

# THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE PSALMS TO A POSTMODERN MISSIONS PARADIGM

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Recently, I reported how an adult Sunday School class used word associations to arrive at this conclusion: "The Psalms are elegant poetry, songs and prophecies to cause sorrow, repentance, praise and thanksgiving in order to arrive at confidence."<sup>1</sup> This struck me as an excellent description of God's way of reaching out to people, of doing missions. By comparison, our missions efforts have often been much less elegant, dare I say it, even ugly. As one believer put it, "missionary" carries the connotation of "a poor speaker coming in, telling stories about the poor, and showing pictures of the needy and then passing the hat and doing everything you can to get everybody to feel guilty."<sup>2</sup>

It seems that the "Modern Missions Movement" is exactly what it calls itself—a missions movement based on a certain worldview called modernism, with strong leanings toward simple utilitarian pragmatism<sup>3</sup> and little concern for beauty. As such, this missions movement has spread the gospel throughout the globe, probably with a lopsided dependence on intellectualism, and it "also became one of the great secularizing forces of the past century."<sup>4</sup>

The purpose of this paper is to point out the Psalms' crucial place in postmodern missions - perhaps even as a vital element of an emerging paradigm of missions for postmodern societies. This paper is organized into two parts. The first part reviews crucial concerns of postmodernism

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<sup>1</sup> Michael L. Landon, "The Psalms as Mission," *Occasional Bulletin* 21.2 (2008): 4-8.

<sup>2</sup> Brad Jones, quoted in "Winds of Renewal," *Mission Frontiers* (January-February 1999), [www.missionfrontiers.org/archives.htm](http://www.missionfrontiers.org/archives.htm).

<sup>3</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Missions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 334-335.

<sup>4</sup> Paul G. Hiebert, foreword in *Bridging the Gap*, by Bruce Bradshaw (Monrovia, CA: MARC, 1993), iv.

and demonstrates how the Psalms responds to them. The second part suggests how the Psalms can help guide one to a new paradigm of missions that may be especially useful in the postmodern world.

## II. POSTMODERNISM AND THE PSALMS

Numerous authors have explored postmodernism, but several Christian missiologists have provided brief reviews of the concept in reference to evangelism and missions, including Van Gelder and Bosch.<sup>5</sup> Despite the value of all these sources, Hiebert's presentation is perhaps the best organizing principle for this discussion. He highlights two significant sociological characteristics and three cultural characteristics of postmodernism, and this section on the Psalms' relevance to a postmodern world is organized around these five themes.

### A. 1<sup>st</sup> Sociological Theme: Pluralism

Pluralism, as a theme of postmodernism, is not only the existence of a myriad of ethnic and social groups but the acceptance and affirmation of other peoples and their beliefs.<sup>6</sup> What do the Psalms teach about pluralism?

#### *a. Biblical Exclusivism*

At first glance, the fit seems very difficult, since the Old Testament is adamant about worshipping only one God—the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:1-6), the punishments for idolatry (Lev. 20:1-6), and the preaching of the prophets (Isa. 44:9-20). The New Testament also openly and unapologetically declares that one can only come to God through Jesus (Jn. 10:7-8; 14:6).

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<sup>5</sup> Van Gelder has an excellent discussion of six themes of postmodernism and the varied intellectual and sociological forces that contributed to the growth of post-modernism, as well as describing the implications of these changes for North American ministry and mission in his two articles "Mission in the Emerging Postmodern Condition" and "A Great New Fact of Our Day: America as Mission Field" in *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, ed. George R. Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder, 57-68, 113-138 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996). Bosch devotes an entire chapter to seven changes in the Western world as it moves from an Enlightenment paradigm to a postmodern view. He lists and discusses these changes: 1) the expansion beyond reason to experience, 2) moving beyond subject-object roles among humans, 3) the rediscovery of teleology, 4) the challenge to the importance of progress and development, 5) changes in epistemology, 6) a chastened optimism, and 7) the growth of interdependence. Bosch, *Transforming*, 351-362.

<sup>6</sup> Paul G. Hiebert, "The Gospel in Our Culture: Methods of Social and Cultural Analysis" in *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, ed. George R. Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder, 139-57 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1996), 152.

The Psalms also demand exclusivity, since they call humans to the one true God and the rejection of the false gods.

The idols of the nations are silver and gold,  
made by the hands of men.  
They have mouths, but cannot speak,  
eyes, but they cannot see;  
they have ears, but cannot hear,  
nor is there breath in their mouths.  
Those who make them will be like them,  
and so will all who trust in them. (Psalm 135:15-18)<sup>7</sup>

Additionally, many of the Psalms have strong apologetic arguments for the true God. The author of Psalm 135 declares, “I know that the LORD is great, that our Lord is greater than all the gods” because of what he has done—the creation, the exodus.

The LORD does whatever pleases him,  
in the heavens and on the earth,  
in the seas and all their depths. . . .  
He struck down the firstborn of Egypt,  
the firstborn of men and animals. (Psalms 135:6, 8-12)

#### *b. Pluralism as Context of Psalms*

So, how can the Psalms fit with pluralism? First, notice the context of Psalms 135. One would expect what is found in verse 1—this is a Psalm directed toward “the servants of the LORD, you who minister in the house of the LORD,” but it is easy miss the reference to Egypt in verse nine—“He sent his signs and wonders in your midst, O Egypt.”

It is true that the Psalms were most often directed to the Israelites, but an amazing number are addressed to or make significant reference to the peoples of the world—Psalms 1, 2, 22, 24, 33, 40, 45, 46, 47, 49, 50, 58, 66, 67, 68, 72, 82, 86, 87, 95, 96, 97, 98, 115, 117, 135, 138, 145, 146, and 148. StuhlmueLLer declares, “The prayer of Israel reached outward to the nations principally in the hymns of praise.”<sup>8</sup> Du Preez points out that in Psalm 47 “the Hebrew actually describes the nations ‘as the people of the God of Abraham’.”<sup>9</sup> He continues:

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<sup>7</sup> The New International Version for all quotes from the Bible.

<sup>8</sup> Carroll StuhlmueLLer, “The Foundations for Missions in the Old Testament” in *The Biblical Foundations for Missions*, ed. Donald Senior and Carroll StuhlmueLLer, 9-138 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 135.

<sup>9</sup> J. Du Preez, “Interpreting Psalm 47” *Missionalia* 25.3 (1997): 308f; parenthetical references in the original, [www.geocities.com/missionalia/psalms47.htm](http://www.geocities.com/missionalia/psalms47.htm).

Here in verse 9, nothing is heard of other nations under Israel's feet. On the contrary, a *spontaneous* coming to God is suggested whereby the nations become a people of the Most High, a people of the God of Abraham. Leupold (1969:373) even prefers to read "the willing ones" instead of "princes" or "leaders," according to the "primal meaning" of the Hebrew word. As Delitzsch (1880:98) tellingly remarks, the true and final victory of Yahweh "consists not in the submission brought about by war and bloodshed and consternation that stupefies the mind, but in a change in the minds and hearts of the peoples, so that they render joyful worship unto Him."

Mays (1994:187) writes that one should notice the implicit understanding of the concept "the people of God" in verse 9. They are constituted "not by ethnic or national identity, but by the recognition of the rule of the LORD" (cf. Weiser 1962:378 and Deist 1996). People from other nations may become people of the God of Abraham, completely on *a par* with the people of Israel. Of this, Israel had to sing in praise of God, and joyfully so."<sup>10</sup>

Thus, pluralism is the context of many of the Psalms, and they address that situation.

### *c. Limited Pluralism*

Second, the Psalms affirm pluralism in a limited sense - as an affirmation of differences in ethnicity, culture and personality. God created a wonderful variety in his material world, and it all praises him (Ps. 96:11-13; 98:7-8). God created culture and ethnicity by separating the people and languages at Babel, and they all are called to worship him (Ps. 22:22-31; 72:8-17; 87:4; 96:1-10). God creates individuals as unique creations according to his plan (Ps. 99:6; 105:6-36; 139:13-16) and deals with them in their different circumstances (Psalm 107:4, 10, 17, 23).

## **B. 2<sup>nd</sup> Sociological Theme: Networks**

The second of Hiebert's sociological characteristics of postmodernism is the desire for "loose organizations and more personable relationships."<sup>11</sup> This seems to be a reaction to both the inflexible nature of many organizations and the loneliness of many individuals. Not only has the Enlightenment paradigm featured treating the world as a machine, it has tended towards treating people as machines. As such, they can be manipulated like machines by social and political specialists<sup>12</sup> and are useful primarily for production.

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<sup>10</sup> Du Preez, "Psalm 47," 8, italics in original.

<sup>11</sup> Hiebert, "Gospel," 152.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Berger, Brigitte Berger and Hansfried Kellner, *The Homeless Mind*, Vintage Book Edition (New York: Vintage, 1974), 112-114.

Many churches may have fallen into the mechanical trap as well, “[t]he result is a mechanical approach to human organization, in which people become standardized parts within a ‘factory’ which has as its goals production and gain.”<sup>13</sup> And even those who come to conventional churches are often lonely, since they often live in "a plurality of life-worlds," where in no place do they know another deeply, nor are known deeply.<sup>14</sup> In response to this, people are looking for community. The Psalms responds to this need for relationship in two ways.

*a. Wholehearted Relationship with God*

First, although the Psalms presuppose Tabernacle or Temple worship, this worship is much more than “church” mentioned above. The prophets railed against that outward, ritualistic, self-centered hypocrisy that religion often produces (Amos 5:21-24, Micah 6:6-8, Malachi 1:6-2:9), but the Psalms plead for a wholehearted relationship with God (Psalm 66; 111:1; 116:1-2, 16). The Psalms insist that one have a devoted relationship to God, not just a religion.

As the deer pants for streams of water,  
so my soul pants for you, O God.  
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.  
When can I go and meet with God? (Psalms 42:1-2)

This praise for God comes not just because of his majesty and power, but also out of recognition of one’s own weakness. In all the Wisdom literature, God draws near - near to our fear, powerlessness, pain and sorrow. When one cries out, the Psalms talk back in a language that understands pain (see Psalms 18)!

The Psalms emphasize that God loves each person, despite his true hatred of sin. The most obvious example is Psalm 51, written by David after the discovery of his adultery with Bathsheba. Another example is Psalm 32. Denying guilt was a terrible experience: "my bones wasted away ... groaning all day long, ... my strength was sapped" (32:3-4), but finally, "I acknowledged my sin to you ... and you forgave the guilt of my sin" (32:5).

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<sup>13</sup> Paul G. Hiebert, “Missions and the Renewal of the Church” in *Exploring Church Growth*, ed. Wilbert R. Shank, 157-67 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 159. See also David O. Moberg, *The Church as a Social Institution*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1984).

<sup>14</sup> Berger, *Homeless*, 64.

### *b. Corporate Worship and Relationship*

Second, according to the Psalms, corporate worship can lead to deep personal relationships with one another. We are here together because God loves us both (Ps. 86:5, 15), we survive only because he rescues us both (Ps. 86:6-7 14), and our purpose and end in life are to praise him (Ps. 86:8-13). Shoun clarifies how music is related to relationships:

And it is in worship—“with the multitude” (Ps 42:4)—that we share with one another most deeply.

The music of worship plays a pivotal role in that sharing. First, to sing freely in the presence of others is make ourselves *vulnerable*, to expose a part of ourselves that is (for most of us) far from perfect. Yet in worship we not only accept that vulnerability, we embrace it, because we understand the closeness that it brings.<sup>15</sup>

Using Turner’s work on rituals, Hatcher explains the power of music to build relationships:

For example, a group of people singing songs around a campfire can enter into a *communitas* experience in which they realize a togetherness that transcends their normal awareness. Though to their knowledge they have not been ritually stripped of anything, the awareness of their individualities has been brought low in relation to their sense of togetherness, and they are impressed with the special (sacred) power of that togetherness.<sup>16</sup>

In Psalm 51, David begins by righting his relationship with God through confession of sin, but it ends with proclamation: “open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise,” and then asks God to bless, not just himself, but Jerusalem, the corporate body. His relationship with God necessarily implied relationships with and responsibilities to others.

### **B. 1<sup>st</sup> Cultural Theme: Deconstructionism, Relativism, and Pragmatism**

The first of Hiebert’s cultural characteristics of postmodernism can be expressed as the falling apart of the world: “it argue[s] against coherent plots and perspectives in art and distinct styles in architecture...”<sup>17</sup> He uses words like “fragmentation,” “discontinuity,” and “chaotic” to describe this view of life.

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<sup>15</sup> Carol Shoun, “God’s Word in Us Richly: the Power of the Psalms as Songs,” *Leaven* 7.3 (1999): 123-4, italics in the original.

<sup>16</sup> Mark J. Hatcher, “Poetry, Singing, and Contextualization,” *Missiology* 24.4 (2001): 481, italics in the original.

<sup>17</sup> Hiebert, “Gospel,” 153.

### *a. Psalms of Disorientation*

But doesn't this chaos sound familiar to the Psalmist? Aren't disorientation and fragmentation central subjects for many of the Psalms? Brueggemann lists five kinds of "Psalms of Disorientation" in the Psalter, including personal lament, communal lament, two problems, penitential, and "after the deluge—Thou!"<sup>18</sup> But perhaps, most significantly, he introduces this section by criticizing traditional church music.

The problem with a hymnody that focuses on equilibrium, coherence and symmetry (as in Chapter 2) is that it may deceive and cover over. Life is not like that. Life is also savagely marked by disequilibrium, incoherence, and unrelieved asymmetry. In our time—perhaps in any time—that needs no argument or documentation....

The point to be urged here is this: The use of these "psalms of darkness" may be judged by the world to be *acts of unfaith and failure*, but for the trusting community, their use is *an act of bold faith*, albeit a transformed faith. It is an act of bold faith on the one hand, because it insists that the world must be experienced as it really is and not in some pretend way. On the other hand, it is bold because it insists that all such experiences of disorder are a proper subject for discourse with God. There is nothing out of bounds, nothing precluded or inappropriate.<sup>19</sup>

This chaotic, confused, frightened world listens to a poet like David (see Psalms 55:9-13, 20-22).

### *b. Psalms of New Orientation*

The Psalms not only acknowledge and empathize with fragmented lives but also offer renewal, transformation and hope. Once again, Brueggemann may have best expressed it:

That is, the Psalms regularly bear witness to the surprising gift of new life just when none had been expected. That new orientation is not a return to the old stable orientation, for there is no such going back. ...

Rather, the speaker and the community of faith are often surprised by grace, when there emerges in present life a new possibility that is inexplicable, neither derived nor extrapolated, but wrought by the inscrutable power and goodness of God. That newness cannot be explained, predicted, or programmed. We do not know how such a newness happens any more than we know how a dead person is raised to new life, how a leper is cleansed, or how a blind person can see (cf. Luke 7:22). We do not know; nor do the speakers of these psalms. Since Israel cannot explain and refuses to speculate,

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<sup>18</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis, MN Augsburg, 1984), 51-121.

<sup>19</sup> Brueggemann, *Message*, 51-2, italics in the original.

it can do what it does best. It can tell, narrate, recite, testify, in amazement and gratitude, “lost in wonder, love, and praise.”<sup>20</sup>

Brueggemann’s first example is Psalm 30, which begins “I will exalt you, O LORD, for you lifted me out of the depths and did not let my enemies gloat over me” (Ps. 30:1). In such “[m]oments of weakness and of strength, moments of pain and of joy,” Shoun explains that music has a unique ability—“all can be held together in one grand, timeless moment of song.”<sup>21</sup>

### C. 2<sup>nd</sup> Cultural Theme: Subjectivism, Idealism, and Existentialism

Within this fragmented and chaotic world, postmodernism “also argues against any single system of objective truth.”<sup>22</sup> With this loss of stability, predictability, and confidence in the establishment, the human psyche requires a replacement. In post-modernity, the individual become one’s own standard and authority.

A second theme of post modernity is that the mind creates the realities we know. . . . We create the world in which we live. Therefore, we must be gods. . . . We are the center of existence, so we should live for ourselves today.”<sup>23</sup>

#### a. *The Stranglehold of Reason*

Following the patterns of the Enlightenment, some Christians may have become enslaved to reason. Brueggemann describes the Modern encounter with the gospel and the distortion it has created:

The gospel is thus a truth widely held, but a truth greatly reduced. It is a truth that has been flattened, trivialized, and rendered inane. Partly, the gospel is simply an old habit among us, neither valued nor questioned. But more than that, our technical way of thinking reduces mystery to problem, transforms assurance into certitude, revises quality into quantity, and so takes the categories of biblical faith and represents them in manageable shapes.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, postmodernism may have a point—some modernists, even those in conservative, Bible-believing churches, may have been trying to domesticate God with the iron rod of reason. In this crisis, Hiebert’s analysis of epistemological positions clarifies both that some Christians may

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 123-4.

<sup>21</sup> Shoun, “God’s Word,” 125.

<sup>22</sup> Hiebert, “Gospel,” 153.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 154-5.

<sup>24</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1989), 1-2.



have been assuming too much in their ability to know truth (naive realism) and that it is possible to affirm ultimate truth without assuming that any one theologian can speak definitively for God.<sup>25</sup>

Bosch doesn't say that the West is fleeing reason altogether but that rationality is being "expanded" to 1) "probe" rather than "prove," 2) reevaluate "the role of metaphor, myth, analogy, and the like, and 3) the rediscovery of a sense of mystery and enchantment."<sup>26</sup> In truth, "the central doctrines of traditional Christianity, Frye says, can be expressed only in the form of metaphor."<sup>27</sup> To counteract an over-dependence on reason, experience has become more important.

### *b. Experiencing the Psalms*

When I suffered a great loss in my life, one of my mentors counseled me to read the Psalms, slowly and often. Kidner points out that Psalm 66 begins with "a world's homage," then moves to "a nation's story" and "a nation's trial," but it finishes with "one man's debt" and "one man's story."<sup>28</sup>

The Psalms ... are rather the voice of our own common humanity—gathered over a long period of time, but a voice that continues to have amazing authenticity and contemporaneity. It speaks about life the way it really is, for in those deeply human dimensions the same issues and possibilities persist. And so when we turn to the Psalms it means we enter into the middle of that voice of humanity and decide to take our stand with that voice. We are prepared to speak among them and with them and for them, to express our solidarity in this anguished, joyous human pilgrimage. We add a voice to the common elation, shared grief, and communal rage that besets us all.<sup>29</sup>

"Down through the ages many have said they found themselves and their feelings and circumstances *in* these prayers. The closer truth is that one finds oneself *through* these prayers."<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Paul G. Hiebert, "Epistemological Foundations for Science and Theology," *Theological Students Fellowship Bulletin* (March 1985): 5-10.

<sup>26</sup> Bosch, *Transforming*, 353.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Inter-Varsity, 1975), 233-5.

<sup>29</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms* (Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 1983), 15-16.

<sup>30</sup> James L. Mays, *Psalms*, *Interpreters Commentary* (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1994), 23-24.

Through the Psalms, one not only experiences life's pain but also the worship of a glorious God. Root explains how some today have been missing the boat when they maintain that worship is something they perform or do in order to check it off their "to do" list.

We will have Sunday-only Christians as long as we have Sunday-only worship. We have been fighting a losing battle because we have been proclaiming that Christianity is something "you are," but worship is something "you do." Nothing could be farther from the truth. If you are a Christian you are worship to God.... Worship is as simple as the gospel itself. Worship is a life given in obedience to Christ. At one time worship was the act of going to the temple and making a sacrifice, but in Christ, we sacrifice ourselves. Our lives become worship to God.<sup>31</sup>

#### **D. 3<sup>rd</sup> Cultural Theme: Therapeutic Society**

As the previous section pointed out, the postmodern world is self-centered. One consequence has been emphasis on self-realization, health and therapy. As emphasis on therapy and healing has grown, concepts such as sin, self-denial and salvation have declined.<sup>32</sup> Many churches have become "vendors of religious goods and services,"<sup>33</sup> and many pastors have uncritically fallen into the role of therapists to meet the consumers' needs.<sup>34</sup>

##### *a. Defining the Problem (Reality of Sin)*

Marrs points out the modern pastoral dilemma in dealing with suffering:

The Psalter is replete with laments that articulate the cries of ancient Israelites who experienced intimately life's injustices and sorrows.... Given this dilemma, we unfortunately often rely upon ourselves as principal resource. Left to our own devices, we may engage in empathetic dishonestly ("I know how you feel"), theological arrogance ("It must be God's will"), or even theological nonsense ("God needed your baby in heaven").... But if we

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<sup>31</sup> Root continues with texts that support this conclusion: Romans 12:1-2; Hebrews 12:28-29; 13:15-16; I Corinthians 10:31; Colossians 3:17. The common Greek word for worship, λατρεύω, is translated both serve and worship. Mike Root, *Spilt Grape Juice* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1992), 20.

<sup>32</sup> Hiebert, "Gospel," 155.

<sup>33</sup> George R. Hunsberger, "Sizing Up the Shape of the Church" in *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, ed. George R. Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder, 333-46 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 338.

<sup>34</sup> Alan J. Roxburgh, "Pastoral Role in the Missionary Congregation" in *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, ed. George R. Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder, 319-32 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 322.

are to be faithful to scripture, we must challenge ourselves to go where scripture goes.<sup>35</sup>

The Psalms make it clear that the problem in life is often one's own sin. Psalm 51 is the classic example, where David confesses his sin. This Psalm can serve as a guide today: confess sin (51:1-5), ask God for cleansing (51:6-14), repent or commit to a new life (51:15-17), and ask God's help to restore proper relationships with others (51:18-19).

*b. Finding the Solution (Crying Out for Justice)*

A second way that the Psalms deals with pain is to cry out for justice denied by the sin of others. Psalm 64 begins, "Hear me, O God, as I voice my complaint," and continues "hide me from the conspiracy of the wicked," "but God will shoot them with arrows," "let the righteous rejoice in the LORD and take refuge in him; let all the upright praise him!"

Psalm 77 reveals a man in deep distress, crying out to God for redemption. As he meditates on the situation, he asks, "Will the Lord reject forever?" (Ps. 77:7-9) Then he decides to appeal to the God who redeemed Israel from Egypt (Ps. 77:10-20). The Exodus and the possession of Canaan was Israel's story, the story that gave it identity and a place in this world as God's chosen people, and it is the story to which the Psalmists turned time and again for comfort (i.e., Psalms 44, 47, 60, 66). This God of the Psalms is "a father to the fatherless, a defender of widows" (68:5). Thus, these Psalms promote the critical therapy one needs—a relationship with one's heavenly Father.

*c. Summary*

Hiebert lists two sociological themes and three cultural themes as characteristics of postmodernism. This preceding section demonstrates that the Psalms speak to this situation. 1) Pluralism was the context of the Psalms and the reason for many of the Psalms, since their purpose was apologetic and evangelistic. 2) The need for personal relationships outside of a bureaucratic context is exactly God's desire, expressed through the Psalms that call humans to intimate relationships with the Creator. The Psalms as music also provide a method for fostering

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<sup>35</sup> Rick R. Marrs, "Out of the Depth: The Psalms and Pastoral Care," *Leaven* 7.3 (1999): 144-5.

relationships among God's worshipers. 3) To a fragmented, confused world, the Psalms can say, "I know how you feel!" The "Psalms of disorientation" speak the language of confusion and pain. 4) Along with the narrative sections of the Bible, the Psalms glory in experience. Don't believe in my God because of logic; believe in him because of what he's done for me and my people—saving us from slavery, leading us to our own land, rescuing me even when I was in the wrong! 5) Finally, the Psalms reveal the cause of so much dysfunction--sin, the sin of others and my own sin. And the answer is repentance, the doing of justice/righteousness and return to the Father.

### III. SUGGESTIONS FOR A PSALMIC MISSION PARADIGM

The section above demonstrates that the Psalms respond to postmodern concerns. Without abandoning the foundational examples of Jesus and Paul, I submit these five reflections to guide action and spur further discussion on missions to postmodern souls.

#### 1. Both truth (revelation) and testimony are important.

In an attempt to avoid the relativism common today, often only revelation has been deemed authoritative or important. As a result, some tend to devalue anything other than the sermon and Bible teaching.

Hiebert has done an excellent job of presenting a realistic, yet humble epistemology that affirms absolute truth.<sup>36</sup> But Reese is equally helpful when he pointed out that theology has been seen as both "understanding seeking faith" and "faith seeking understanding."<sup>37</sup> While evangelicals have concentrated on the "understanding seeking faith" side (use of reason to arrive at faith), Reese asserts that others assume faith and use the Biblical text to understand the world.

Expressing this search to understand life from a Biblical perspective is a vital part of the personal and community Christian life. Brueggemann points out that "long before Freud, the psalmist understood the power of speech, the need for spoken release and admission, the liberation that comes with the actual articulation to the one who listens and can respond."<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Hiebert, "Epistemology."

<sup>37</sup> Jack R. Reese, "Hermeneutics and Theological Paradigms: A Pastoral Concern," paper read at the Christian Scholars Conference, 1990.

<sup>38</sup> Brueggemann, *Message*, 97.

## **2. Theologizing emphasizes both content and process.**

Along similar lines, Christians should value not just the content of Biblical theology, but also the process of theologizing. The Psalms are revelation and theologizing mixed together. Unfortunately, the most instructive times are usually the bad times, so the Psalms often present not so much a final theology as the struggle to understand.

The imprecatory psalms can be especially revealing about the need for process. Psalm 59 is addressed to evil rulers, “Do you rulers indeed speak justly?” (59:1) After condemning their sin, David calls on God to “break the teeth in their mouths, O God; tear out the fangs of the lions!” (59:6) The emotional struggle with suffering that includes dependence on God is the point of this psalm, not the final rational conclusion. The Psalms, Ecclesiastes and Job all present models of faithful living through life’s pain, and Christians today shouldn’t be afraid to admit that they live and learn much like the faithful did centuries ago.

## **3. The message will continue to be counter-cultural in a postmodern world.**

When the church is aligned with the society, its gospel message tends to be both common and nice.<sup>39</sup> At the edge, the gospel can challenge and draw blood (Hebrews 4:12). It can present a new worldview, present a new ethical behavior and demand change (Romans 12:1-3).

To flee the roles of executive or therapist that the consumer culture has thrust on the pastor, Roxburgh has suggested three roles for the pastor of a missional church: apostle, poet and prophet.<sup>40</sup> Brueggemann links poet and prophet:

To address the issue of a truth greatly reduced requires us to be *poets that speak against a prose world*. The terms of that phrase are readily misunderstood. By prose I refer to a world that is organized in settled formulae, so that even pastoral prayers and love letters sound like memos. By poetry, I do not mean rhyme, rhythm, or meter, but language that moves like Bob Gibson's fast ball, that jumps at the right moment, that breaks open old worlds with surprise, abrasion, and pace. Poetic speech is the only proclamation worth doing in a situation of reductionism, the only proclamation, I submit, that is worthy of the name *preaching*. Such preaching is not moral instruction or problem solving or doctrinal clarification. It is not good advice, nor is it romantic caressing, nor is it a soothing good humor.

It is, rather, the ready, steady, surprising proposal that the real world in which God invites us to live is not the one made available by the rulers of this

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<sup>39</sup> Andree Seu, “Nice” *World Magazine* 14 #26 (1999): 45.

<sup>40</sup> Roxburgh, “Pastoral Role,” 326-32.

age.... Our preferred language is to call such speech prophetic, but we might also term it poetic. Those whom the ancient Israelites called prophets, the equally ancient Greeks called poets.<sup>41</sup>

#### **4. Principle # 4 - Song will be considered as important as sermon.**

In the past, students ... were really puzzled by Plato's devoting time to rhythm and melody in a serious treatise on political philosophy. Their experience of music was as an entertainment, a matter of indifference to political and moral life. Students today, on the contrary, know exactly why Plato takes music so seriously. They know it affects life very profoundly...<sup>42</sup>

In many societies, music is the favorite method of communicating strong messages, especially counter-cultural messages.<sup>43</sup> It is effective for three reasons. First, Parker points out “[o]ne of the glories of music is that it says what words cannot say.”<sup>44</sup> Second, it is symbolic, and power structures often don't understand, so they can't censor or pervert the message. And third, people tend to remember musical lyrics much easier than any other form of communication.

The Psalms can definitely come to the forefront of the gospel encounter with the postmodern world because they speak the postmodern language - experience, emotion, symbolism.<sup>45</sup> Poetry and music have been widely recognized primary channels of communication since Bloom identified the younger (post modern) generation's "addiction to music."<sup>46</sup>

#### **5. Principle # 5 - Missions can be elegant.**

As stated at the beginning of the article, missions are sometimes associated with “rustic,” “cheap,” and even “ugly.” Many of the psalms set a standard for the richness and elegance

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<sup>41</sup> Brueggemann, *Poet*, 3-4, italics in the original.

<sup>42</sup> Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 70-1.

<sup>43</sup> Hugo Slim and Paul Thompson, *Listening for a Change* (Philadelphia, PA: New Society Publishers, 1995), 71-2.

<sup>44</sup> Shoun, “God’s Word,” 122.

<sup>45</sup> Jacob A. Loewen, “Myth and Mission.” in *Readings in Missionary Anthropology II*, ed. William A. Smalley, Enlarged 1978 edition, 287-332 (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1978), 327. Refers to Hendrik Kraemer, *From Missionfield to Independent Church*, (The Hague, Netherlands: Bockencentrum, 1958), 81 and Daniel von Allmen, “The Birth of Theology,” *The International Review of Mission* 75 #253 (1975): 41-4.

<sup>46</sup> Bloom, *Closing*, 68.

possible in missions. Like Brueggemann's poetic preaching, I believe that the gospel deserves - and the postmodern world is searching for - truth and good news "that moves like Bob Gibson's fast ball, that jumps at the right moment, that breaks open old worlds with surprise, abrasion, and pace."<sup>47</sup> Inductive and narrative sermons are certainly steps in the right direction,<sup>48</sup> but "gospelized" music can provide the power, variety and beauty that few preachers will ever attain.

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<sup>47</sup> Brueggemann, *Poet*, 3-4.

<sup>48</sup> Nancy J. Thomas, "Weaving the Words: The Book of Ruth as Missiologically Effective Communication," *Missiology* 30.2 (2002).