis. Most relevant for Christian mission is the way design thinking is fundamentally empathy-oriented, and derives all of its data and solutions from up-close observation of real, situational human needs - and is thus highly contextual.

*So, my thesis is that Design Thinking contributes a flexible methodology and language toward a more adaptive contextualization process for Christian mission.* Design Thinking is contextual and people-focused, which keeps it anchored in some of the core philosophical constraints of missiology, but provides a language, a method, and a toolbox for unpacking cultural realities, uncovering latent solutions and possibilities, and creating a cycle of feedback, evaluation, and learning that can help churches and and ministries remain agile and flexible in changing environments, without forcing them to compromise their identity, calling, theology, or core message. Design thinking is a methodology that can contribute toward developing theologically faithful expressions of highly contextual, adaptable mission, quickly.

This thesis will (1) explore the contours and requirements of a Biblical missiology, (2) explore the dimensions of faithful contextualization, (3) introduce Design Thinking as a parallel discipline, and (4) synthesize the Design Thinking methodology towards constructing a “design” approach to ministry contextualization.
CHAPTER 2

THE GOD-GIVEN MISSION OF THE CHURCH

What is Mission?

Mission is essential to the identity of the church. Christians are constituted as a community of people “on mission” forward and outward into the world (Mt. 28), with an embodied proclamation of the good news of what God has done, and an open invitation to everyone to participate in the Kingdom of God. The word mission comes from the Latin “to send,” and assumes one being sent. This sending is given and governed by a divinely-revealed Word about God and his purposes in the world. Christians are a people on a mission from God.

The earliest patterns of Christian mission are derived primarily from accounts of the first few centuries of the early church, as the first disciples were sent to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the Earth (Acts 1:8). It was the Apostle Paul who journeyed through Asia Minor, sailed for Rome, and longed to travel to Spain, the edge of the known world, pioneering new Christian communities along the way, and instructing them in Christian faithfulness and mission with remarkable cultural skill.¹ Mission was at the heart of the explosion of the young Christian movement of the first 3 centuries A.D.

While a full chronology of the history of mission is beyond my scope, a few recent mile markers are helpful. For example, after years of relatively stable European Christen-

dom, the Jesuits of the 17th century began to self-consciously employ the concept of a broader mission outside the church fellowship. With the Reformation concept of the priesthood of all believers, the “hierarchical” and “Christendom” modes of mission began to be replaced by a more individualized responsibility for mission. This energy for mission expanded relatively quickly among Protestants at the dawn of the early international missionary movements of the 17th and 18th centuries. It was William Carey who re-popularized the Great Commission as a church-wide responsibility, with his 1729 work “An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathen.” As awareness of the broader world expanded, the concept of a truly global mission became reality as well. Mission has always been the identity of the church as it has grown, but has only become a truly self-reflective discipline in the past few centuries, and only something like an a theoretical pursuit in the past 100 years. This growing awareness and reflection on the missional responsibility of the church through the past few centuries came to be understood as missiology. In its popular Western usage, missiology has traditionally come to mean the theoretical discipline that studies the expansion of Christianity from its geographical and cultural centers in the West, to the rest of the world, and the practical discipline of constructing real-world paradigms for faithful Christian witness and expansion.

Mission, however, is broader than the Western missionary movement. Christopher Wright, in *The Mission of God*, defined mission as “our committed participation as God’s people, at God’s invitation and command, in God’s own mission within the history of the

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world for the redemption of God’s creation.”

Another definition focuses on the communication act intrinsic to mission, saying, “Mission is no longer primarily understood as the geographical expansion of Christianity, but rather as the task given to God’s people everywhere to communicate the good news not only with their words but also with their lives and deeds.”

The Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization, the largest worldwide evangelical umbrella organization focused on Christian mission, defined mission as “The whole church taking the whole gospel to the whole world” in their late 20th-century gatherings in Switzerland and Manila, recently affirmed in their 2010 document, *the Cape Town Commitment*. The “whole Gospel,” implied in this definition, is broader than just the communication act of the Gospel content, but implies the entirety of “word and deed” and “worship” and “life” and “community” that are to mark Christians as a sign of the coming Kingdom of God.

Mission has moved from an activity on the margins of Christendom to a central activity of the worldwide Church.

These various definitions of mission all point to a dimension of the same reality - that all individual Christians, and the Church as a body, have an imperative to proclaim and to enact the good news about who God is, what Jesus has done, and what God has promised about the future, wherever they are. This imperative encompasses the entire church and the entire world. Thus, missiology is the active examination of the mission of the Church, and is

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the responsibility (indeed, even the identity)\(^6\) of the whole church, regardless of geographic location. In the same way that access to theology and scripture have moved from the clergy and the academy to the laity over time, so then should missiology as a reflective discipline continue to move from the missionaries and the academy to every individual Christian as well.

**Changing Missiological Approaches**

Mission of the last four centuries typically (and often unfortunately) had a default “colonial” shape, given the global realities of the European empires of the 17th to 20th centuries. Even now, mission is often seen in many circles as the idea of cultural and economic expansion from North America or Europe into the territories of Africa, Asia, or the Middle East. However, a half-century of globalization and a re-balancing of world powers in the late 20th century has re-oriented the missiology conversation away from a Western deployment of missionaries to the South and East, and re-oriented it in two trending directions: first, towards a balanced “multi-directional” approach to cross-cultural missions, based on emerging missions energy and resources in other parts of the world, and secondly, towards “local mission,” particularly in western contexts. The second trend towards “localism” emerges as the opportunities of global mission take diminishing importance (and the lessons of colonialism

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\(^6\) Goheen, p.4 - At its best, “missional” describes not a specific activity of the church but the very essence and identity of the church as it takes up its role in God’s story in the context of its culture and participates in God’s mission to the world.
linger in our collective memory), and the challenges of secularization and pluralism in the West continue to grow.

In both instances, missiology has moved away from being the domain of expansionists with a position of cultural hegemony, toward a more collaborative and reflective discipline, rediscovering the early biblical pattern of God’s mission to a multicultural world from a geographically diverse church, as at Pentecost and in Acts. Without anywhere else to now geographically “go,” per se, missiology now has the task of constructing increasingly contextualized approaches to the realities of the new local mission fields, now more proximate to a mature indigenous church in a wide diversity of cultures and subcultures. In some ways, this move toward localism and new diversity of missional expression is a recovery of the spirit of the early church. Now, in all places, we are all as much on mission today - in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8) - as were the very first disciples of Jesus at their initial commissioning.\(^8\)

**Missiology Starts with God**

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\(^7\) This is, of course, not to say that there is not still substantial frontier work to be done among unreached people groups, language groups, and persecuted areas, but rather to highlight the rebalancing taking place in light of the growth of a robust indigenous church in most parts of the global south and east.

\(^8\) The World Council of Churches Ecumenical missionary conference in Mexico City in 1963 described mission as “witness in six continents,” from all six, to each of the other six - every congregation is now a “base” for mission. (From Goheen 2014)
Missiology-proper is an applied discipline, a particular way of reflecting on Biblical theology and determining a way of living in response. Missiology has God, and God alone, as its starting place. We only know what to be on mission for, and how to be on mission, to the extent that we have grounded ourselves sufficiently in understanding what God is on mission for, and how He is on mission. But theological reflection immediately moves toward cultural interpretation, because the church is always rooted in particular contexts. This dynamic space between “theology” and “culture” is the space in which missiology explores and reflects - as Goheen states, “Missiology must remain rooted in the gospel and the Word of God. But it also must address the times and place in which it lives.” Missiology matters for everyone, because it is essentially an active reflection on what the sovereign God of the universe has disclosed about his macro-intentions for the world, and then an active participation in his means of accomplishing them in our local time and place. The space between those two things is Missiology.

Methodologically, then, constructing a local and agile missiology for today first requires a deeply rooted missional theology. Mission must be grounded and guided by understanding the Biblical testimony of God’s purposeful activity through history. It is only here, through a missiological hermeneutic of reading scripture that we may understand exactly what God’s missional means and ends have always been, and how they give normative au-

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9 In a sense, theology comes FROM mission. “Contemporary New Testament scholars are thus affirming what the systematic theologian Martin Kähler said eight decades ago: Mission is the ‘mother of theology.’ Theology, says Kähler, began as ‘an accompanying manifestation of the Christian mission’ and not as ‘a luxury of the world-dominating church.’ The New Testament writers were not scholars who had the leisure to research the evidence before they put pen to paper. Rather, they wrote in the context of an ‘emergency situation’, of a church which, because of its missionary encounter with the world, was forced to theologize.” David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 16

thority for shaping the mission and work of today's Churches. Constructing a biblical missiology is one of the present essential tasks\textsuperscript{11} of missiological thinkers and theorists, and is the necessary prior step to any particular “applied” missiology. Biblical missiology must give the grounding for particular missiologies. So first, we must explore the mission of God, and then evaluate how that gives direction, telos, shape and constraints for particular missiologies.

**Reading Scripture with a Missional Hermeneutic**

Biblical missiology begins with God, and moves toward reflection on God’s actions in the world as revealed in Scripture. This is the basis for subsequent theological and philosophical reflection. God reveals his mission to us through his Divine Word - both the scriptures, and in the life of Jesus. In one sense, the entire Bible is the story of God actualizing his purposes in the world, and the Bible seems to drop us off right in the middle of the story, with the purposes as yet somewhat unfulfilled, but with an already-but-not-yet glimpse of how it will be fulfilled in our midst. The scriptures reveal that God has a grand telos for all of creation and humanity, which he has bound himself to through his covenant promises. We can know, understand, trust, and participate in God’s promised future. We get to “go where God has told us he is going,” in a sense, because he has revealed in the Biblical narrative.

\textsuperscript{11} Goheen argues that present mission studies require multiple tasks - Fresh reflection on scripture, a reassessment of the history of mission, reflection on the nature of mission, reflection on contextualization, reflection on missional encounter with other religions, mission in cities, and a comprehensive view of the “World Church.”
While “mission” is not the only way to read the scriptures, it is a particularly useful hermeneutic for the church, because it orients our action. Biblical scholar Richard Bauckham says that a missionary hermeneutic of Scripture “will enable us to enter into the bible’s own missionary direction,” and will recognize “how the Bible as a whole tells a story, in some sense a single story, constituting in its overall direction a metanarrative, a narrative about the whole of reality.”12 In other words, reading scripture comprehensively means that God’s mission becomes the central plot device of the scriptural story. Goheen states,

The Bible is a narrative record of God’s mission in and through his people for the sake of the world. It tells a story in which mission is a central thread-God’s mission, Israel’s mission, Christ’s mission, the Spirit’s mission, the church’s mission. Indeed, the whole Bible is itself a missional phenomenon.13

The bible itself is a byproduct of God’s mission, and bears witness to this mission. Reading the Bible with mission at the center14 is a coherent and legitimate way to read the text, in a way that invites active participation in the ongoing plot for Christians today. NT Wright sees the Biblical story of mission as “the story of the whole world, a public truth.”15 The mission of God matters for the whole world, and it is the essential story for understanding how the church is to function in the world in the present.

13 Goheen, 2014
14 “What a difference it would make to biblical studies if full justice were done to the Bible as a book about mission from beginning to end, written by missionaries for missionaries! Given its content and intent, how could one study it in any other way?” Andrew Kirk, *What Is Mission?* p. 20
Defining the Missio Dei

God’s mission in the world is referred to as the Missio Dei - Latin for “the mission of God”. But given its significance as a central narrative theme in scripture, we must evaluate further what the Missio Dei means. God’s purposes have sometimes been described by focusing on the “sending” aspect - the Father to the Son, to the Spirit, to the Church. Christopher Wright speaks more broadly of God’s mission as his “long-term purpose to restore people from all nations and the whole of creation,” focusing on the renewal initiated by God’s promise of good news to Adam and Eve upon the entrance of sin and brokenness into the perfect world. God’s mission has something to do with renewing and restoring what was originally broken.

The Missio Dei is singular, yet has diverse components and themes and implications contained within it. There are many ways that the Missio Dei will manifest itself among the diversity of the created world, as God works to accomplish his ends in all people and places. Goheen states:

The horizon of God’s mission is the ends of the earth. God’s intention is to restore all nations, all cultures, indeed all of the creation from the sinful rebellion of humankind and its effects. So God’s purpose is restorative and com-

16 Wright, Christopher J., Mission of God, p. 17
prehensive, and it involves a battle against the corruption and idolatry that be-
fouls his creation.¹⁷

There is an underlying unity that brings all of the diverse strands of God’s mission into co-
herence.

What do the various definitions have in common? To summarize, God’s mission is
nothing less than the renewal and restoration of the entire world and everything that is bro-
ken, and has been broken within it, accomplished through the work of Jesus and the creation
of a renewed covenant community. The Bible tells this story. To unpack this definition re-
quires a closer look at a few predominant Biblical themes that can be synthesized from the
Biblical text.

First, God’s mission is the creation of a good world to reflect his glory and the joy of
the Trinity. The first action in scripture is God creating the world ex nihilo (Gen 1:1), out of
an overflow of creative love within the community of the Trinity. God is first and foremost a
designer, a creator who, out of his identity and power and essential attributes, creates a gov-
erned and ordered world, with laws and constraints that reflect his own, in a way that is de-
signed to bring freedom and flourishing. This is sometimes overlooked in conversations
around mission, but the first act in the Biblical story is Creation. God brings about a good
creation (1:1-25), and then creates man to reflect his image (1:26-30). He gives them a cul-
tural mandate to steward the world and to reflect his own creative action by bringing out the
latent potential of the world through creative cultivation (1:28-30). The conditions for

¹⁷ Goheen, 2014
agency, design, fruitful growth, and innovation were built into the role of man and the material of the earth from the very beginning.

Second, God’s mission is to establish a covenant people to bring his blessing to the whole world. After the fall of Adam, the entrance of sin and brokenness into the world, and God’s promise of future redemption in the Garden (Gen. 3), the remaining arc of scripture might rightly be seen as God creating a renewed family, out of broken humanity, for himself and for the renewal of the world. This is demonstrated through a series of covenant promises that God makes with particular people in particular places and times throughout the scriptures. God covenants with Noah (Gen. 9:17) that he will sustain the world and keep it from ultimate destruction. He covenants, most notably, with Abraham, that he will “make a great nation out of him” (Gen. 12:2) as the father of God’s new family on earth, pointing forward to an eventual “new Adam”. He develops this family through his covenant with Moses, as he gives the laws on Sinai (Ex. 19-20) that govern God’s relationship with his people, and through the instruction and development of the sacrificial system and the Tabernacle (Ex. 26), a home fit for God, so that he could live directly among his people in fellowship.

The covenant with Israel, through Abraham and then Moses, further demonstrate God’s larger mission, because the covenant is designed to be a relationship that would bring blessing to the rest of the world (Gen. 18:18). Israel was created as the people of God so that he might have the ability to pour out his blessings and invitation to the entire world that had rebelled against him. Eventually through the work of Jesus, the covenant family of God was no longer ethnic Israel, but became open to anyone who would be united to God “by faith,” as Abraham was (Heb. 11:8). In this way, the Missio Dei has increasingly been
fulfilled among the entire world - God inviting normal men and women in particular times and places into his covenant family, regardless of ethnicity or class or status, but by faith in his righteousness (Rom 4). The final words of Christ himself were a commissioning to go to “all nations,” and announce the opportunity to become a part of God’s covenant people (Matt. 28:19). God then gave his Holy Spirit to live among his covenant family, giving wisdom and power and fellowship (Acts 2:1). The church today is the covenant people of God, who are charged with the responsibility of extending God’s blessing and God’s invitation to the rest of humanity. The “covenant community” is an essential part of the Missio Dei.

Third, God’s mission is to rescue his people from slavery and death. God demonstrates a willingness and a commitment through scripture to liberate his people. The archetypal example is the Exodus account, when God intervenes as his people suffered oppression and slavery at the hands of Egypt (Ex. 12-14). His mission is to intervene, to liberate his people and move them from death in Egypt to life in the Promised Land. He takes on the identity of the powerful rescuer, saving his people from oppression and death. Later in Christ, God demonstrates this mission even further. Jesus sacrifices his divine life in order to rescue humanity from the penalty, power, and presence of sin and death. He heals the sick (Matt. 8:1, Mk. 1:40), and works against the oppressive structures and idols that enslave and destroy people.18 Jesus is the champion of God’s liberating mission - the Messiah who defeats the powers of evil through his life, death, and resurrection, and restores the ability for God to live among his people once and for all.

18 Particularly the overreach of the Jewish Temple System, eg., John 2:13-22, Matthew 23, etc.
Fourth, God’s mission is to establish a kingdom for his generous rule (Matt. 3:2, 4:17). God demonstrates through the scriptures that he is not just developing any sort of community, but that he building a kingdom, and a kingdom that has a particular type of governance and law (Matt 4:23, 5-7). Kingdom is an important metaphor in the scriptures, and a sizable portion of the Old Testament is dedicated to the question of how the people of God would respond to God’s kingship - culminating the coronation of David, and the subsequent decline of all of Israel’s kings. There was no human ruler that could oversee Israel with the justice and power and wisdom necessary to set things right. Thus, God promised a new kind of king (Isa. 32:1), that would rule God’s way, as the Messiah and the one who would set injustices right, and build the kind of society that Israel longed for. God did this in Jesus, although it did not look the way that Israel had expected that it would, politically. In Jesus, God introduces a particular kind of kingdom, one “not of this world,” and in the Gospels (especially stories like the transfiguration and the ascension), we are introduced to Jesus as King, and sent out as messengers of that kingdom into the world, to announce that the world’s social powers are not the only authority anymore.

Fifth, God’s mission is to extend his community to the ends of the earth. God had from the beginning designed that his people would be a “blessing to the nations,” and that through Abraham, “all peoples would be blessed.” The life of Jesus was a departure from the covenant exclusivity of Israel’s ethnic identity, as he welcomed and sought out Gentiles (e.g, Jn. 4), bringing them into his kingdom. The early church was given the gift of tongues at Pentecost (Acts 2), with the mandate to go to the literal ends of the earth with the announcement of Jesus’ resurrection and kingdom. The earliest stories of the acts of the disciples
highlight the essential multicultural nature and cross-cultural missionary identity of the early church, in Antioch, Rome, and beyond (e.g. Peter in Acts 10, Paul in Acts 17-28). The history of the church has been the gradual “globalization” of Christianity, with communities of Christians of almost every ethnic identity today. The mission of God is enacted by a global, cross-cultural family that maintains allegiances higher than the state or the tribe or the marketplace.

Finally, God’s mission is to enact the defeat of death and renew all things in a restored creation (Jer 15:19, 1 Peter 5:10, Rev. 21:10). The mission of God concludes almost where it started. It concludes with a humanity in full fellowship with God, with unbroken relationship among God and among themselves. This is the picture of shalom - total restoration, of justice, and of peace. This is the picture of God being King among his people in a restored world, but instead of in a garden, this picture takes place in a city (Rev 21:2). The fullness of the original cultural mandate, without any of the brokenness, leads to a diverse city where God reigns and justice and peace and fruitfulness prosper together among people of every kind. God’s mission concludes with a diversity of persons and diversity of cultures, but in a single community of fellowship with himself. Thus, all of these “goals” yet remain in place. The church lives in the “already-but-not-yet” time, where we see the accomplishment of this mission in Christ, and the deposit of the Holy Spirit among the Church as a promise of complete fulfillment and enactment of this reality in the future. God’s envisioned future includes a new heaven and earth, with his covenant family, fully liberated and free, living under his generous rule with people from every people group on earth, cultivating an unbroken world. Our mission, therefore, must also aim for those things.
God’s purposes outlined above have a few particular “means” for how they are accomplished. If this biblical theology of mission demonstrates God’s intended future for the world, then what might we be able to discern about his particular methods? The scriptures show us how God, in his divine wisdom and sovereign plan, chooses to empower and use the people in his covenant community to obediently serve and accomplish his mission. The Church is that community today, and is invited into the remainder of the story, sent out to enact the mission in the present. The Missio Dei is primarily accomplished through the church.

A few examples highlight this role and responsibility of the church. Scripture mentions the creative power of the Trinity in the creation (Gen. 1, Ps. 127:1), and ongoing sustaining of the world, as the very order of nature is under His governance. Yet God accomplishes the cultivation of the world by entrusting this responsibility to humans, that he made specifically to represent his image in the world and fulfill the mandate to create culture (Gen. 1:28-30). God accomplishes his mission by creating covenantal promises with particular people which bind them to a shared future (Gen 12, 15). He enacts his mission by articulating a divine Law for his people, and giving them a means for being in literal presence with Him through the Tabernacle and sacrificial system (Ex. 19ff). He accomplishes his mission by the incarnation and sinless life of Jesus, who took on the fulness of sin to remove humanity from its penalty. He accomplishes his mission through the formation and commissioning of disciples (Matt. 28), giving them a mandate to make more disciples, to remember Christ’s
sacrifice, and to not stop until the whole world had an invitation. He accomplishes his mission by investing his followers with the presence and power and particular gifts of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12), which gives them the ability to enact and announce his kingdom in power. He accomplishes his mission through the work of the Church, bearing witness to oppression and injustice and working for the liberation of the poor and marginalized. He works ultimately to accomplish his mission by giving the world the power of vocation, to cultivate the potential of the world into new and better forms, for the flourishing of everyone.

In all of this, God always personally superintends his work in the world, through his promises, his laws, his power, and his presence. This is most clearly displayed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and the commissioning of his disciples through the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. This is the signal that God now intends to accomplish the remainder of his mission in the world through his family of followers. By this, the Missio Dei is now being stewarded and enacted in the world through his Church. As Goheen summarizes:

The overarching plot of the biblical story is God’s mission in and through Israel, Jesus and the early church. All three parts of this story are significant for us, for it is we who are now called to continue on the mission of Israel, the mission of Jesus, and the mission of the early church. We take up Israel’s mission to be a light to the world, Jesus’ mission to make known the kingdom of God, and the early church’s mission to bear faithful witness to Jesus. We do so first of all immersed in this story so that our witness may be consistent
with and faithful to it. We do so also creatively and imaginatively, improvising in our new cultural settings.\textsuperscript{19}

These very flawed men and women living in Jerusalem at Pentecost went on to start the most vibrant and enduring religious movement the world has ever seen, and this mission and mandate continues in those following the way of Jesus today.

Missiology, then, when it retains its grounding, its telos, and its means, is meant to be good for the entire world. Through it, the gracious invitation of God to become part of his family, serve in his kingdom, and join him in the task of renewal is issued and enacted to the whole world through the church. The mission of God is through the church, but it is for everyone, and is meant to bring flourishing to the whole world.

\textsuperscript{19} Goheen, 2014
CHAPTER 3

CONTEXTUALIZATION IN MISSION

The Missio Dei is Always Enacted in Context

The Missio Dei gives the church the guiding parameters of its mission. However, the church fundamentally exists in culture(s), and this creates a new challenge - how to enact the fullness of the Missio Dei, in particular times and places and cities and communities, by particular individuals in particular churches and groups. The work of the church today, of course, does not take place in the same cultural conditions as the church of Acts.

Missiology, when it is faithful, is never purely theoretical - it is always an applied task, the work of the Christian practitioner. Therefore, something as simple as “loving your neighbor” or “being on mission” is fraught with all kinds of interpretive issues, trade-offs, and constraints, because our “neighbor” is a particular person in a particular place, and how to love them is undefined. All of our missiologies-in-practice have an implicit theology, philosophy, anthropology, and imagination that is modified by the particularities of our own time and place, because people are fundamentally cultural creatures. Our missional decisions, however scripturally grounded, are always being shaped by a confluence of social desires, pathways, and constraints, whether we are quick to realize it or not.

Because it is always enacted in culture, missiology requires careful reflection. Our missiology-in-practice can have more or less fidelity to the scriptural narrative, it can be more or less aligned to the situational context, and it can be more or less effective in enacting
spiritual transformation in the lives of real people, and we can be more or less aware of our particular approach to doing mission in the world. Said differently, all mission is contextualized, but not all missioned is contextualized reflectively or with intentionality, and not all mission is contextualized effectively.

Contextualization, then, is a critically important category for mission. If the mission of God is truly good news for the whole world, and contextualization is the central process for communicating the good news effectively, then contextualization of all parts of mission is an essential task for the entire church. What is contextualization, exactly? Author Zane Pratt says:

The most basic explanation of contextualization is taking something from one place and putting it in another while retaining faithfulness and sensitivity to the original intent of the thing….Contextualization is communicating the gospel, planting churches, discipling others, training leaders, and establishing Christianity...while being both faithful to God’s Word and sensitive to the culture.¹

Further exploring the definition is author Lamin Sanneh, who emphasizes that contextualization was embedded in Christianity from the very beginning, saying:

Being the original Scripture of the Christian movement, the New Testament Gospels are a translated version of the message of Jesus, and that means Christianity is a translated religion without a revealed language. Without translation there would be no Christianity or Christians. Translation is the church’s birthmark as well as its mis-

sionary benchmark: the church would be unrecognizable or unsustainable without it. . . . Christianity seems unique in being the only world religion that is transmitted without the language or originating culture of its founder.²

Mission, for it to truly be Christian mission, must always be translated to real people in a particular cultural environment. The guidelines, constraints, methods, and mechanisms that shape our translation of mission into the world are of primary interest, then, if we are to contextualize well.

Contextualization in Historical Perspective

First, we look to the past for examples. Mission has taken many shapes as God has superintended the history of the church. If missiology is fundamentally a scripturally-grounded but culturally-embodied discipline, then we would expect to see a diversity of missiological “shapes” throughout church history, as Christianity has navigated a wide diversity of contexts and cultures over time. A cursory glance of missions efforts today highlight the variety of historical methods of mission quite easily, as we observe the proliferation of Christian efforts, church programs, para-church organizations, missions initiatives, and more. Even further, a quick scan through church history can give us some clear insight into the way Christians have “designed” their practical mission work in different times and places.

Historically, Christianity’s general expansion and engagement with culture can be understood a number of different ways. Neill and Latourette\textsuperscript{3} understand the historical evolution of mission geographically, first into the Roman Empire as a persecuted minority religion (100-313) and eventually as the culturally-dominant state religion (313-500). This was followed by the Christianizing of Europe, through mixing with the Germanic, Frankish, and Anglo Saxon tribes (500-800), the Slavonic tribes (800-1000), and the Scandinavian tribes (1000-1200). Then, the expansion was from Europe to the World, in the Roman Catholic Missions (1500-1700), the Pietist European Missions (1700-1800), and the European North American Protestant Missions (1800-1950), giving way to an emerging structure of ecumenical partnerships today. This only tangentially speaks to contextualization, but does point to the church’s growth and adaptability over time according to the dominant macro-cultural modes of the day.

Andrew Walls evaluates church history through the lens of cultural diffusion,\textsuperscript{4} beginning with the “Jewish Church in Mission,” moving to the “Missionary Expansion to the Greco-Roman World,” to the “Evangelization of Barbarians and the making of Western Europe,” to “Empire and Mission expanding from Europe,” to the “Cross Cultural shift of Christianity to the South.” These epochs or stages of mission imply certain missionary patterns, from positions of cultural dominance and power or relative marginalization.

Bosch looks at the development of various church “paradigms,” starting with the Early Church paradigm (33-313), then the overlapping “Eastern Church Paradigm (150-1453),

the Catholic/Medieval paradigm (313-1800), the Reformation paradigm (1517-1800), then
the “mission after Enlightenment” paradigm (1800-1918), and today’s “Ecumenical/post-
modern mission” paradigm.\(^5\) Sanneh similarly highlights the “Judaic Phase, Hellenistic
Breakthrough, Reformation phase, Liberalism, and Ecumenical” phases.

Looking at the macro-trends of the church relative to cultures over time is only one
way to explore this dynamic. There have been countless ways the church has “taken shape”
over time, and done something new in practice with the demands for faithful mission. For
example, Missiologist Sam Larsen recently compiled the following (non-exhaustive) list of
“ministry models” over time, for a graduate course on missions history:

- Grassroots Evangelism
- Open Preaching
- Koinonia Community
- Urban Church Planting Teams
- Christendom Expansion
- Denominational Hierarchies of Churches
- Informal Learning
- Philanthropic Social Services
- Literacy and Bible Translations
- Missional Monasteries (Franciscan/Dominican)
- Power Encounters
- People Movements
- Storying the Bible Communally
- Liturgy and Liturgical Evangelism
- Literature Publication and Distribution
- Ethnographic Research
- Sacramental Missions
- Contextualized Missions
- Lay Ministry
- Missional Family Teams (Moravians)
- Mission Societies (William Carey)
- Radio and Film Missions
- Church Growth Movements
- Seeker Church
- Missional Church
- House Church

A full and clearly defined taxonomy of missional “models” would be enormous, and a
full examination of the contextual conditions and decisions in the various times and places of
church history is far beyond my scope, but the diversity of approaches to culture and mission

demonstrate the complex sets of contextualization decisions that are often shaped by broader cultural patterns, theology, philosophy, and culture. Forms of mission, in a sense, can be as diverse as the people that enact them in thousands of subcultures. How to enact mission faithfully and effectively is always a partially moving target.

This diversity demonstrates that local mission is flexible, and integrates theology, cultural analysis, and at least an intuitive understanding of local ministry opportunities and constraints. My argument at this point is simply that mission-in-practice is a function of an implicit design process, and that this process is built upon a number of cultural instincts, and philosophical and theological commitments, all done with varying levels of reflection and intentionality. The necessary conclusion is that each of these models could be evaluated for their scriptural fidelity, their translation toward and critique of the local cultural moment, and the degree of resonance and spiritual fruit in the lives of their hearers and beneficiaries.

It might be said, in summary, that mission has usually, if subconsciously, found itself attempting to create a synthesis in the tension between “theology” and “culture,” to varying degrees of emphasis on each. These are the twin “loci” of authority in missiology, and create the essential constraints of any mission-in-practice. This process was, for much of the church’s history, done in light of the dominant western culture, which was implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) deemed to be superior. There was hardly a self-reflective category for “effective cultural contextualization,” until the global missionary encounters of the 18th century and beyond. The question of contextual effectiveness has always been important, but

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6 Indeed, “culture” historically referred to sophisticated “western culture,” as in, “to become cultured.”
was infrequently asked, in light of the expected norms of cultural homogeneity that came with European Christianity.

Thus, there was often little reflection on contextualization, and little evaluation of the extent to which these missions models combined Biblical faithfulness and cultural effectiveness in communicating the Gospel. Today, we are able to scan the historical mission horizon and the present mission horizon, and conclude that missions efforts should be modified by their cultural context, but this is a function of a more recent relativized view of culture(s).

The interest and awareness of mission contextualization is growing, but the question remains as to how effective contextualization is conducted in practice, and how it local missiologies might be adjusted toward faithfulness, cultural alignment, spiritual revival, and personal fruit. This is the effectiveness question, or as missiology has historically discussed it, the question of “good” contextualization.

**Good Mission Requires Good Contextualization**

So what then are the practices of “good” contextualization that lead to effective mission? First, we might say that good contextualization starts with the right constraints. Stephen Bevans, one of the leading thinkers on the issue of contextualization, talks about the shape and constraints of good mission, saying,

The church only becomes the church as it responds to God’s call to mission, and to be in mission means to change continually as the gospel encounters
new and diverse contexts. Such change, however, is not arbitrary; rather, there have always existed certain constants that, while they might differ in content, are always present as a kind of framework by which the church identifies itself and around which the gospel message takes shape.”

Mission is first constrained by the narrative shape of the Missio Dei found in scripture, and must be continuous with the work of the Spirit and direction and imagination of the Biblical story. It finds itself constrained by the missional “means” given by God - the community of believers empowered for mission by the Holy Spirit, to proclaim the Kingdom of God and work for the reconciliation and renewal of the world. This anchor to the Biblical story and ethic is the “faithfulness” constraint, as fidelity to the Missio Dei always function as a priori inputs to the particularities of mission in a context. The church must remain the church in mission.

Good contextualization also means mission must also be sensible, plausible, credible, and at least partially desirable by the people it seeks to reach. This is the “cultural fit” constraint, which forces translation, adaptation, and intelligibility to those whom we are ministering to. It constrains us to engage with a cultural reality, adapting our mission-in-practice by observing and meeting the spiritual and physical needs of the community, and adapting our symbols and language and stories and thought forms, in order to help the gospel story to

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8 Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder, Constants in Context, p. 72. This isn’t to say that the church is formally constituted as it embarks on mission, as it is constituted according to the effectual call and constitution of the church by Christ, but to rather highlight mission as an essential identity and inherent action of the true church.
become as plausible and desirable as possible, without losing its power. We seek to “become all things to all people,” so that the Gospel might be an invitation rather than an offense.

The motivation for cultural contextualization is the desire to see real spiritual “fruit.” We aim to be good stewards of our mission, and should desire to see more people hearing the proclamation of Good News, understanding it, and being renewed in community. There are always winter seasons and rocky places with tough soil and direct opposition that will challenge missional effectiveness and remind us of the essential work of God in mission. But the missional desire should be to strive for a truly fruitful harvest as good stewards. So along with the faithfulness constraint and the cultural fit constraint, there is a “fruitfulness” mandate. We are driven toward cultural adaptation because we desire by faith to see the Gospel unleash its effective power. The fruitfulness mandate acts as a sort of forward force that evaluates our alignment to faithfulness and cultural fit. As Tim Keller says:

Contextualization is not — as is often argued — “giving people what they want to hear.” Rather, it is giving people the Bible’s answers, which they may not at all want to hear, to questions about life that people in their particular time and place are asking, in language and forms they can comprehend, and through appeals and arguments with force they can feel, even if they reject them.⁹

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If good contextualization happens, our mission-in-practice will be as biblically faithful as possible, as culturally plausible as possible, and as personally transformational as possible.

The space between the faithfulness constraint, the cultural fit constraint, and the fruitfulness mandate is the space where local mission is contextualized. This leads to somewhat of an “undefined” problem, as we ask “within that space, how do we practically do mission?” This opens a wide field of possible answers, with undefined pathways for hypothesis testing, and thus requires a certain synthetic way of answering the question. The mission contextualization process is, therefore, an open-ended problem that requires a process for determining or developing the best solution. It is essentially a “design” problem.

**The Challenges of Good Contextualization**

Attempting to strike the balance between faithfulness and contextual relevance creates the opportunity to go too far toward either of these poles, at the expense of the other. Goheen further highlights some of the tensions of contextualization, saying,

Today, with a global church, we see many different expressions and theologies as the gospel incarnates itself in various cultures. This creates difficult issues that surround two major sets of questions. The first is the relation of the gospel to cultures (plural). There is one gospel and yet many embodiments in the various cultures of the world. How can we be faithful to one gospel without privileging one cultural expression? How can we honor di-
verse expressions without falling into relativism? The second is the relation of the gospel to culture (singular). How do we relate the gospel to a particular culture? How can it be both at home and at odds in each context? How can the gospel both affirm the creational good and confront the idolatries of each culture? Contextualization studies that struggle with these questions will be an essential item on the agenda of missiology today.

Goheen goes on to highlight four dangers: ethnocentrism, relativism, syncretism, and irrelevance.

First is the danger of ethnocentrism, which occurs when “one cultural expression of the gospel is considered normative for all others (and) the gospel and its cultural form are not distinguished.” He highlights rightly that this has been the dominant error of the colonial/European missionary paradigm, and the subsequent western missionary paradigm of the last couple of centuries, which can affect everything from ethnocentric theological criterion that are extra-biblical, to ethnocentric worship and liturgical practices. Mission is hindered by the inability of the Gospel to move from the thought-forms of the dominant culture to the thought-forms of the receiving culture, because it is unable to connect to the ideals, problems, and needs of that culture with credibility, plausibility, and power.

The second, and opposite danger is cultural relativism, which occurs when “no cultural expression can be judged good or bad by Scripture, or by the church from another cul-

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10 Goheen, 2014
11 Goheen, 2014
ture.” In other words, since mission is always enacted in culture, there becomes no room for the “critique” of the paradigm or practices of another from an external standard. In this sense, the entire Biblical story becomes completely a cultural story, with no “transcendent” narrative by which all cultures must be critiqued in some sense. This mirrors the postmodern move towards plurality in the face of diversity, which puts pressure on any higher arbiter of truth or reality. In practice, mission that becomes too relativistic loses its power to critique, challenge, and transform its hearers beyond their existing reality - which diminishes its faithfulness and its fruitfulness.

The third danger is syncretism, which is when “the gospel is absorbed into idolatrous forms, structures, and categories of the culture and is consequently compromised.” This might be as pronounced as merging the Biblical story with, say, Buddhist or Hindu or animistic practices and traditions, or as nuanced as shaping the Biblical story according to more sophisticated political, social, or economic patterns in Western society. Either way, syncretism challenges mission because it warps the Gospel into the shape of a more dominant cultural idol, which robs it of its power. Ultimately, faithful and fruitful mission will be able to identify and challenge the deep idols of a culture and call people out from them, in a way that resonates with them instead of alienating them.

The final danger is irrelevance, which is when we “attempt to be faithful to the gospel by holding on to older or foreign forms of the gospel.” Alien forms of the Gospel, whether they are western or modernist or something else, fail to resonate, and can harm or alienate

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12 Goheen, 2014
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
those they seek to reach. These forms of mission often call people to a certain way of joining the Biblical story, arguing that moving from idolatry must mean a corresponding move to existing cultural forms of Christianity. The Gospel doesn’t often feel like good news if it requires giving up your entire cultural orientation wholesale, rather than critiquing or redeeming the idolatries present within a “neutral” cultural framework. A mis-contextualized gospel can lead to an irrelevant gospel, which fails to be truly faithful or fruitful.

The move away from a modernist metanarrative about the world has helped the church realize that it is truly multicultural, and no particular culture has the complete paradigm for explaining Christianity to everyone. The scriptural story has to be enacted in today’s culture just as it was enacted in Israel’s culture, Egypt’s culture, Rome’s culture, and beyond.

**Philosophical Commitments that Shape Contextualization**

Being aware of these challenges and dangers in contextualization is helpful in understanding our boundaries, but it is incomplete. The reality is that mission is often shaped by numerous additional commitments beyond faithfulness, cultural fit, and fruitfulness.

If mission-in-practice is developed somewhere between faithfulness to the Biblical “text” and adjustment to fit the cultural “context,” then it follows that we might explore the additional dimensions which functionally shape or limit the mission-in-practice of a person, a community, a church, or a mission-driven organization. Many would likely affirm and agree to the Biblical narrative outlining the *Missio Dei*, and the corresponding ends and means that
have been outlined above. Yet the enacted priorities of our missiologies vary widely - and are often the source of disagreement or conflict. Within the realm of contextualization, we may find that our mission-in-practice is often shaped by additional commitments and assumptions, sometimes unobservable without careful reflection. Below is an outline of some of the philosophical dimensions that actively constrain or shape our local missiology-in-practice, which often live under the surface of our “normal” set of ministry decisions.

First, we emphasize a particular view of God. Even assuming a broadly orthodox Christian theology, one with room for all of the various segments of global Christianity, one’s “functional” theology will be a serious driver of their mission. Our cultural nesting or ordering of God’s priorities will have significant implications, and our mission might be unbalanced by an over-emphasis on God’s justice, or God’s liberation, or God’s wrath, or God’s grace, or God’s creativity. It is the implicit selection of one of these attributes to the exclusion of the others than can lead to diverse missiological conclusions about what it means to enact God’s desires in the world. Do we work for justice, or for forgiveness, or both? Do we work for reconciliation or call for judgment? Do we work quietly and patiently or actively and with urgency? These might be false dichotomies in theory, but often one or another of numerous dualisms can find themselves taking priority in practice.

Second, we assume particular understandings of the life and purpose of Jesus. In a similar fashion, the various ways of understanding and emphasizing Christ’s life, ministry, death, and resurrection will have profound implications for mission. Do we seek primarily to emulate Jesus’ incarnational movement, focus on his ethical vision for the “least of these,”

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15 Not to say that scripture doesn’t at times emphasize or order (cf. “especially” in Gal 6:10, 1 Tim 5:8). The point is simply that our nesting and ordering of theological priorities is almost always enculturated to a degree.
focus on his critique of the religious authorities, or his political posture toward Rome? Do we understand his work on the cross as payment, or liberation, or victory? What exactly does it mean that he took on our sins, and that he has power over death? What does his resurrection, ascension, and ongoing intercession with the Father mean for how we live, and how we invite our neighbors into the story? These nuanced theological questions can actually lead to widely divergent, if not conflicting missions approaches based on the implicit answers to these questions.

Third, we assume a view of the Holy Spirit. The dynamics around how one views the work of the Holy Spirit will have a profound view on their practical missiology. Is the Holy Spirit active today in the same way that he was active in the early church? Does God speak to people through the Holy Spirit, or heal them, or give them prophetic insight, or the ability to speak in or interpret tongues for the good of the Church? The cessationist and continuationist debate has real implications for missiology. Even if the Spirit is actively at work today, is He at work in the same way among all peoples and cultures around the world, or are there dynamic differences in how to expect the spirit of God to be at work? Is there a biblical pattern for inviting or welcoming the Holy Spirit, say, communally in the fellowship of believers rather than individually? What does it mean for God to “dwell” among his people by the Spirit, or for the Spirit to be a “counselor,” or for Him to bring God’s people into all truth and wisdom, or for Him to bring power and resources for mission? The essence of the Holy Spirit is to dwell among God’s people today, and empower them for mission, and a misunderstanding or misinterpretation of what that means will shape a missiology from its very foundations.
Fourth, we assume a particular view of the church. One’s missiology is shaped by their ecclesiology. Goheen says, “Mission defines the very identity and being of the church. The church is missional, and mission is ecclesial...mission is not just something that the church does, but rather is something that it is. Mission is not merely about certain activities, but rather defines the very identity of the church.”

There are a number of metaphors that communicate what the church is in her essence - the Covenant people of God, the new Israel, the disciples of Christ, the Family of God, the Kingdom of God, witnesses to the World, an alternative community, a community on mission, a generous community, a diverse community, and many others. There are implications as to whether we perceive the Church to be a people on mission for the neighborhood, or a family of believers stewarding the purity of the Gospel. Group identity, in-group and out-group dynamics, the ability to receive or welcome or communicate to people that are sociologically different, and the relative amount of energy or emphasis put on preaching, service, children, young adults, the elderly, the poor, and the relative importance of evangelistic energy and responsiveness to material needs in the city or community are all downstream effects of our ecclesiology.

Fifth, we assume an anthropology. Missiology always requires a view of what it means to be fully human. It carries real implications for mission, whether one emphasizes humanity made in the Imago Dei, with the full spectrum of creativity and agency and good-

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16 Goheen, 2014
17 “This view of mission led to a number of problems. Mission is reduced to the task of taking the gospel to places where it is not known. Moreover, mission and church are separated. There are two parallel institutional bodies: mission organizations are committed to the missionary enterprise, and local congregations are communities that support it. Further, this leads to churches without mission and to missionary organizations that are not churches. Churches are reduced to their pastoral role and become introverted. Mission organizations carry on their work outside of ecclesial structures. Finally, mission is an activity carried out in non-Western cultures. If the church was to recover its intrinsic missional character, these undergirding assumptions had to break down. This began to happen early in the twentieth century. Goheen, 2014.
ness and capacity that God bestowed upon humanity, or whether humans are intrinsically defined by sinfulness, brokenness, and depravity. These are both true, but the emphasis for our missiology matters. How we think about humans-as-humans, and God’s posture towards them in common grace, regardless of brokenness or sin, might lead us toward an anthropology of man’s “goodness,” with a blind spot toward understanding sin and corruption. Yet, maintaining an overemphasis on the universal fallenness and sinfulness of man will give guidance to a missiology that is potentially harsh or critical or unwise in its approach, forgetting the intrinsic humanity and giftedness that all men possess. Building our missiology carefully around our reflection on God’s purposes for human nature is essential towards its effectiveness.

Sixth, we assume a view of missional effectiveness. Is the proclamation of the kingdom and the building of the church God’s responsibility, or ours? The answer, again, is “both,” but it is a matter of order and emphasis that shapes our functional missiology. Jesus promised, when he sent out his disciples, that his Spirit would be with them, and that the gates of Hell would not prevail against his church (Matt. 16:18). Jesus also told numerous parables about stewardship and active participation in the coming Kingdom (cf. Matt. 25, Luke 10). Paul, the foremost apostle, also called us to “build with care” (1 Cor. 3:10), and reflected on how he had become “all things to all people,” (1 Cor. 9:22), striving to adapt his missionary methods toward as much effectiveness as possible. Do we have a missiology of agency and urgency, or a missiology of stay-the-course patience? Do we have a missiology of evaluation and improvement, or a missiology of “let go and let God?”
Seventh, we assume an epistemology and truth-criterion. Our missiology requires a particular view of knowledge, truth, and validity. If we see the world through a “sacred and secular” lens, we will tend to discount knowledge that isn’t “divine knowledge,” and project the truths of theology and scripture as antagonistic with other types of knowledge - scientific, cultural, academic, intuitive, etc. If we tend toward an “all truth is God’s truth” epistemology, rather, and look to theology and the scriptures as our interpretive key and criterion for ultimate validity, we will have a view of reality with more space for insight from culture, the marketplace, or the social sciences. The extent to which we welcome a diversity of knowledge sources and methods for insight, as inputs into our mission, is the extent to which we can see alternative pathways to reach the world. The early church had a high degree of interdisciplinary integration, and Paul’s career as a scholar was the foundation for his apostleship.

Eighth, we assume a particular view of culture. Culture can be seen as an evil to be avoided at all costs, as a neutral immaterial force that has little bearing on relationships or formation or communication, or as a negative force to be critiqued and engaged and challenged into conformity with our view of reality. Culture can be seen as an intrinsic good, to be cultivated and stewarded and nurtured as itself part of our mission in the world. Culture can be seen as overwhelming, mixing people and views and norms and worldviews with such velocity that it is almost impossible to speak of culture and only realistic to speak of “subcultures.” Is culture to be escaped, challenged, critiqued, copied, or engaged? At what cultural or subcultural level does our missiology operate? What if our missiology has to be flexible
enough for multiple cultures, or we have to work together toward missional goals with people who have a different perspective on how to engage culture in the first place?

Finally, we assume a particular view of who our neighbor is. We have a mission out of a mandate to love our neighbor and proclaim the Kingdom of God to the whole world. Is our neighbor only those closest to us, or do we have a fundamental imperative to expand, grow, and scale our work as far as possible? If we live in high density places, is it realistic to love everyone, or should we focus our efforts on those people that we sense a particular calling to, whether socio-economically, demographically, culturally, or otherwise. Sometimes a clear sense of missional focus, and wrestling with who our neighbor might be, can put pressures and tensions on our missiology that we might not expect. Regardless, we must wrestle with whom our missiology is for, and whom it is not for, in particular ways for our particular realities.

In short, our task of loving our neighbor, proclaiming the kingdom, and making disciples of all nations gets significantly more complex, as we evaluate all of the philosophical and practical considerations that govern our approach. Many are often unaware of the design tradeoffs and interpretive steps present in “doing ministry,” and can be guided by unchecked assumptions and intellectual commitments, or guided by default patterns governed by the cultural defaults present when we were formed as Christians ourselves. This limits our set of possibilities for how to contextualize faithfully and fruitfully. The implication is that developing effective mission-in-practice takes significant wisdom, nuance, intentionality, and discernment, and the answer to “how to love my neighbor well” is often decided upon far too quickly, with too little intentional reflection.
Good Contextualization Requires Intentional Design

In summary, good mission requires intentional reflection on individuals, communities, and cultures, in order to navigate the contextualization process effectively. This requires listening, discovery, reflection, research, and prayer. Design is the response process for taking the result of that reflection, and actively developing means for bringing the fullness of the Gospel to those individuals, communities, and cultures. Designing mission is the problem-solving act of active cultural discovery, leading to contextualization of the Gospel, the Kingdom, and the Church to fully and plausibly invite those who are outside, to come inside, and experience the good news without unnecessary hindrance.

Therefore, if contextualized mission is something we design, we might do well to have the best possible toolbox for designing it. This is where the Design Thinking framework can be instructive.
CHAPTER 4
THE DESIGN THINKING APPROACH TO PROBLEM SOLVING

Design Thinking Defined

In introducing “design” my intention is not to give a comprehensive overview of the domain, but to re-define design as a relevant category that goes beyond connotations of visual design, and becomes useful as a verb (designing) and an adjective (designer) that fit a wide range of organizational activities and goals - including, eventually, ministry design.

Design “thinking” refers to a type of problem solving intrinsic to the work of a designer. It is a semi-formal method for approaching problems in a way that is “solutions-based,” starting with the goal of a future state clearly envisioned, with an exploratory process for reaching the future state constituting the design process. It is initially contrasted to more inductive, or scientific-method-style approaches to problem solving, which requires the existence of the parameters of a problem at the outset in order to develop a solution. Design thinking, in contrast, starts with the present ambiguity of the current situation in order to unlock hidden constraints and parameters, navigating multiple or alternative paths to reach the envisioned goal, across multiple cycles and iterations. Tim Brown, one of the most prominent popularizers of Design Thinking says, “design thinking is fundamentally an exploratory process; done right, it will invariably make unexpected discoveries along the way, and it would be foolish not to find out where they lead.”

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pathways and conditions relevant to arriving at the solution, and the solution itself might be a halfway-point towards initiating another design cycle. Design thinking is the difference between setting out to “build a new set of scissors,” versus “finding a better way to cut paper.” It’s a structured but open-ended methodology for actualizing a desired future state.

**Theoretical Foundations of Design Thinking**

Herbert Simon, a Nobel Laureate and one of the most important social scientists of the twentieth century, first began discussing design as a “way of thinking” that included a specific pattern of problem solving, in his book “The Science of the Artificial” in 1969. The term “design thinking” itself goes back as far as 1987, to Peter Rowe’s book, “Design Thinking,” referring to the underlying design process he utilized in architecture and urban planning. MIT professor Richard Buchanan wrote an article in 1992 titled “Wicked Problems in Design Thinking,” referring to the opportunity of design thinking to unlock the most intractable challenges in problem solving for engineering. Buchanan, in the article, attempts to orient design as a field separate from the social or natural sciences, stating that:

Design eludes reduction and remains a surprisingly flexible activity...the variety of research...suggests that design continues to expand in its meanings and connections, revealing unexpected dimensions in practice as well as understanding...[it] now should be recognized as a new liberal art of technological culture.
Going on further in the paper, Buchanan states:

[Design has] a concern to connect and integrate useful knowledge from the arts and sciences alike, but in ways that are suited to the problems and purposes of the present. Designers are exploring concrete integrations of knowledge that will combine theory with practice for new productive purposes.²

Design thinking is a methodology that synthesizes insights from across multiple knowledge domains, which open new pathways toward the envisioned result. In that way, it is a systematic approach to innovation and creativity that can be used in any domain.

This is why, of late, design thinking has been gaining traction outside of its traditional uses, growing in popularity among businesses and other commercial organizations. In the face of numerous “wicked problems” and “high degrees of ambiguity” presented by the accelerated rate of market and economic changes, along with the integration of knowledge afforded by growing widespread access to the internet and smart technology, businesses specifically face a severe challenge. If they are unable to innovate their products, services, or business model quickly enough for a changing world, they find themselves at a severe disadvantage. The ability to innovate, create new value for people, solve ambiguous problems, avoid

socially negative externalities (like pollution, for example), and remain agile for a changing future has become an incredible competitive advantage.

Brown was instrumental in broadening the definition of design thinking to become a “business innovation process,” and to even further envision design thinking as a framework for social impact, with his landmark book Change by Design (2009). He summarizes his view in the introduction, saying:

Design thinking begins with skills designers have learned over many decades in their quest to match human needs with available technical resources within the practical constraints of business. By integrating what is desirable from a human point of view with what is technologically feasible and economically viable, designers create the products we enjoy today. Design thinking takes the next step, which is to put these tools into the hands of people who may have never thought of themselves as designers and apply them to a vastly greater range of problems.

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3 Brown goes on: “Since the completion of the Great Western Railway in 1841, industrialization has wrought incredible change. Technology has helped lift millions out of poverty and has improved the standard of living of a considerable portion of humanity. As we enter the twenty-first century, however, we are increasingly aware of the underside of the revolution that has transformed the way we live, work, and play. The sooty clouds of smoke that once darkened the skies over Manchester and Birmingham have changed the climate of the planet. The torrent of cheap goods that began to flow from their factories and workshops has fed into a culture of excess consumption and prodigious waste. The industrialization of agriculture has left us vulnerable to natural and man-made catastrophes. The innovative breakthroughs of the past have become the routine procedures of today as businesses in Shenzhen and Bangalore tap into the same management theories as those in Silicon Valley and Detroit and face the same downward spiral of commoditization.” Brown, Tim (p. 2).

4 Brown, (p. 4).
Brown’s business success with his popular consultancy IDEO backs up this idea, that the specialized design skill set, previously only the domain of applied designers, is something that can now be unlocked across any set of business problems, or beyond. Brown reflects on the early days of IDEO, that they were “increasingly being asked to tackle problems that seemed very far away from the commonly held view of design,” like health care systems, alternative education environments, and more. This is part of what sparked IDEO’s move from “design” to “Design Thinking” as a translatable process.

Design thinking is now being popularized as a cross-disciplinary innovation methodology for students of every academic discipline of study at Stanford University. It is given credit as one of the underlying innovation philosophies at Apple, and is quickly being integrated into formal and informal training environments in business settings, as well as educational settings throughout North America. Derivative applications like “Design thinking for Educators” attempt to utilize design thinking to solve tricky education-related problems, and courses like the “Human Centered Design toolkit” are working to spread a design thinking approach to the international development community, tackling everything from to poverty alleviation in cities to designing sustainable community development approaches in parts of the global south. Everyone seems to want a reliable way to innovate.

**Why Design Thinking is Emerging Now**

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5 Brown, (p. 6).

6 Jon Kolko says “There is a shift under way in large organizations, one that puts design much closer to the center of the enterprise, but the shift isn’t about aesthetics - it’s about applying the principles of design to the way people work.” Kolko, Jon. *Exposing the Magic of Design: A Practitioner’s Guide to the Methods and Theory of Synthesis*. Reprint edition. Oxford University Press, 2015.
But why is the emergence of design thinking growing now? What is driving the proliferation and popularization of design thinking as an online search term, as the subject of articles in Harvard Business Review, or in the titles of a growing stream of new books? It seems that the emergence of design thinking is a response to a number of macro-trends.

First, organizations feel the pressure of increasing complexity. In business, especially technology, creating a viable product or service is more challenging than it used to be. Consumer trends are changing rapidly, the start-up ecosystem is growing quickly and putting pressure on established companies, and some markets are seeing consolidation by major conglomerate companies with a technological advantage (think Amazon or Google). To break through (in the marketplace at least), requires more knowledge capital, innovation, and creativity, executed more quickly, with more risk and less room to fail than ever before. This can often force organizations into areas that they have no previous expertise in, creating a complex challenge for viability and growth.

This has begun to require a more adaptive skill set from leaders and managers, often beyond what they were trained or educated for. It is not often possible, any more, for any particular subject matter expert or specialist to have the breadth and range necessary to develop a piece of software, a piece of hardware, or develop their seamless interaction when combined, or deliver a delightful experience to the customer is using them. Beyond technology, it increasingly takes more specialists from a wider array of disciplines to provide actionable leadership insight in business, or politics, or education. Organizational leadership, however, increasingly, requires the ability to be nimble and agile across knowledge domains.7

7 I would argue that just to run a church, pastors are functionally working across research, technology, economics, management, psychology, cultural trends, education, professional development, and more.
Design thinking promises to give leaders and managers a pathway of depending on what they do know - the vision of their desired future - and a chance to walk through it by rapidly inviting the best contribution of many specialists. Brown, referring to the potential of design to tackle increasingly complex problems, said:

A competent designer can always improve upon last year’s new widget, but an interdisciplinary team of skilled design thinkers is in a position to tackle more complex problems. From pediatric obesity to crime prevention to climate change, design thinking is now being applied to a range of challenges that bear little resemblance to the covetable objects that fill the pages of today’s coffee-table publications.  

Design thinking, at least according to Brown, has wide promise to help leaders in all sectors make complex problems a little less complex.

Second, from a business perspective, it has become increasingly clear that to win a customer’s loyalty in a competitive environment requires appealing not just to their sense of utility, but to their sense of aesthetics, purpose, and social good. Understanding the world from the “other’s” point of view, and focusing on appealing to their emotional experiences, has become a huge advantage for business. Learning narrative, story, art, and beauty has been a way of appealing to the intrinsic emotions of a consumer. Apple, of course, is the leading current example of how to do this. Because technology opens up consumer choice,

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8 Brown, (p. 7).
there are increasingly low switching costs between products and services, especially information products - so, understanding one’s customer or audience in their emotional world has become a critical skill to retain their loyalty. Design thinking, with its primary focus on in-person participation with customers or beneficiaries, working towards comprehensive empathy with their situation, and designing products with a clear emotional benefit in mind, has forced businesses to become “more human” in how they design solutions - because the marketplace has more options. This business reality has driven the adaptation of design thinking significantly.

Finally, with the seemingly increased pace of today’s business environment, spending years on developing business plans for the future - with long-term investment outlays and specific product requirements on a product that wouldn’t be ready for five years - began to seem untenable. Design thinking offered a pathway to envision a way forward without knowing exactly what the product or even the market would be, but allowing the discovery process to be done in a way that allows for lower initial risk, a faster cycle of failure and learning, and the ability to adjust to what was learned about the customer or the market as the process went forward. Design thinking has significantly helped organizations avoid major product or service launches that are based in bad assumptions about reality, and helps them fail faster, learn faster, and stay more in tune to what their customers really want in a rapidly changing environment. This agility amid ambiguity is the essence of the appeal of design thinking in a post-industrial, technological business environment.

The promise, then, of design thinking, is that it delivers quickly and with less risk on discovering “product and market fit” - that is, discovering the solution to a complex problem
that integrates the desires and requirements of the customers in a given context, within the boundaries of resource and technological constraints. It therefore delivers on adaptiveness and responsiveness, because real-time sensitivity to feedback from environmental conditions is the primary input. This often leads to unanticipated insights, and therefore, grounded and reliable innovations.

According to the leading design thinking authors and practitioners, this is possible by a number of core methodological and value commitments, which are important to detail below. Sometimes they are called “design mindsets,” or “design values,” or other similar categories. These are the commitments and guardrails that orient the design thinking process, to ensure new solutions are effectively and intelligently aligned with the real problem conditions.

**Design Thinking Core Mindsets**

First, the design thinking process is exploratory. Design thinking is non-linear and inquiry-based. When done well, it will inevitably yield new insights that point in unexpected directions. Testing the seed-form of a new idea with those whom it is designed for should, for example, yield some critical early insights about its usefulness or about one’s governing assumptions, and those insights are then fed back into the design process. The “open” or “beginner’s” mind, purposefully limiting one’s own areas of bias or value judgment, is essential for new discovery.
Second, design thinking embraces the right constraints. While the design process is exploratory, it is shaped by constraint. To quote Brown:

“Without constraints design cannot happen, and the best design—a precision medical device or emergency shelter for disaster victims—is often carried out within quite severe constraints...The willing and even enthusiastic acceptance of competing constraints is the foundation of design thinking. The first stage of the design process is often about discovering which constraints are important and establishing a framework for evaluating them. Constraints can best be visualized in terms of three overlapping criteria for successful ideas: feasibility...viability...and desirability.”

While the embrace of design constraints in a ministry context will necessarily be different than in a commercial enterprise, the pattern is the same - discovering the appropriate design constraints helps create the right “design space,” which then creates focus and orientation, rather than disorientation.

Third, design thinking is focused on human problems. Good design, in an organizational context, always has a specific person or group of people in mind. Almost always, the design process is unlocked most effectively when the person with a need (the beneficiary) is clearly in view, and any solutions-oriented movement is clearly in reference to a particular subset of people. Brown quotes Peter Drucker, who famously said, “the job of the designer is

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9 Brown, (p. 18).
converting need into demand,” or said differently, serving people’s real needs by creating something that meets their needs on their terms. However, there is an important caveat here -

traditional methods for discovering “what people want” are often ineffective, because people are generally good adapting to undesirable situations. Brown says the challenge for design thinkers is to “help people articulate the latent needs they may not even know they have.”10

Fourth, design thinking attempts to get close to the action. One of the essential tools of design thinking is its reliance on embodied, real-world observation for insight. It is, in a sense, built upon the tools and methods of the social sciences. To be a great design thinker is first to be a great anthropologist, because insight about latent human needs is the key to unlocking better ways of serving them. This “anthropological research,” of course, is also the key starting point for the missionary pattern, which I will get to later. Embodied, qualitative data gathering is inescapably important - you have to talk to the people you want to design for. This can yield insights that a survey or a focus group never could. Tom Kelley, one of the principles of IDEO, adds to this, saying, “Whether it’s art, science, technology, or business, inspiration often comes from being close to the action. That’s part of why geography, even in the internet age, counts.”11 This is also what is sometimes referred to as the “founder’s mentality” - staying so close to market conditions that you can see changes and opportunities sooner than everyone else, and remaining committed to integrating new observations about the world. Discovering how people practically navigate their many social and

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10 Brown, (p. 40).
personal worlds, can yield helpful insight. Simple in concept, but a step that is often difficult to put into practice.

Fifth, design thinking attempts deep empathy. Observation often isn’t sufficient for insight. An essential value of design thinking is empathy and intellectual humility. Since the aim is practical insight, observation and analysis isn’t always enough. One has to “begin by recognizing that their seemingly inexplicable behaviors represent different strategies for coping with the confusing, complex, and contradictory world in which they live.” Everyone is trying to solve problems in their lives a certain way - empathy expands the field of vision, so that potential ways of seeing this are not missed. To enter into the emotional world of another, and to experience their pains, desires, opportunities, and motivations, is a rich source of insight. This is helpful in improving anything from the flow of a grocery store to the experience of a doctor’s office to the process of church membership. Good designers are in tune with the layer of social and psychological challenge is faced by those they are designing for.

Sixth, design thinking requires framing the right problem. Sharpening the focus of a brainstorming meeting or design “session” is important. Similar to embracing constraints, it is important to have “the end in mind,” or at least a hypothesis about what the desired future might look like for the people you’re aiming to serve. A well-articulated question is one of the simplest, but most important design tools, because it can point a conversation in a helpful or an unhelpful direction. Thus, one of the essential skills of a good design facilitator is knowing precisely how to frame the right question, based on the available information so far. Ensuring a broad enough scope of inquiry, with room to “explore,” is important. For example, asking “how do we get more people into our Thursday night small groups” might already
be too narrow, while asking “how do we ensure everyone in our wider church or ministry is connected to deeper community around them?” is wider. It doesn’t already presume the answer, but envisions a desired state worth exploring.

Seventh, design thinking follows a rhythm of divergent and convergent thinking. The dominant approach to decision making is “convergent thinking” - taking available data, analyzing it, eliminating alternatives, and making a final choice. Convergent thinking is an essential problem solving step, to help assess the relative value of a set of options, and move forward. However, convergent thinking is not helpful at “creating choices,” or multiplying options in order to identify additional solution pathways, and often takes place without reassessing initial assumptions and commitments. In design thinking, the divergent “pattern” always comes before the convergent “pattern,” in order to ensure that the full scope of relevant and updated option sets have been taken into account in the design process. Diverging into wider and longer sets of salient insights means a higher probability of converging onto the best one. This is, of course, counter-intuitive, because it can (for a time) increase complexity and be inefficient in the short run. The two “phases” of exploration need each other - this is sometimes described as “zooming in and out,” or “switching from analysis to synthesis,” and is describing a core pattern - the ability to switch back and forth between creative and analytical thinking. According to Brown:

There is a good reason why design education draws in equal measure upon art and engineering. The process of the design thinker, rather, looks like a rhythmic exchange between the divergent and convergent phases, with each
subsequent iteration less broad and more detailed than the previous ones. In
the divergent phase, new options emerge. In the convergent phase it is just
the reverse: now it’s time to eliminate options and make choices.  

The process of opening the design question, then closing it, over and over again towards op-
timization, is one of the essential skills of a good design thinker.

Eighth, design thinking pushes for essentialism. If divergent thinking is the process
of creating complexity, convergent thinking is the process of taking the complex and making
it simple. The “final” solution to a problem (although no solution is ever really final in a de-
sign mindset) from a design session should go through a real pruning process, to take away
everything that is unclear or inessential, to make the solution as clear and effective as possi-
ble. One of the seven “mindsets” of the Stanford d.School at is to “craft clarity” - to take all
of the data and insights from the discovery process, and to bring them into a coherent whole
with the right level of specificity for the audience. Nothing kills a good design solution like
too much unnecessary complexity.

Ninth, design requires broad collaboration. In design, there are rarely “lone
geniuses.” The power of design thinking is the integration of insights from a wide variety of
specialists, who each have a perspective that is relevant towards exploring and designing the
best approach to problem solving. Thus, often the role of the design thinker is as facilitator,
able to navigate a collaborative conversation among people with different interests, motiva-
tions, and expertise, and to create synthesis among all of their constraints and requirements as

12 Brown, (p. 68).
stakeholders. Increasing the diversity of a design team is a good thing. In ministry, then, the
design of a structure, strategy, program, initiative, experience, or product shouldn’t just be
designed in reference to someone’s theology, but with a room full of professionals of all
kinds, bringing their insights about how to make the idea better.

Finally, design thinking calls for constructive and quick failures. Design thinking al-
ways depends on constructive failure.\textsuperscript{13} The emphasis on discovery, testing, and rediscovery
based on progressively deeper insight requires a certain level of missing the mark. Discover-
ing misalignment, integrating those discoveries into the design process, and re-developing
the solution requires a tolerance for failure. This is what is often referred to as the “lean
startup” mindset. It can, of course, take substantial time, energy, and resources to develop an
idea all the way to public launch, and if there haven’t been any iterative steps of feedback
along the way, that public launch can be a huge disaster, costing real time and money and
good will. The real benefit of constructive and quick failures is risk mitigation - even though
an idea might be messy, it is better to discover if you are on the right track early, with a pro-
totype or some other artifact, by testing your assumptions with the real people you have de-
dsigned for. Embracing the discomfort of potential misalignment in the short run can save
larger failures in the long run, and creating a culture of “freedom to fail” is essential to de-
veloping real insight and better solutions. This, of course, implies the ongoing assessment

\textsuperscript{13} Brown says: The risk of such an iterative approach is that it appears to extend the time it takes to get an idea
to market, but this is often a shortsighted perception. To the contrary, a team that understands what is happening
will not feel bound to take the next logical step along an ultimately unproductive path. We have seen many
projects killed by management because it became clear that the ideas were not good enough. When a project is
terminated after months or even years, it can be devastating in terms of both money and morale. A nimble team
of design thinkers will have been prototyping from day one and self-correcting along the way. As we say at
IDEO, “Fail early to succeed sooner.”
and evaluation of the solution, relative to those whom it is designed for. If they don’t like it, understand it, benefit from it, or want it, the solution is headed the wrong direction.

**Design Thinking Process - Core Patterns**

The Design thinking process is characterized by a particular pattern that it repeatedly moves through. Design is a cyclical and repetitive process, but it is not without a certain shape. It often moves from imagination, to insight-gathering, to problem framing, to ideation, to idea-testing, to learning, to iteration, and back again, over and over again. The design process is not linear, but it is purposeful. It has a rhythm and a shape that are more or less predictable, and a good design thinker will be able to move deftly through the design process by understanding where they are in the cycle. Brown begins to explain the design patterns, saying:

Design thinkers know that there is no ‘one best way’ to move through the process. There are useful starting points and helpful landmarks along the way, but the continuum of innovation is best thought of as a system of overlapping spaces rather than a sequence of orderly steps. We can think of them as inspiration, the problem or opportunity that motivates the search for solutions; ideation, the process of generating, developing, and testing ideas; and implementation, the path that leads from the project room to the market. Projects
may loop back through these spaces more than once as the team refines its ideas and explores new directions.\textsuperscript{14}

The rhythm of design is something that, according to its leading proponents, can be consistently replicated.

There are a number of naming variations on the overlapping spaces in the design process from the available literature, with some practitioners aiming to consolidate steps, others aiming to deconstruct steps into smaller parts, and others aiming for alliteration for simplicity. It is almost impossible to ascertain the origins of each version.\textsuperscript{15} They are easy to customize for unique uses, but the point is that this language is attempting to describe the same process: one that starts with deep, embodied inquiry, moves toward open and divergent possibility generating, then towards optimizing solutions with limited information, toward testing the early solutions in the real world, and repeating the process over and over again. For my purposes, I will use “Empathize, Define, Ideate, Prototype, Test, Iterate,” which comes from the Stanford d.School.\textsuperscript{16}

Before exploring those six steps, however, there is, in a sense, a “pre-step.” The assumption behind design, especially for a mission-driven organization, is that one would have a particular vision or motivating mission, or a particular outcome in mind that is driving the problem solving process, or a particular person or group of people for whom the organization

\textsuperscript{14} Brown, (p. 16).

\textsuperscript{15} For example, in a quick online search, we can see design methodology steps as: “Discover, Define, Design, Develop, Deliver,” or “Problem Finding and Problem Solving,” or “Empathize, Define, Ideate, Prototype, Test, Implement,” or “Ask, Brainstorm, Concept, Feedback, Revision, Repeat, Implement, Assess,” or “Knowledge, Empathy, Awareness, Creativity, Design, Adaptivity,” and many more.

has a sense of burden and are seeking to serve. Each of these is a legitimate entry point into the design process, and “identifying” and “imagining” what problem you would like to solve, and for whom, is the entry into the process itself. For product-driven organizations, this is less important, as the product design is fully referential to what the customer might buy. Service and education-oriented organizations, however, have to balance twin desires - to serve their customers or constituents well, but to simultaneously invite them into challenging transformation pathways. Even with (or perhaps, especially because of) this added layer of complexity, design is growing as a methodology for tackling outcome-oriented solutions as well.

The first step of the design process, as mentioned before, always begins with *Empathy*. Design has a “human center,” and it is suspicious of detached or disembodied information gathering. Design is anthropological, and requires a participatory form of action research. Real, direct conversations with those for whom you are problem solving is an essential ingredient to the design process, and pushing through “common wisdom,” toward real, observable insight is part of the magic of design. Spending quality, real time in a home, community, workplace, or family situation will reveal constraints and realities and problems that a survey or phone call never will. In this step, Brown encourages a certain functionalism, prioritizing observation over conversation - “watch what people do or don’t do,” in order to implicitly understand their pain points, their daily goals, and what they are aiming to accomplish or problem solve in their own lives.

The second step of the design process is *Problem Definition*. This is slightly “convergent,” requiring a distilling and a synthesis of all of the data gathered during the empathy-

driven discovery process. It is when you “unpack and synthesize your empathy findings into compelling needs and insights, and scope a specific and meaningful challenge.”\textsuperscript{18} This is an especially important step in the absence of a clear problem to solve - for example, saying “we want to reach our community” is ambiguous enough to need some focus and problem framing, and this is the step in the design process that allows one to move from ambiguity to focus on a clear beneficiary and a clear way to serve them, and speak to a core problem, which they have told you or shown you is a serious core problem for themselves. In the definition stage, you bring your beneficiary into clear focus, and determine exactly what question or problem you are going to design for. If done well, this “how might we” question should immediately unlock a sense of divergent “energy” among your team or design collaborators, and create an immediate pathway to generating new insight or ideas.

The third step of the design process is \textit{Ideation}. Ideation is moving from identifying problems to exploring solutions. Since the previous stage was “converging” on a particular problem frame, the ideation stage opens a new cycle of “divergent” thinking, as you and your collaborators set out to generate as many possibilities and potentialities as possible, temporarily entering into a fully generative mindset, without constraint. This is the process where you are pulling in as much latent insight as possible from a diverse group of collaborators, in order to get as much idea-data as possible - the more ideas and data points, the better. The d.School handbook calls this the step in which you “aim to generate radical design alternatives,” and you work on “going wide” into a wide open “solution space,” with a “large quantity of ideas and a diversity among those ideas.”\textsuperscript{19} This is another essential step - most

\textsuperscript{18} Stanford d.School \textit{Bootcamp Bootleg PDF}, “Define” section.
\textsuperscript{19} Stanford d.School \textit{Bootcamp Bootleg PDF}, “Ideate” section.
often, with our tendencies toward analytical reasoning, or trusting our intuition, or scarce marginal time for reflection, we have the liability of “converging too quickly,” and limiting the number of possible alternative solutions in the overall solution set. The greater your set of generative ideas, the more possibilities you have to work with, and to potentially combine and test. Often, this step is where the sense of design “magic” happens, as contributors begin to see patterns and opportunities that would have never emerged otherwise. To conclude, the d.School guide cautions, “the fundamental principle of ideation is to be cognizant of when you and your team are generating ideas and when you are evaluating ideas - typically keeping these two tasks separate.”\(^{20}\)

The fourth step of the design process is Prototyping, a word derived primarily from use-cases in engineering and technology, which describes making small-scale models that generate insight about the performance and limitations of a concept or idea in the real world, without the real world risks. Prototypes are essentially small models, which increase learning and feedback quickly, without the costs associated with a full rollout of the idea. While prototypes for products are often more “tangible” than prototypes for services, experiences, or communication artifacts, the ability to construct a model of an idea is no less important - whether on a white board, a piece of paper, or a wall full of post-it notes. Design thinking literature often refers to this as “building to think,”\(^{21}\) and this can help focus assumptions, force trade-offs and rankings of ideas, and begin to articulate vision for the idea. The prototyping process is a “convergent” or “evaluative” phase, taking the wide set of ideas and possibilities, and clustering them and ordering them by theme, or by feasibility, or by desirabili-

\(^{21}\) Stanford d.School Bootcamp Bootleg PDF, “Prototype” section.
ty, or cost, or whatever other constraint is most helpful. Often, the convergent process requires thinking through multiple anticipated constraints, and eliminating some ideas and possibilities with additional layers of criteria. Prototyping the emerging idea is a helpful way to understand realities of the emerging concept(s).

The fifth step in the design process is Testing. The testing phase is the act of taking your working concept or prototype, and putting it in front of the people it is designed for, to get their opinion or feedback on it. The d.School outline encourages us to “prototype as if you know you are right, but test as if you know you are wrong.”\textsuperscript{22} The purpose here is refinement, and to quickly assess whether you were constraining your ideas according to your reality, or according to the actual reality of your beneficiary. The only way to know is to go back to them with a concept or set of concepts, and get feedback on it. This is another step to further develop and deepen empathy insights, and your ability to see through the point of view of your beneficiary. You might learn that you did not get the solution right because you did not frame the question correctly - but much better to learn this way, than to learn after a failed product or program rollout.

The final step in the design process is Iterate. The design process never truly ends, because people and cultural environments are constantly changing. Even if a program or initiative were to roll out at full scale, a certain degree of evaluative and constructive feedback should always be built in, so that the alignment between the initiative and the beneficiary are constantly in dialogue. The lack of an ongoing feedback mechanism is how people and cultures and trends shift under our feet, and we often lose the coherence of the product or pro-

\textsuperscript{22} Stanford d.School Bootcamp Bootleg PDF, “Test” section.
gram design without even realizing it. This incentive only grows as the organizational investment to the design model grows - which is how mature organizations often lose their “founder’s mentality” - because they lose touch with the cultural conditions, empathy questions, and feedback cycles that drove their initial design in the first place. Ongoing evaluation is critical to the design process.

**Design Thinking Applications**

As I have implied, design thinking is not limited to commercial organizations, which is part of its appeal and increasing utility. The differences between the purpose and functions of a business and the purpose and functions of a church or ministry are numerous, as they should be. Organizationally, however, there are a number of contexts that benefit from design thinking, and by highlighting them I hope to create analogues that are a little closer to the organizational realities of churches and ministries.

For businesses, of course, the primary organizational mandate is the maximization of profit, and thus design thinking in a business context is oriented toward identifying and actualizing potential opportunities for product and customer fit. Product or service design is constrained by the nuances of what a person will choose to buy, but is only constrained further by internal realities - like organizational culture, organizational strategy commitments, or in some cases, ethical commitments to social responsibility. Design thinking can, of course, be used to gain an innovative advantage to unethical ends, but is intended to be optimistic about solving problems and serving people through market mechanisms. As mentioned earlier, for-
profit service organizations, like doctors or personal trainers, often have a different set of constraints: they need to design for what people want, but also for what they need (which is sometimes painful). Balancing what people want and what they need only increases the complexity of the design challenge, but often the payoffs - like getting into shape or undergoing a life-saving procedure - are much higher for the well being of the customer, and thus service providers design for motivational triggers, incentives, and rewards. They are still being customer-focused.

Educators have a multi-faceted set of design thinking challenges and opportunities. Education, particularly at a systemic level, has a number of complex problems with a diversity of stakeholders and a high degree of constraint around curriculum demands, individual student needs, and competing resources. An entire sub-genre of design thinking has been developed with classroom education solutions in mind, popularized as the “Design Thinking for Educators Toolkit.” It follows a similar design rhythm (discovery, interpretation, ideation, experimentation, evolution), and specifically highlights curriculum, classrooms, processes and tools, and education delivery systems as areas of focus for design thinking.

Design thinking is also growing as a problem solving framework for social work and development organizations, as “design thinking for social impact.” Design thinking has been steadily making inroads into the theory and practice of international development, social innovation, and community transformation. While this sector has a long history of asset-based community development approaches, and numerous tools for beneficiary observation and discovery, design thinking brings a methodological coherence, a generative creativity, and the

tools for community-driven design that are new to the social impact sector. The design methodology is being popularized in places from the Stanford Social Innovation Review to recent graduate programs in Social Impact Design. Publications such as the “human centered design toolkit” seek to make the most granular design thinking exercises accessible to anyone, with those working in poor environments in the global south particularly in mind.

The following section of this thesis will explore the crossover potential of design thinking as an innovation methodology for churches and missions organizations. These organizations are not often businesses (although some emerging missions models generate revenue and profit), and they aren’t even service organizations, education organizations, or social impact organizations, per se (although those three models have much nearer parallels). The mission of the church is governed primarily by its fidelity to the Biblical narrative, as I have argued above. However, to the extent that mission exists to invite, integrate, and transform people into full members of the family of God, in a way that is contextual and effective, I believe design thinking can contribute a theoretical framework and a set of organizational mindsets and tools toward that end.

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24 For example, see the latest programs the Parsons School of Design in New York City or other similar institutions.
Zane Pratt, talking about the theoretical foundation of contextualization, quotes famed linguist Eugene Nida in his Introduction to Global Missions:

‘Good missionaries have always been good anthropologists.’ Thus missionary linguist Eugene Nida begins his classic work, Customs and Cultures. In fact, all missionaries either learn anthropology in school or on the job. Relating correctly to other cultures is the basic element of the missionary task, and those who find success on the field are those who do it well.¹

The humanities have long been a theoretical foundation for the cross-cultural task of mission. If design thinking is, indeed, a new “liberal art of technological culture,” as Buchanan stated in 1992, it is worth exploring how this liberal art might inform missiology, creating value in ways that the other liberal and social sciences have brought insight to missiology - following

¹Pratt, Zane; Sills, M. David; Walters, Jeff K. Introduction to Global Missions (p. 137). B&H Publishing Group. 2014.
the pattern of anthropology, the crown-jewel of missiological method, to sociology, psychology, economics, and cultural theory. Surely design as a discipline can have insights for the effective re-framing of the most intractable missions challenges, in which envisioned futures are somewhat clear, but parameters and pathways and milestones are often ambiguous, hidden, and rapidly changing.

As I have demonstrated, the leading thinkers of Design Thinking have cast vision for design thinking to lead the way in such audacious areas as serving the needs of the global poor, designing new approaches to elderly care, designing the future of our urban communities, and re-designing our food and health systems. Yet, very few voices are evaluating the implications for design thinking on our missiologies - from cross-cultural mission, to urban mission, to justice and service, to church planting, to discipleship, to community outreach. Exploring the opportunities of this overlap for missiology and its practitioners is the remaining focus of this thesis.

The first two parts of this thesis focused on the theoretical foundations of missiology and the philosophical commitments of contextualization, and begged the question of how to ensure contextualization that is effective, further asking whether we might have any reliable tools for effective local ministry contextualization. The third part of this thesis introduced design thinking as an adjacent discipline, asking a similar question, namely, “how do we contextualize a product or service or experience with real people in mind, in a way that drives organizational goals and invites beneficiaries into a transformational journey?” The synthesis of these three areas of inquiry is a practical approach to “ministry design.”
When I refer to ministry design, I am referring to the sum total of factors and steps that drive “local contextualization” decisions, either explicitly or implicitly, about how to enact the Missio Dei in a particular context by a person or group of people. Our theoretical missiology has to be enacted by practitioners in concrete places through concrete acts of “ministry.” Ministry design is the process of enacting and delivering on a local missiology-in-practice, for real people.

Ministry design is an “abductive reasoning”\(^2\) approach to contextualizing mission, using the design thinking mindsets, methodology, and tools to find the clearest ways of designing ministry solutions that correspond faithfully with the particularities of a culture and a beneficiary group. Much of our existing literature and practical training in missions and ministry tend to overlook the problem solving process that exists underneath our ministry and mission decisions in practice. Theologians, pastors, missionaries, and even anthropologists are often not trained on a legitimate framework or philosophy for contextual innovation - which can sometimes leads to ineffective or sub-optimal ministry that is misaligned to the particular needs of the environment, with discouraging consequences for the missionary, pastor, or layperson. Design thinking might be able to help.

So, a synthesis between Design Thinking methods and “good contextualization” criterion might help us further understand how to move from conceptual missional theology to concrete missional praxis, and press further into the effective “localization” of the Missio Dei in our time and place.

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\(^{2}\) Roughly defined as an inference that goes from observation first, to theory, but without the conclusive power of deductive reasoning. Charles Sanders Pierce, an American philosopher and mathematician, first called it “educated guessing.”
The Theology of Ministry Design

Since alignment to the *Missio Dei* is the fundamental grounding of Christian mission, it is important to explore the alignment and areas of convergence between the philosophical commitments of design thinking, and Christian theology. The metaphor of design, the act of the designing, and the values that drive the design process, can find their grounding in a Biblical anthropology and theology of mission (with some unique constraints). So, for synthesis, I’m aiming to take the values of design, and integrate them with some of the Biblical and theological rationale for ministry contextualization, so that we might have the foundations for a “theology of ministry design.”

*Renewal as the Vision for Design*

First, why should Christians have a vision for design? As I’ve demonstrated, design thinking is concerned with meeting human needs, and concerned with solving complex social problems for the common good. Design has a human-oriented center, and “renewal” (of some type) as its ostensible goal. There is, of course, the opportunity for design to serve the idolatries of technological convenience and power, or the various visions of non-Christian ideologies, but to the extent that ministry design is aiming for redemption and renewal of people, towards Biblical flourishing, and toward social shalom and the common good, it shares much in common with design thinking. The renewal and flourishing of people’s soul, heart, mind, marriage, family, vocation, friendship, leisure, community, workplace, and city
are all under the realm of “flourishing,” and can all be seen as noble domains for robust design thinking by churches and ministries, to contribute to this aim.

Christians as Learners

Design thinking is fundamentally multidisciplinary. It has as much to gain from art as from science, and can learn from pop culture, sociology, or biology. There is a true interrelatedness of knowledge that design thinking welcomes, because it wants any perspective possible that might generate a new insight on a problem or a new possibility on a solution. In design thinking, reality is your friend - assumptions or projections about reality are a limitation to be actively overcome by asking good questions and challenging assumptions. Intellectual humility and social empathy are the keys to generating data and insight for problem solving. In the same sense, Christians historically hold to a view of God and epistemology that allows for divine insight and common grace across all knowledge domains. Good missiology can benefit as much from social science, economics, and technology as it can from theology, philosophy, and biblical studies, assuming it is properly normed by the Biblical narrative and Biblical telos. Christians are to have the humble confidence to be active, participatory learners, highly in tune with the people and culture around us, and ably pursuing insight about human nature and the world we live in from every discipline. If “truth” is an essential attribute of God, then in a sense, we should be bringing the entire wisdom and counsel of God and his good world to our missional task.
The Power for Design

Christians ought to have a robust and distinct motivation for design-based problem solving. The theological heart of Christianity, “justification by faith,” says that Jesus has fundamentally secured the eternal future of the Christian, and grants him divine approval in the present, and the presence of the Holy Spirit as a promise of the future. In other words, Christians have the most security possible to take bold risks, the most free to fail, the most willing to look squarely at the hard lessons of failure, and the most free to take risks again. A spirit empowered mission cannot be anything other than truly apostolic, entrepreneurial, and innovative, because it has the highest incentive for urgent fruitfulness (the Great Commission) and the deepest safety net imaginable. A robust theology of grace gives real courage for the innovation task, and a mindset of abundance and freedom, not scarcity or fear. Christians motivated by this fuel can bring a radical and innovative “design” ethic to mission, pressing forward into new means for ministry.

Designing For People

Design is “human centered,” and while mission finds its grounding in God, it is not a stretch to say that mission is also “human centered,” insofar as it is designed to communicate the Gospel to people where they are. The Great Commission was the command to “make disciples,” in alignment with Jesus’ previous command to “love your neighbor,” and even to “love your enemies.” In Acts, the earliest marks of the church were common service to the poor, and the generous sharing of all things with their community. The most essential ethical directives in the life of Christ are toward the well-being of one’s neighbor. We inherit a
“human centered” and “community centered” mission that implores us to serve people well in the name and image of Christ. Good ministry and good design both come from a foundation of relational care and relational common sense - observing the needs of one’s neighbor - particularly neighbors who have more complex problems to navigate - and loving them well through creative service.

Getting Close to People

To that end, good design borrows from mission in its essential “incarnation.” Part of the critique of the business sector from design thinking is that it is too removed, and not sufficiently “embodied” with the people it exists to serve. The essential missional step was God “incarnating” among people, and walking among the “others” that existed. Good mission, then, is incarnational, and requires a certain proximate nearness that lends itself toward observation, empathy, and creative solutions. This resonates, of course, with what we are learning about innovation itself - the best innovations are often found in “local” contexts, not in board rooms of well resourced organizations. Whether an individual, a missionary, a pastor, a church, or a global organization, real mission requires real incarnation and active local participation, and design thinking will argue along that this is an essential step for real problem solving and solution building.

Design Constraints

Design thinking, particularly in the product-development business, is constrained by technology, or price economics, or business strategy, or customer desires, or more. The
magic of design for business is in the deft navigation of all of the design constraints to find the best way forward. In mission, we operate with the same creative navigation, but among a different set of constraints. The Biblical narrative is our primary constraint - is the shape of our mission in line with the spirit and essence of the Kingdom of God as modeled in Christ? This is our first evaluative “norm.” The priority of the Gospel message is a constraint, ensuring that a ministry or message doesn’t obfuscate the clarity of the teaching of the good news. There is a prophetic constraint, taking into consideration the hidden “idols” of a culture or community that would tend to invite design alignment (say, materialism, for example), when what is really needed is a prophetic critique. Ministry design should be as relevant, and clear, and plausible as possible, but never outside the boundaries of its key constraints.

*Designing in Community*

Design is a collaborative, community project. It seeks a diversity of perspectives, skills, and insight in order to widen the lens as far as possible on diagnosing, understanding, and generating insights for action. A good design team pulls from multiple industries and sectors, even if the particular problem to solve is particular to one of them. It seeks as much adjacent insight as possible. In the same way, the body of Christ is given a plurality of gifts and abilities, and beyond the spiritual gifts, the body of Christ possess a richness of practical gifts that are not often engaged. Asking design questions around how to more effectively conduct discipleship, small groups, children’s ministry, membership, building development, communications, community outreach, or mercy ministry, will have the potential to engage the full skill set of men and women in a church or ministry organization. Inviting collabora-
tors to bring their best thinking to solve Kingdom problems is an activating, mobilizing action. Design thinking affirms that men and women of diverse backgrounds and skill sets can work together, and our theology of the Body of Christ affirms that we all have the gifting to contribute toward Kingdom solutions.

**Designing for Fruitfulness**

Design thinking is iterative, which means it is also evaluative. It is seeking “alignment” with its beneficiary, which is indicated either by a purchasing decision (business) or by some sort of transformational outcome (social impact sector). Christianity has a theology of stewardship and of “building carefully,” which calls us beyond faithful presence and into fruitful presence. To have a missiology or ministry that isn’t evaluative is to have one that is not striving for fruitfulness. Striving for effectiveness is not a heavy, law-based burden as some sort of performance-seeking before God (although it can become that if not observed carefully), it is an intentionality that is always seeking to further love a particular neighbor or community. In such a paradigm, ineffectiveness is commensurate with “loving poorly.” The Christian mandate, then, isn’t fruitfulness per se (which is the work of the Holy Spirit), but it is faithfulness striving for fruitfulness, in a manner that trusts the Lord in his sovereignty but takes seriously the gift of innovative agency that we have been given. To design well is to test, to evaluate, to improve, to evaluate, and to keep cultivating the soil, especially the tough soil. It might be tough soil, or we might simply be using the wrong seeds and the wrong tools. Faithful, iterative evaluation is what helps us discern the difference.
Contextualization as a Design Process

As I demonstrated earlier, there is a significant amount of theoretical and practical work being done in the area of missiological contextualization. Where much of the writing on contextualization seems to be underdeveloped, however, is in the contextualization of the overall ministry construct, beyond the communication act of the Gospel itself. There is more to the overall plausibility of mission and ministry design than the right metaphors or cultural references during preaching. The messaging, structure, environment, organization, and experience of a church service, a community program, or a small group might have serious differences in “shape” after serious cultural reflection and deep observation Ministry design requires developing the entire ministry construct from start to finish.

Designing an effective local ministry requires a similar “design process” as the one outlined earlier. The design thinking process adapts and adjusts, but is generally consistent, even if one is designing ministry. I will discuss those patterns with a “ministry” lens here, using a modified version of the design process: Discerning, Discovering, Defining, Designing, Delivering.

Discern

Ministry design starts with identity and calling. Discerning one’s particular sense of calling and identity within the context of God’s mission is fundamental toward good ministry practice, because it integrates the particularities of one’s gifting, timing, situation, and burden for the world. Beginning to ask “what should I do” is an ineffective question if it isn’t first
built on the foundation of “who is God, who am I, and what story do I find myself in?” Being rooted in and oriented by the biblical story of God’s mission is the first pillar of good ministry. Assessing one’s gifts, skills, opportunities, and sense of “burden” for the world is the second pillar. Where the mission of God meets your particular gifting in a concrete way, then the foundations for effective ministry are in place. This requires ongoing listening, prayer, and discernment, but the essential identity and calling commitments made by an individual are the fundamental constraints for ministry design. In the same way, an organization or church shouldn’t be designing outside the boundaries of their mission or vision, as to avoid “mission drift” (although whether an organization’s mission and vision are properly developed is an essential early question, and itself requires discernment). In ministry, design doesn’t begin with demand, it begins with discernment. Sometimes God’s call will not be the most “effective” or “scalable” pathway ahead. Nevertheless, in the ongoing process of ministry design, aligning to one’s particular and God-given identity, calling, gifting, and purpose is essential for effectiveness.

Discover

Where ministry design begins in practice is in an active “discovery” phase. This is the step requiring active incarnation and empathy, collecting primary and secondary data, using anthropological tools and other research tools, to gain as much insight as possible into those whom you seek to serve or reach. Spending sufficient time walking a neighborhood or location in prayer, or spending intentional time in structured conversations with the right questions is important. Getting to the heart of the real pain points that are keeping people
from encountering Christianity, or at least from participating or engaging in a ministry opportunity will be crucial to creating insight for ministry design. Sometimes, it is the smallest detail, comment, story, or insight that might re-frame your entire ministry approach. It comes from investing sufficient time and energy and resources into listening to the people you seek to reach, and being committed to using those insights are you starting point for design, rather than simply supplemental information for the project you already have in mind. Ministry design requires a truly open, “beginner's” mind, and incarnation means truly being willing to “take on” the realities of those whom you serve, as they are.

Define

Moving from initial insight to problem definition is a “convergent” step. You’ll likely gain significant insight, but without reflecting on and discerning your ministry’s particular identity and calling, you likely won’t be able to frame a sufficiently concrete problem. So, “how do we begin a missional small group,” or “how do I develop an opportunity for scripture engagement,” or “how do I help strengthen families in my community,” or “how do I train small group leaders in our growing church” are all problems that can be tackled by design - but it is the input from the discovery phase that will help you determine if the problem you want to solve is a problem worth solving. If a ministry design problem has no reference to the desires and inputs of the people for whom it is designed, it will inevitably fail. Even when things aren’t “what people want,” but might be what they need - like medicine, exercise, or a diet - these are still most often framed in reference to the future vision and benefit for the customer that is worth the potential pain, cost, and sacrifice - in short, when the pain
of staying the way they are is greater than the pain of walking a journey of transformation. Understanding these dynamics as you design ministry approaches is essential. Understanding the transformational goal - the outcome - in the life of the person you want to serve or empower can help frame the right design question and unlock all of the latent problem solving energy for you and your team.

**Design**

In light of your calling, those whom you exist to serve and begin to build relationship with, the insights you gather about their life, and the value you decide to create for them, the brainstorming space becomes much more intuitive. Often doing this intentionally, in a single room with a number of collaborators for a fixed period of time, can unlock a wide range of new pathways quickly. Creating “divergent” space for people to write down or capture or list or name any good idea is important for ensuring that the widest possible set of options presents itself, especially the ones that go “outside the box.” Then, clustering ideas by emerging themes or idea groupings, and sorting and ranking them according to the right criteria, will help the best ideas emerge. The emerging design should feel like it integrates everything the group has learned about those they want to serve, and fits within the constraints of Biblical mission, and the mission and gifting of the church or organization (though if it challenges some constraints of the organization, that might be a good thing).

**Deliver**
Delivery is the “doing” stage. It is presenting your idea, or a small version of the idea (a prototype), back to the stakeholders that support it and the people that are intended to benefit from it, to see if they resonate with your emerging ministry design. Is it plausible to them? Is it helpful? Is it clear? Is it credible? Is it desirable? People that see something through the lenses of clarity and desirability often take action. The sign of a good ministry design is that people take action to move toward it. If not, the feedback you get can help inform and improve the next iteration of the design cycle. Delivery gives you the chance for new discovery - which moves the cycle back onto itself over again.

Evaluation and Ministry Design

This thesis began with a claim that we are “all designing ministry,” from pastors, to christians in the marketplace, to missionaries, to staff members of nonprofits and para-church organizations. Everyone that has a personal commitment to see the Kingdom of God grow on earth as it is in heaven is already designing ministry to a degree. This has often been done intuitively with great skill, and only sometimes understood consciously, although one might not have language or margin to reflect on it. The question I have attempted to raise, then, is “how are we designing our ministries?” and “are we designing them well?” The first question is methodological, and the second one is evaluative. While I’ve spent most of my time on method, the evaluation question is also critically important.

Peter Drucker said that “What you measure is what improves.” Most of the common criterion for “good ministry” is simply its fidelity to God, to one’s sense of calling, and to
basic alignment with the Biblical story. This is the “faithfulness” criterion, and I’ve already spoken about the need for a robust theology of mission guarding our ministry actions.

There is also the “fruitfulness” mandate, which guide our energies towards pursuing cultural fit. Part of faithfulness is the constant pursuit of fruitfulness. Our sense of fidelity and missional urgency should lead us towards an evaluative posture, which asks, “is this aligned, and is it working, or not?” This is the realm of outcomes - are we seeing change, or at least hints of change, in the lives of those we seek to serve, at least to some degree? If the ministry one has designed isn’t accomplishing the outcomes it was designed for, then there is a “fruitfulness” challenge, at least in part. Often, individuals aren’t sufficiently able to articulate the “outcomes” they hope to see, nor how the ministry activity they are pursuing is sufficiently aligned to accomplish them. Working towards coherence and alignment between “ministry design” and “intended outcomes” is an essential evaluative step. While there is inevitably tough, fruitless soil in which to do ministry, we do ourselves no favors by ignoring a misalignment between our efforts and our intended outcomes in the lives of the people we seek to serve or reach. A system is designed perfectly for the results it is getting, in a sense.

Getting this alignment right, of course, is the essential skill of design. Getting it right is difficult, which is why an experimental, observational, flexible, agile approach to ministry design is important. Missional faithfulness leads to the pursuit of missional fruitfulness, and the pursuit of fruitfulness leads to the pursuit of contextual alignment - ensuring to the best of our ability that our mission design fits seamlessly in the areas of local culture and community that need to be adapted, and intelligently critiques the areas of local culture and community that need to be critiqued, and being committed to making sure that the essential “value”
of the ministry - the value and benefit of the good news of the Gospel and the participation in the church and in the renewal of creation - is seen and comprehended clearly. Ministry design creates plausibility by removing unintended obstacles and barriers, and invites unhindered transformation by the power of God. Evaluation and adjustment of our ministry is important because the clarity and invitation of the Missio Dei is at stake in the lives of real people.

**Design Thinking Applications for Church and Mission Institutions**

Finally, it would be helpful to get more specific in some of the possible use-cases of ministry design, although exploring case studies in depth is likely reserved for future research. To say “mission” or “ministry” can carry a diversity of meanings, particularly if one zooms out across a wider range of Christian traditions and commitments. Ministry design is not, after all, just for evangelicals or pentecostals or progressives. This is a very limited list, and is the launchpad for further exploration of the implications of design thinking for mission, but opens up a few important categories.

First, ministry design might be useful for church planting. In the context of church planting, it can provide a framework for discovering the pastoral and missiological approach most appropriate for a particular neighborhood or community. Identifying a few of the key people in the neighborhood whom the planter would like to invest in can provide the initial opportunity for a deep discovery and empathy phase, as the planter spends time in their lives, observing their lives on practical, vocational, relational, and spiritual dimensions. This is a
helpful way to check assumptions about “cultural realities” that might or might not be accurate. Divergent ideation can be done closely with a planting team, and might even be done with other community stakeholders, collaboratively working together to envision “what kind of church might be most effective for this community.” Designing the initial language, culture, identity, teaching, worship, rhythms, structure, and experiences of a church plant provide an opportunity for testing, learning, and adjusting based on early feedback.

Ministry design might also be useful for discipleship, broadly defined. Developing “discipling” relationships, as an individual, is an opportunity for design, as is the process of building a discipleship program, pathway, or system for larger communities. Discipleship is the realm of personal formation, and so understanding clearly what particular “formational outcomes” one intends to see accomplished will frame the design question in a clear way. Moving toward deeper knowledge of the scriptures, or more activated service in the community, or the ability to apply the Gospel to difficult areas in life, are all transformational outcomes that can be assessed and designed for. Discipleship design might ideate around and evaluate particular models of content, relationship structure, rhythms, applied learning, apprenticeship, or more, toward the outcome of seeing people formed into followers of Jesus in a particular context.

Ministry Design might help with local community outreach and impact. Identifying and framing a particular community need - for foster care, or incarceration support, or supplementary education - is a good starting point for designing intelligent ways to serve a local community. Designing with a wide variety of stakeholders, whether from government, education, social sector, business, or beyond, will help ensure a wide-angle approach to solu-
tions, and avoid some of the naïveté often intrinsic to community development approaches. Converging around constraints like “sustainable,” or “empowering,” or “participatory,” or “evangelistic,” will allow a ministry design team to develop sensible approaches to tackling local problems that might not have been tried before, and will create new relationships with community stakeholders along the way.

Ministry Design might also be a useful framework for global missions, whether mission-going or mission-supporting. As a local church attempting to support some variety of cross-cultural or overseas mission efforts, the design process can be helpful for discernment and alignment. Starting, for example, with deep reflection on their particular identity, calling, and burdens, a church community can then frame the question, “where should we allocate our missions energy?” Spending time understanding the particular desires and passions of individuals or segments of members of a church might unlock vision, opportunities, gifts, or skills that were previously unknown. Generating options around possible organizations to support, geographies to work in, or possible ways to serve well, and converging around constraints like “theological alignment,” and “great personal relationships,” and “highest impact opportunities,” will help create an aligned missions strategy that flows out of the identity and heart of the local congregation.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Contextual Mission for a Changing World

The Missio Dei is the overarching narrative that gives identity, meaning, and shape to the work the church in the world, now and into the future. The church called to remain faithful to that mission. An essential ingredient of that faithfulness is good contextualization, because the good news of Jesus and the proclamation of the Kingdom of God came in a cultural form, and require contextualization to other cultural forms. Faithful mission and good contextualization are both essential towards cultivating fruit in the lives of those we seek to serve. In order to contextualize mission well in an endless diversity of rapidly changing contexts, we need contextualization tools that allow us to get local, into the lives of real people, and develop ministry approaches driven by on-the-ground, incarnational empathy, with spiritual transformation as their goal. Design thinking is a problem solving paradigm that widens the set of possibilities for local ministry, and allows emerging mission strategies to evaluate and self-optimize, so that the power of the Gospel message can increase in clarity, credibility, and power. This is all so that more people might encounter the living God. If the church could grow in its ability to self-reflectively design good local ministry through an intentional
design process, it might open the door for people to enter into the family of God that otherwise would have never comprehended the fullness and beauty of the invitation. For the missions world of today, this is an important opportunity.


