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**Title:** Hearing God - the character and functionality of situatedness for elucidating the variance in Evangelical doctrine and as the primary criterion for contextual cross-cultural proclamation.

**RQ:** What influence and bearing will situatedness have for Evangelicals on hearing God and the proclamations of the message of the Bible?

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# PROLEGOMENA - THE SITUATEDNESS OF THE ESSAY

Soon after my classic conservative Baptist Seminary training as a Christian pastor, I was predominantly ministering with atheists, agnostics and ‘broken souls’ – many whose lives had been ravished by the many existential and physical crises that can capriciously storm into one’s life. They posed questions to me that led me to question the relevance of my proclamation[[1]](#footnote-1) and many treasured beliefs such as my conservative doctrine of Scripture and inherency.[[2]](#footnote-2) Inerrancy had achieved ‘canonical’ status for me. However, I recognized that often I was not heard or listened to and some inconsistencies in my beliefs and proclamation became painfully clearer. I realised that at the core lay my hearing of God and the doctrine of Scripture moving through my hermeneutical process and impacting the contextualising of my proclamation. I needed more insight into these matters to better comprehend why there is so much inconsistency and variance in answers to theological questions. Thus, I pondered a title that would allow for a focused and fundamental research question (RQ) that would guide my investigation and feed selective yet relevant substance into my title. I became convinced that the concept of situatedness illuminated my dilemma and thus, might be part of the solution. The RQ was born. ‘What influence and bearing will situatedness have for Evangelicals on hearing God and the proclamations of the message of the Bible?3 It is implicitly linked to my title. As an Evangelical practical theologian by training and I am predominantly involved with the relationship concerning systematic theology and practical theology as responsibilities in the Church’s collective ‘performance of the scriptures’ and in the advancement of the church’s ‘social imaginary’ (Thompson 2013:17). I am deeply concerned in the practical relevance and presentation of theological conceptions. Foshaugen (1997:1) writes: ‘Practical theology studies the means by which the Church as the community of faith preserves and protects its identity.’ He goes on to say:

Practical theology concerns itself with the way in which the Gospel works out in practice in the world and should raise questions about what it sees, addressing them back to theology. … practical theology is a discipline that must bring to bear theological criteria on contemporary situations and realms of individual and social action, then attempt to formulate a suitable response and test the theory in practice.

This is what I will attempt in this research project, to forge a pragmatic, reasoned, and adequate answer to the research question and the nominated subsidiary questions raised within the RQ.

# OVERVIEW

God speaks. Hearing God. Two phrases of two words each are perhaps the most critical, misunderstood and even abused words in the existence of the Church and in particular for evangelicals. The term ‘evangelical’originates from the Greek word *euangelion* meaning ‘gospel’ or ‘good news’. Thus, if one is evangelical then one is committed to the Christian gospel message that Jesus Christ is Lord and Saviour of humanity. However, within the concepts of Lord and Saviour, there may be various understandings. I see Jesus as the Saviour or the Transformer of humanity. Bebbington (1989:4) has a definition for evangelical that includes biblicism – and by this, he means a high regard for the Bible; Crucicentrism - with an emphasis on Jesus’s crucifixion; Conversionism - that is the ‘born again’ experience (I would use the term transformer of humanity); and Activism - the principle that one’s faith should influence one’s conduct in all of life and lead to missions and social reform. However, I have found many different emphases and understandings of those 4 elements of evangelical beliefs among leading scholars, and some will be reflected on in the essay.[[3]](#footnote-3) From an early age, I was taught that theologically an evangelical must hold to the Penal Substitution Atonement theory (PSA) and believe that the core and essence of the Gospel was that Jesus saves people from hell to enter heaven when they die. This I believed as the fundamental nature of being an Evangelical. However, in this essay, I am not referring to Evangelical as a concept only limited to the heaven or hell framework.

I feel it is important to disclose to the reader what I am convinced is a more accurate and applicable definition of Evangelical and the Gospel. The essence of the Gospel is to make God’s love, mercy and grace known and for God’s love to be riposted with love. The message of Jesus was that the Kingdom of God has come. There is now a new way for rapport and fellowship with God. Thus, to’ turn for the Kingdom is near’ is not so much turn from sin but rather an invitation to make place in one’s life the opportunity to experience the love of God. It is thus not a move from ‘sin and enter heaven and ever-lasting life’ paradigm. It is more an invitation to change - to another way of living that makes place to encounter the love of Jesus. When Jesus met the women at the well or the tax collector Zacchaeus - Jesus meets them first with love, grace and mercy. Then they had the opportunity to see another way of living – an opportunity to include in their life a God who loves them and seeks relationship and fellowship. Their lives had missed the mark, missed the way that

God wanted for them – and that is the definition of sin.[[4]](#footnote-4) They were invited as they were, embraced by the love, grace and mercy of Jesus who is the full representation of God – to make place for

God in their lives - to no longer ‘sin or miss the mark’ It is always mercy and grace first. Secondly, in holding to this I am convinced that we need less perfectly formulated doctrines on all matters as we realise that the Gospel message and Christianity encompasses both wonder and mystery for the creator God of love, grace and mercy is always greater than any of our theological concepts about Him. Once we encounter the love, grace, and mercy of God as seen in the ministry of Jesus then we enter into fellowship with God,.and we enter the Kingdom of God. Now we begin to live a life where we no longer miss the mark but begin to hit the target. We begin as a people called ‘God’s beloved’ to use our time, money, and talents to care for the earth and all her people. We become the hands, feet and voice of Jesus to the broken and suffering. We practice social economical involvement in the world, fight for justice and fairness. We share the Good News that there is a better way of living than the philosophy of materialism and that there is a God of love, mercy and grace who seeks fellowship with all His creation. This is not the classic gospel message of ‘turn or burn’ founded on a heaven and hell paradigm. It is a Biblical representation of Jesus revealing the Kingdom and inviting people to enter it by experiencing and making place for this awesome God of love, mercy and grace. Then the transformation begins and we no longer ‘miss the mark’ but begin to’ hit the target’.

## Design and direction of the project.

For most Evangelicals everything we say and do in ministry is linked to these two-word phrases

‘hearing God’ and ‘God speaks’ and what they mean. We acknowledge that there are many forms and methods that God might communicate so that we humans can hear Him. These would include messengers such as angels, via His creation, or through dreams and visions. Some might believe that God can manifest physically to speak directly in person and others have confidence in charismatic gifts that God utilises to speak – such as words of wisdom, prophecy etc. It could be the voice inside our hearts, a sense of peace or urgency, open or closed doors of opportunity, or the sermon of the preacher. Furthermore, Evangelicals agree that God speaks to humanity through the Bible which many claim is the *rhema* or w(W)ord of God and that God speaks to the world through proclamation - the actions and words of Christians. This might be by means of evangelism, teaching and preaching, apologetics or any form of verbal or practical witnessing – these all are included in my broad definition of proclamation.

Evangelical Christians believe that there exists a loving merciful and gracious God who is the creator of everything. He has revealed Himself and He does speak to His creation. Of course,

Christians must ask two vital questions: ‘How do we achieve confidence that what we believe reflects what God has said?’ Even if we are confident of what we believe God has said Christians must then ask: ‘How can we be sure people listening to our proclamation are hearing God? At the very core of Evangelical proclamation is a conviction that we are proclaiming God’s word - we are speaking for God. Thus, stated slightly differently, we should ask how we know that our proclamation is God speaking. Is what Christians believe and their proclamation authoritative, inspired and inerrant (in the same sense and way many Evangelicals see the Bible)?

McGrath (1996:22) says that Evangelicalism finds its distinctiveness in relation to a series of central themes and concerns that work together. Two of them are of importance for me to consider. Firstly, a focus, both devotionally and theologically, on the person and work of Jesus Christ. This will become clearer in section 5 when I suggest we need a more Christocentric hermeneutic to hear God with one voice - if that is feasible. Secondly, there is the abiding concern for living and sharing the faith through proclamation. Proclamation is both – the spoken word and action or service.

To hear God, we need to understand what the Bible is saying. Then, to ensure the Christian proclamation is understood as God speaking, we need to consider how and what our listeners hear.

The first half of the essay relates to questions such as: ‘How confident am I of what I have believed God has said? In this many roads of inquiry arise. Is the Bible true even when it refers to scientific matters about the creation or the makeup of the universe? Is it inerrant and utterly reliable and accurate on every detail or subject that is recorded in it – from archaeology, chronology and historical details through to the teaching of the authors of the New Testament (NT)? How much am I reading into the Bible rather than reading from the Bible? Are Scriptures true in matters of faith but not in subjects such as history and science? How should I explain the inconsistencies and possible errors that I was discovering in the text and even more concerning - in my own doctrine? Then there are the questions concerning the process of the formation of my Protestant version of the Canon, the reliability of translations, issues such as inerrancy, authority, and the process of hermeneutics to try to understand how the Bible becomes theology and doctrine. This essay then attempts to clarify why there is variance in answers and why there are acceptable alternative views for Evangelicals to hold to.

The second serious issue that continuously challenged me can be stated succinctly and for me – profoundly in one sentence. How were my listeners hearing God? In this, I was questioning the contextual relevancy of my proclamation. These two issues together are asking if proclamation can be seen as the inspired inerrant speaking of God. Some critical concerns need to be addressed when we say we wish to ‘hear God’ and have our listeners hear God. Thus, the essay title reveals the heart of my concern - ‘Hearing God – contemplating a few underlying issues related to interpreting and contemporary communicating of the Bible that explains the divergence in Evangelical doctrine and practice.’ As Christians, we all believe in some concept of revelation and that God has spoken and desires to continue to speak. We need to hear God so that we can proclaim God in a manner that others might hear God. I postulate that all the above is concomitant to one concept – the situation or what I will term situatedness.

## Situatedness

Evangelicals believe that God seeks relationship and fellowship with all of His creation and thus God communicates, He speaks and can be heard. I have always assumed that Christianity is partly characterized by a concern for missions - to offer all the opportunity to hear God – we evangelicals call this ‘spreading the Gospel’. However, my own circumstantial experiences and studies focusing on Bebbington’s (1984:4) understanding of the term evangelical, have led me to question my reasoning, practice, efficiency and doctrinal positions in proclamation. This has been and remains a complicated and painful process to navigate but one I see as essential if I am to remain a sincere and humble seeker of Biblical truth. Recognising that my thinking is partly a product of numerous factors relating to my parental, cultural, and linguistic past, and specific education in theology and ministry has been critical for me to acknowledge. This is best explained by the concept of ‘situatedness’, a term that I have nurtured and matured as my own expression, but I suspect it was most likely conceived by others long before me. For me, it arose in my cross-cultural ministry settings in South Africa and the UK. For many years I lectured on Nietzsche to philosophy students. He is not always easy to read as he used so many aphorisms however one concept was remarkably accessible, and students enjoyed considering its application. His view on perspective relates soundly to situatedness. Nietzsche (1989:119) writes:

Let us be on guard against the dangerous old conceptual fiction that posited a 'pure, willless, painless, timeless knowing subject'; let us guard against the snares of such contradictory concepts as 'pure reason', 'absolute spirituality', 'knowledge in itself': these always demand that we should think of an eye that is completely unthinkable, an eye turned in no particular direction, in which the active and interpreting forces, through which alone seeing becomes seeing *something*, are supposed to be lacking; these always demand of the eye an absurdity and a nonsense. There is *only* a perspective seeing, *only* a perspective knowing; and the *more* affects we allow to speak about one thing, the *more* eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our 'concept' of this thing, our 'objectivity' be.

Nietzsche's views on perspectivism commence by questioning the underlying notions of neutrality of any articulation or interpretation. Instead, all views are in a sense glued to various perspectives and thus all interpretations are constrained in some manner to the perspectives they have. My concept of situatedness is the conviction that every individual is entrenched in their own particular geographical, environmental, social, historical, family, and cultural contexts.[[5]](#footnote-5) Therein they encounter all the ideological, religious, secular, power, ethical, educational, artistic, and political relations - to name but a few. These are all interconnected and will have a substantial influence, enlightening and determining role as individuals or members of a community experience, consider, interpret and thus react and respond or make conclusions about the world around them. In my definition, this would imply that no individual's mind is totally free or neutral as experience and cognition on any matter have been shaped by its situatedness. To what degree is debatable but that it is significantly influenced is not. The mind and all thinking must be comprehended as operationally entangled with all that it is embedded in. I chose this phrase ‘operationally entangled

‘as it truly reflects how difficult it is to untangle all the influencers or elements. This can be taken one step further and applied to both verbal proclamation and the writer of any text where the thoughts, meaning, intentions and use of language are also linked to situatedness. The warning here is to recognise that one’s own situatedness and the situatedness of any experience, concept, writer or verbal proclamation being researched or commented on all will all factor into conclusions and meaning. Thus, situatedness is immediately associated with Nietzschean perspectivism.

In both the 20C and 21C I worked in a multi-cultural milieu in South Africa and later, in the UK, I ministered as a Chaplain, teacher and counsellor with learners from over thirty diverse nationalities. These experiences made it obvious to me that an effective Christian mission requires consideration for the contemporaneous culture colonized by those Christianity is endeavouring to influence. I will argue that doctrines are also bound to situatedness in many ways including the sense that they are situated in each other and thus if one has a particular doctrine of God, it can and will influence one’s doctrine of Scripture – as will be shown in section 4. Gadamer (2006) explored the manner in which historical and cultural circumstances fundamentally affected human understanding. This is portrayed in the concept of ‘historically affected consciousness’ and how the ‘horizons’of the text and interpreter are and have been influenced by the interpretative traditions (Gadamer, 2006:291-306). Gadamer formulated the hermeneutical method as the combination of two horizons. Thiselton (1980) was swayed and influenced by Gadamer’s enquiry and analysis of understanding as the fusion of horizons. This concept of fusion of horizons is directly related to my concept of situatedness and will be developed further in the essay. Thiselton held that an impartial, non-presuppositional interpretation of Scripture is unreasonable and I believe this is because of

situatedness and thus every reader and interpreter of the Bible begins with a pre-understanding – the horizon of their own situatedness.

## The rationale, objectives and value of the title and research question

Harrisville and Sundberg (1975:77-78) said that the German Reformed scholar Schleiermacher believed that the Bible must be considered like all other books. For him, there was no difference between any metaphysical view of the world and the particular Christian view revealed by Scripture. I think that this far I do not wish to go if it means I must accept human rationalism and rise above deference and submission to the authority of the Scriptures when considering both the content of my beliefs and my proclamation of the Scriptures. I wish to maintain God as in a very real sense the originator and ‘author’ of Scripture and that inspired Scripture allows us to hear God thus it does have authority in and for its proclamation. However, there remains the issue of unpacking these terms so that we may have confidence in what we believe we hear from God and how we must proclaim it, and what our audience is hearing. Thus, my integrity demanded that one of my tasks was to revisit my doctrine of Scripture and understanding of hermeneutics to see if I can find reasons that explain the questions, concerns and doubts that I have, and just possibly postulate a way forward.

It is this that then led to my essay title ‘Hearing God - the character of situatedness elucidating the variance in Evangelical doctrine and the primary criterion for contextual cross-cultural proclamation’.It relates to Evangelical assumptions and convictions such as God speaks primarily through the Bible, Christians can hear God, and Christians are charged to proclaim God to the world in a manner that the world can also hear God and respond to what they hear. Yet, there is so much obvious variance in Evangelical doctrines. Jesus commanded that the Church stand in unity and love, yet when there is no consensus, the outcome is often that the unity and love fade away. Thus, my task in this essay is to identify and contemplate specified underlying concerns related to interpreting and contemporary proclamation of Christian Sacred Scripture that might illuminate the emergence of variance and discrepancy in Evangelical doctrine and practice. I opted to seek a research question that would be fundamental and clear in what it asked and allow for crucial research pertinent to providing the opportunity to explore what I felt was the very foundation of my title. Thus, from the title that explained my dilemma, I chose a RQ and hypothesis that would allow me to briefly consider the ‘why’ questions and concerns and understand the implications of situatedness. Now I had my research question: ‘What influence and bearing will situatedness have for Evangelicals on hearing God and the proclamations of the message of the Bible? Within this RQ are a multitude of possible avenues of research and essay-length constraints force me to only select what I believe is most pertinent.

The purpose of the RQ and a brief exploration of the selected issues arising from them is to consider the role of situatedness and the possible existence of mitigating reasons that help account for diversity in Evangelical doctrine and divergence in answers to theological, ethical and social questions. If situatedness is critical it might then allow for a wiser consideration of what we can and must do to ensure God is heard in the 21C proclamation. It is in my humble opinion a momentous issue as the Church should ask the question that is very close to being a synonym for the research question: ‘Is contemporary Christian proclamation of God heard as God intended it to be heard?**’**

I am now old enough to know that learning to live with many questions that have no acceptable clarity or finality in their answers, is the norm. Many questions led to answers that I have had to revisit continuously as new circumstances or learning raised doubts about the former acceptable answers I had arrived at. I am amazed at how many times I have said, ‘Did I really believe that?’ This then shows how my own situatedness demanded a review of my cherished answers. The most troublesome question that I have always been considering and reconsidering for the last four decades has been: ‘Am I hearing what God is saying and proclaiming the Gospel in such a manner that it can be both heard, understood and responded to? This then forms the essence of this essay.

The significance and value of the research rest in what it might find or determine in terms of the role and impact of situatedness in hearing God. It might in some small way promote more unity in love in the Church if the hypothesis is upheld - that situatedness impacts both what Evangelical Christians believe they hear from God and what is needed to be proclaimed. Situatedness might offer sound and valid reasoning for variance in answers to theological questions. The divergence in beliefs and doctrine are all claimed to be grounded in Scripture (Biblical) and are then decreed and proclaimed as Biblical truths and they are often seen as inerrant as the belief of some concerning the inerrancy of Scripture. Thus, my RQ highlights my practical contemporaneous concern. Are there inspired inerrant interpretations that accompany the original texts of the Bible?

It has become evident to me that many understandings of the doctrine of Scripture are often directly linked to the doctrines or content of the proclamation of the Church. There exist lenses (or preunderstanding) through which we study scripture and articulate doctrine for proclamation. I hope to both assert and disclose the significance of the ongoing need to appraise the import, understanding and declaration practice of the Christian faith as it relates to situatedness. To ask if doctrine and/or praxis can and should be reviewed, it is vital to grasp the foundational methodology and undergirding theological assertions so that one can proceed with justified objectives.

I had to ask again what exactly the purpose of God is when Christians received the Bible. To state this more basically – what is the purpose of the Bible? This relates to the doctrine of Scripture. Secondly, I had to ask: Is there more than one way of reading and understanding the Bible? This relates to hermeneutics. Finally, I had to question my proclamation and ask what I need to be aware of to be contemporary and heard. This is about contextual relevancy. The importance of this essay will lie in its success or failure to show that situatedness is an immovable part of hearing God – of interpretation and proclamation. If we recognise that this is God’s chosen method of discourse, to operate within both the opportunities and limitations of situatedness, that it was in a variety of different particular situatedness that the books of the Bible were given to humans, then we should have a better foundation for understanding variance in answers to theological questions (doctrines) and how best to ensure proclamation allows God to be heard.

The essay might offer some insight and direction on a road forward that will accept differences yet promote a unity of love and clarity. Ultimately, I have a very clear practical intention and the practical value of this essay lies in Christians recognising their own situatedness and seeking a unity of love. The clear evidence for this will be when Christians are less supercilious in saying

‘The Bible says …’ and rather say ‘I think that the Bible says’ – perhaps the most discerning, wise and truthful retort to the Evangelical conviction that ‘God speaks’. Herein is the significance of this essay for Christianity – recognising the critical consequences of situatedness of both interpretation and proclamation and the need for an incarnational engaged proclamation that is founded in the life and teaching of Jesus Christ and embedded in the social imaginary of those it is proclaimed to. The end objective is not to be prescriptive on the doctrinal content or activity of the proclamation but rather to suggest principles that might guide both interpretation and proclamation. Evangelicals cherish and believe in the concept of truth. However, the convolution of this problem is somewhat solved if when we say we believe in a truth claim, we accompany this with an unpretentious acknowledgement of the situatedness of all three - text, interpreter and intended audience. Let us recognise that the fullness of God is not ‘contained’ in one’s theology. We can acknowledge that in our situatedness we can have many precious opinions that we hold to – but they may change. However, as Evangelicals, we can have some ‘eternals’ - a few convictions that will always hold us. Perhaps it is not ‘thus saith the Lord’ or ‘the Bible says’ but ‘I think this is what God has said’ or ‘I think this is what the Bible is saying or teaching’.

## Methodology, delimitation and plan of the essay

I do not contemplate God as an empirical object. Thus, one is perhaps wise to consider Pannenberg (1976), whose general argument in his work *Theology and the Philosophy of Science* is that belief in God in terms of a theory of science, should be understood in the class of hypothesis. It suggests that one could argue that theology takes the veracity of this belief as its point of departure, but for me, as an Evangelical, this might disregard, diminish or neglect the concept of revelation and veracity. These are demanding and contentious issues that in themselves merit auxiliary research and attention that I will not embark on in this essay.

The nature of this research is a conceptual and practical inquiry with analysis and practical theological alignment from a literary investigation. Selected concepts that are associated with the research question will be reconnoitred and comprehended. These include social imaginaries, symbols, language, culture, contextualisation, hermeneutics, and situatedness.[[6]](#footnote-6) The literary works of numerous scholars will be reflected on to ponder these issues as I maintain that theology can only be done in a community. The emphasis will be on investigative research of literature to acquire a sympathetic comprehension of primary and implied explanations, opinions, and assumptions concerning the RQ. The project will provide discernment into the nature and challenges of hearing God via the Biblical texts and then consider the issues in contemporary proclamation so that God is heard by the people to whom one is proclaiming. The essay will address the title and the research question through judicious reading and contemplation on the character, function and understanding of the Bible. Then it will contemplate and asses what principles might be essential for the message to be heard in new contemporary periods, to people with a non-Biblical mind and very different social imaginaries to those of the writers of the Bible and its initial audience over two millennia ago. One hypothesis that will be argued is my belief we must be wary of when we say we have

‘heard God’ and the ‘what and how’, the ‘content and methodology’ of contemporary relevant Biblical proclamation to ensure others may ‘hear God’.

Some of my formal definitions pertaining to this essay may differ from usage by others. The word ‘doctrine’ is often used interchangeably with the word ‘theology.’ This is tolerable despite there being an arguable disparity between the two terms. Doctrine represents the explicit teachings of the Church or denomination about God. Biblical theology is the study of the Bible literature in the pursuit to unearth what the Biblical writers intended, described, and communicated in the setting of their own times. Historical theology dissects the expansion and evolution of Christian belief

through the centuries ever since Biblical times. Systematic theology attempts to discover, articulate and apply the Biblical outlook in a current doctrinal system. Practical theology (my field of operation) focuses on the pastoral application of the Bible in modern life. On occasion I might employ Hebrew, Greek or Latin, however, my abilities in all three are sufficiently lacking for me to be contingent entirely on those with linguistic specialities, whilst recognising that even the experts differ. Furthermore, this paper is restricted in that I am not a systematic theologian, and I am more concerned with pragmatic issues than claims of absolute truth. My focus is more on transformed lives than perfect theology. There is an abundance of superb scholarly work on all the topics that this essay will contemplate, and I will only be permitted to ‘dip’ into many far more competent minds than mine. Thus, many noteworthy theological questions that deserve in-depth response that is absent in this short, focused paper. Many critical concepts, ideas and counterarguments that are oft fleetingly reconnoitred or not considered at all – despite more than deserving a hearing. Thus, my focus is always guided by the practical theology side of the RQ.

I intend to apply critical reading and writing to my research - to seek pragmatic answers. I hope to avoid a serious flaw that I suspect I, like many others, have when defending one’s received doctrine as ‘the Biblical answer’. I consider doing theology to be the archetypal subject when it comes to finding examples of dogma where positions (implicit answers) are assumed before questions are even asked. So often we know what we desire to find before we even ask the questions and view the sources. This can be interrelated to the way our own situatedness is shaping the objectivity of questions. Our situatedness and context tend to define the parameters of the assessment, and consequently the questioner's understanding of these boundaries. After many hours of theological discussion with my peers, I have recognized that what one person might understand as a neutral question, another may heuristically comprehend as subjective and biased.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The investigation findings are not seen as definitive or conclusive but might give rise to a standard that provides some insight, and practical guidance and increase humbleness in proclamation. We can debate if the teaching of Scripture is easily accessible or unclear, and we can argue all the conclusions or observations I will make in this essay, but if we can agree with the reality of the situatedness of the Biblical text, the interpreter, and the audience of Evangelical Christians then there is a way forward.

The plan for this essay will offer a rational and clear focus on the problem, analysis and conclusion.

To do this it is split into two parts. The first part is focused on the situatedness of the Bible and its

interpretation. I will set a foundation for situatedness and succinctly consider three eras that the Church has existed in - premodern, modern and postmodern to grasp of the situatedness of the Church that influenced and impacted proclamation. Then I will proceed with a consideration of the doctrine of Scripture followed by some considerations for hermeneutics. This will begin to provide some of the foundations to answer the RQ and reflect on how the Bible speaks and what Christians hear. The issue explored is hearing God in general rather than the specific content of any one doctrine however a few illustrations of variance in a doctrine will offer some insight. The second part will offer some discernment into doing theology in context to show that for the Christian message to be contemporary and applicable requires some degree of adaption with concern for language and image transformation and metamorphosing of theology. I will deliberate primarily on the work of Gregersen (1998; 2008) and Taylor (2003) to mature the research and contention of the essay. The intention is to contend that there are movements and transformations in the understanding and application of concepts from the Biblical text interpreted, and there are alternative and complimentary interpretations that may be considered to ensure relevancy. Section 7 reflects offers a pragmatic yet biblical road forward. I think God is well aware that there will never be conformity in doctrine and proclamation however Jesus did pray for a unity in love. If He prayed this – it must be achievable and is perhaps acknowledged as a non-negotiable imperative. If disregarded, then even in the dubious event that one had the perfect Biblical interpretation and contextual proclamation but had no unity of love with other Christians who held different doctrinal positions – then perhaps the proclamation may be simply ‘noise’ and justly ignored.

The assignment has a suitable structure so that the connection between the problem, analysis and conclusion is reasonable, consistent and clear. The research problem is unambiguously formulated and defined, and is well-grounded primarily in practical theology with associations to systematic theology. It has well-defined distinct relevance for Evangelicals and the Church at large. The method and theoretical approach selected will reveal and confirm its appropriateness and suitability for the problem identified. My conclusion arrived at after conversations with the selected scholarly literature will highlight independent and pertinent thinking that should contribute to a road forward. The practicality of the proposed way forward will now be reasoned and argued for by allowing the RQ to guides the analysis and dialogue of the essay within scholarly specialist literature and deliberations on interpretation and culturally relevant proclamation. The objective is independent and unprejudiced critical reflection (acknowledging that one can never be 100% unbiased) underpinning the analysis and conclusion.

# THE SITUATEDNESS OF THE BIBLE CONCOMITANT TO ITS ELUCIDATION

# EPISTEMOLOGY AND TRUTH.

I wish to succinctly consider the terms truth and epistemology in three epochs that might offer some clarity for my essay. Whilst I was completing my PhD that was concerned with Christianity in a postmodern world I came across a superb analogy in a book by Middleton and Walsh. It proved to be a most intuitive insight into the conception of truth despite it originally being a humorous anecdote. Middleton and Walsh (1995:31-32) write:

Walter Truett Anderson tells the joke of three umpires having a beer after a baseball game.

One says, “There’s balls and there’s strikes and I call ’em the way they are.” Another responds, “There’s balls and there’s strikes and I call ’em the way I see em.” The third says, “There’s balls and there’s strikes, and they ain’t nothin' until I call ’em.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

The key to understanding this analogy is self-explanatory. Middleton and Walsh are exploring the nature of reality and its status in the umpire ‘calls’ analogy. They point out that for very different reasons each umpire can make an identical decision. Middleton and Walsh astutely comment that ‘the first ump and the third ump may agree that the pitch should be called a strike, but the belief functions differently for each (with the second ump occupying a position in the middle).’ They show how the first umpire is a classical naive realist who holds to the conviction that knowledge and human knowing are available. Thus, there is a ‘knowable direct correspondence between the external world and epistemological judgments.’ However, the second umpire is aware that all access to and knowing of the external world (reality) is continuously ‘mediated by the perspective of the knower.’ Thus, he is termed ‘a perspectival realist’ (or perhaps a critical realist). This is because he acknowledges that how he observes and understands the world always influences his knowledge conclusions. The third umpire takes this perspectival realism even further to its natural conclusion and sees his perspective as all there is, or at least all that matters – reflecting a postmodernist view.

## Premodern

Premodern epistemology involved reasoning (think about the works of philosophers such as

Aristotle and Plato) but it also accepted a metaphysical world beyond the physically inhabited

world. The individual's reasoning was entrenched (situatedness) in a community and was thus in liege to all kinds of community narratives including gods and creation myths. There was the conviction that reason could be used to gain knowledge and understanding of the universe however reasoning was informed by the ontological database of its time –the metaphysics that posited reality outside of human sense perception - from belief in souls to gods being active in the physical and non-physical universe. Reasoning and knowledge in the premodern time coexisted with religion and myth and there was little conflict between the two. One could say that all knowledge was thus grounded in ontological metaphysics and logic – always in the particular community in which people lived. In this environment, the Israeli OT faith was born, and Christianity arose. However, there was one clear difference.

The faith of the nation of Israel reflected the one true God who they believed spoke to them and He desired an intimate relationship with them. This belief was reinforced by the incarnation of Jesus and since the birth of Christianity, most Christians have held that God is the only true omniscient Being and thus is the source of all knowledge. It is God who speaks and reveals truth to people and the primary source of truth would be Scripture and the Holy Spirit. Later on, in its history, the role of tradition as a source of authority on matters of knowledge became stronger. It was widely acknowledged that any knowing and knowledge of humans is to be seen as a very small portion of God’s knowledge and comes to us primarily by revelation. One key aspect of general knowledge in the premodern era was the existence of widespread beliefs in magic, superstition, the spiritual world, miracles, and the supernatural.

For many Christians in the premodern era, the existence of God was a given and there was the absolute conviction that the Bible was true and correct on all matters it addressed – the inerrancy debate considered in section 4. The teaching of the Church became more authoritative and applied to all subjects - from cosmogony to doctrine. However, the Christian view of truth would be seen as premodern by modernists as it is based on the authority and the traditions of the Church as well as inspiration and revelation in what turns out to be unscientific literature.

## Modernism

In modernism, we find a distinct move from the underpinning of human knowledge being the allknowing God to the situatedness of the human as the perceiver and apprehender of knowledge and truth. From the Renaissance period with thinkers such as the philosopher scientists Francis Bacon (1561–1626), the quest for knowledge was driven by the belief that it was knowledge that could alter humans’ physical circumstances. This soon gave rise to rationalism which Deist (1990:213) defined as: “The view that the only source of true knowledge is human reason and that knowledge forms a unified system in terms of which everything can be deductively explained.”

Rationalists held to ‘apriori truth’ and concluded that all that is knowable or verifiable by human reason must be true. This view juxtaposed with the empiricists whose emphasis was the ‘a posteriori’ belief of truth, that which arises from empirical experience is true.

Descartes epitomizes the classical rationalist and Hamlyn (1990:144) commented on Descartes’ philosophy: ‘What is new about the approach to philosophy is … its claim to secure an epistemological and metaphysical underpinning for our knowledge of the world based on what the individual can construct from his own consciousness.’ Here is a distinct move away from the premodern and Christian concept of truth being revealed in Scripture. There is a clear move towards knowledge and truth being grounded on the notion that humans are autonomous knowing subjects. Now the belief was that one could establish truth ‘by establishing a correspondence between objectively “given” reality and the thoughts or assertions of the knower (Middleton and Walsh 1995:32).

Modernity grounded reasoning in a rational self-conscious human agent. Reason is performed by an individual and each human being was a rational being and thus could discover knowledge by themselves. Generalizing it a little, one could argue that reason replaced revelation. There was no longer the need to rely on authority and tradition for knowledge and truth. An inductive empirical process using the senses or even pure reasoning could provide knowledge. Slowly, the physical world was being understood as a machine and that the human being was a conscious free thinker - free to think for themselves. Reason has to understand by observation and reflection and the notable hope arose – one-day humans would control the machine.

Foshaugen (1997:101-129) explored the rise of modernism and notes that rationalism arose from a diverse background that included a nominal Catholic (Descartes), a Jew (Spinoza) and a Protestant (Leibniz) (:101). He then asks a few pertinent questions such as can one construct reality with mere concepts and a priori definitions? Also, should theories match experience to provide a metaphysical understanding of the natural order? He comments that the god the rationalists generated was no more than a hypothetical abstraction – almost as if needed and appealed to, to make the system work. The Enlightenment period and subsequently modernism was birthed in and from this milieu.

The enlightenment was understood as man’s coming of age argues Foshaugen (:104). He says it ‘was man’s emergence from the immaturity that caused him to rely on such external authorities as the Bible, the Church, and the state to tell him what to think and do.’ Brown (1992:355) said that the motto of enlightenment was ‘*Sapere aude* – Have courage to use your own understanding’ and points out that people like Jean-Jacques Rousseau extolled the ‘myth of the noble savage’. In unequivocal terms, Rousseau disavowed the Christian doctrine of the fall and held that man is noble by nature and Rousseau is well known for his claim that humans are born free but everywhere find themselves in chains. Thus, Rousseau decried all creeds and beliefs beyond the assertion that natural religion was founded on feeling and strongly asserted that all beliefs should be brought ‘to the bar of reason and conscience.’

Foshaugen (1997:104) talks about the advancement of the autonomous self. Solomon (1988:40) says this gave birth to the ‘transcendental pretence’ of modernity and the Western mindset has exalted and universalized the thinking self. Grenz (1996:81) summarized the modern, postEnlightenment mind as follows: ‘From Bacon to the present, the goal of the human intellectual quest has been to unlock the secrets of the universe in order to master nature for human benefit and create a better world.’ Foshaugen (1997:113) said: ‘The modern, post-Enlightenment thinker believes knowledge is certain, objective and good. The presupposition is that the rational dispassionate self can obtain such knowledge. Knowledge inevitably leads to progress.’ He argued that the Enlightenment era marked the beginning of the end of the supremacy of the Church epistemology and the concept of truth in Western culture. This is because reason had been given canonical status and the God of the Bible was superseded with ‘nature's god’ (Grenz 1996:73). Thus, the supernatural was replaced with the natural, and reason replaced the focus on dogma and doctrine. The alternate or substitute to orthodoxy became deism. Thus, in the modern era, humans aimed to discover and control truth through reason and science and the concept of revelation is discarded (Foshaugen 1997:114).

Foshaugen (:106-124) showed how the modernist view of knowledge and the world certainly had several implications for Christians. Human beings were seen as biological mechanisms or systems in a cause-and-effect world. There was no need for a creator God or need of any sustaining God in this closed system. The epistemology and methodology of science rejected all concepts of supernaturalism and thus the authority of the Church to speak out on many issues was rebuffed.

Modernism gave birth to its own concept of the idea of ‘heaven’ The ideology of modernism held to the confidence that via knowledge gleaned from science and the subsequent control of nature - humans will progress to ultimately reach an utopia. All this was based on the confident ability of the human mind to perceive and know reality. It was as if one could say that reality was discoverable and knowable without being affected by bias or uncritical belief systems.

Kant exalted the mind as the focal point of the human accessing knowledge procedure and he concurred with Hume and the empiricists that the content of knowledge comes via the senses (Geisler 1992:16). Foshaugen (1997:111-112) says that perhaps Kant was suggesting that the content of knowledge arrives via the senses, but the formation, organization and structure of knowledge are attained in the mind. As I understand it, the senses secure the information which the mind then categorizes through particular formal concepts that are present in the mind (they are there in the mind before the sense experience). These preexistent formal concepts thus act as a type of framework and sieve, supplying the parameters and limitations that make knowledge feasible. I am not sure how these formal concepts came into being but that is another topic. It seems that Kant differentiated between active phenomena (stuff present in the experience of the human knower), and noumena (perhaps best defined as objects lying beyond experience). Thus, there can never be direct knowledge of the source of phenomena – the noumena. This then suggests that we merely experience the phenomena that arise out of them. This then necessitates recognition that there are restrictions to arguing from sense experience and knowledge to transcendent realities such as noumena. The flawed implication appears to be that because science is grounded on sense experience, no reality or object that remains beyond space and time can be known by the scientific enterprise. Where then would pure mathematicians or theoretical physicists stand on this conclusion? What Kant seems to suggest is that there is a limitation in what humans can know with certainty and seems to indicate that God is not an empirically discoverable fact. The need for a creator or sustaining God was removed as now humans were deemed to be biological machines and the universe was comprehended as an impersonal mechanism. Modernism believed that despite any bias from a previous belief system such as Christianity, humans could perceive and know reality. Thus, there was no need for the Christian revealing God and a hope of salivation, because humans had the tools via learning to ensure that it was humans alone who could save themselves. Modernity wished to establish trustworthy beliefs, not based on tradition or authority, to offer epistemological foundations that were logical and certain. Ultimately, this had to remove all external human structures and explanations for knowledge. The modern mind detached human reasoning from its premodern ontological anchorage and repositioned it to being within human consciousness.

In summary, modernity grounded reasoning in a rational self-conscious human agent. Reason is performed by an individual and each human being was a rational being and thus could discover knowledge by themselves. Generalizing it a little, one could argue that reason replaced revelation. There was no longer a need to rely on authority and tradition for knowledge and truth. Inductive empirical processes using sensors or even pure reasoning could provide knowledge. Slowly, the physical world was being understood as a machine and that the human being was a conscious free thinker - free to think for themselves. Reason has to understand by observation and reflection and a great hope arose – that one day, humans would control the machine. The possibility of universally agreed knowledge and truth was around the corner. And there was no need for the Bible to reach it. The obligation is on the individual to exercise the rational freedom to uncover erroneous knowledge claims and beliefs and ascertain beliefs that are grounded on infallible epistemic foundations. Reasoning and discovering knowledge in a community were simply discarded for the rational autonomous self who could ascertain indubitability.

## Postmodernism

Postmodernism spurned this Enlightenment project of certainty and the resulting modern technological ideals and ideology, and all the philosophical assumptions on which the modern era was erected (Foshaugen 1997:113). Tarnas (1991:396) pointed out that the human mind is never a passive mirror of n discoverable external world and inherent order. The mind itself is involved and creative in the process of awareness and reasoning in creating reality. Thus, reality is considered as not being perceived but rather in some sense always constructed by the mind and situatedness. The idea of an independent observer of reality is cast aside. This would mean that more than one concept of reality is plausible.

Foshaugen (1997:132-137) explores how the essential concept to comprehend in epistemology and truth is that postmodernism is against the idea of a universal knowable worldview and absolute truth. Thus, this leads to the natural conclusion that the existence of any universal truths, interpretations or standards must be rejected. He says that ‘postmodernists deconstruct metanarratives so that no one particular belief is more true or believable than another’ and this means that ‘reality eludes all attempts at conformity so there can never be any absolute foundation. Thus, all truth is seen as ‘a social construct, pragmatically justified’. Accepting this leads to the inference that the fluidity of reality is a continuous ‘unfolding process’ then the pursuit for truth and knowledge is ‘endlessly self-revising, continually affected and moulded by one’s actions and beliefs. Consequently, when it comes to human knowledge, comprehension is only interpretation, and no interpretation is final. Tarnas (l99l:396) concisely explained this when he said that for postmodernists there is no neutrality as there exist no empirical facts that are not already theory ladened. He goes on to say that ‘there is no logical argument or formal principle that is a priori certain.’

Perhaps the most crucial insight from this is ‘all human understanding is interpretation’ and ‘no interpretation is final’ (Foshaugen1997:137). There is no place for a metanarrative and ‘the postmodernist thesis is that idiosyncratic cultural-linguistic forms of life ultimately generate all human thought.’ The implications are profound as Foshaugen points out. Knowledge is only a historically provisional and contingent product of linguistic and social practices of the specific regional groups of interpreters, with no assured “ever-closer” relation to an independent ahistorical reality (Tarnas 1991:395-402). The profound and unavoidable implication is that every explanation of any text cannot assert decisive and final authority because of the concealed incongruity and increasing inconsistencies and contradictions that undercut and weaken its harmony and coherence. Foshaugen (1997:138) concluded that this implies that the outcome of this is that all meaning is ultimately undeterminable.

If all human reasoning and thought is somehow limited by a language that is involving situatedness then one has the possibility of innumerable understanding, interpretation, consequence and significance. The conclusion is then that it is unlikely or impossible for a metanarrative or one universal acknowledged representation of reality. Thus, the postmodern narrative turns away from metanarrative and foundationalism epistemology to locally situated narrative and there is never any epistemic access to the world outside of language.

How might this all then impact the concept of truth and text? Two common tenets of this postmodern approach to the writing and reading of texts are underscored by McGrath (1996:186). He indicates that the postmodern position would hold that whatever is written (and I add spoken) will bequeath meanings that its author never intended or envisioned. Furthermore, the writer of a text cannot satisfactorily always put into words what they wish to convey. This signifies that all interpretations are equally valid (or equally meaningless). It was John Caputo (1987:156) who said: “The truth is there is no truth.’ Is Caputo right? From this brief consideration of the premodern, modern and post-modern one now can acknowledge the issue and role of the situatedness when considering how one may comment on ‘hearing God’ and ensure contextual and relevant proclamation. This is the opportune time to begin to ponder on the doctrine of Scripture and hermeneutics.

# THE DOCTRINE OF SCRIPTURE

In my thinking, I have formed a guiding principle that holds the belief that any theory on the doctrine of Scripture needs to explain why and how the Bible reveals a loving God desirous of a relationship with His creation. When one speaks about hearing God, it is helpful to acknowledge that the ‘word of God’ has different possible meanings, and a few are alluded to now. There is the Bible, direct speech of God in the Bible, a word from God as in a prophecy in a local Church or

God speaking directly to an individual such as ‘God told me to become a missionary’ or the designation for Jesus as the Word of God. I think it is useful to only use the upper case ‘W’ for Jesus as the Word of God – as will become clearer further on in this essay. However, that is not a dictatorial stance. I accept that for many the Scriptures are synonymous with the ‘Word of God’ but not for Karl Barth (2004) as will be shown later on. In this section, we are predominantly focused on the Bible as God’s word speaking to us and hearing God through it.

To consider all the matters involved in a doctrine of Scripture is outside the parameters for this essay however there is a palpable need for some precision on individual topics such as the inspiration, purpose, inerrancy, infallibility, and authority as related to the Bible and its situatedeness. Without some clarity on these as they relate to hearing God there is no clear path to the second concern of this essay – ensuring the proclamation is heard in the situatedness of the contemporary audience. There has to be a serious consideration of both inspiration – that is God who spoke to people via the Bible as well as inerrancy and infallibility - to understand the nature of the Bible as this will significantly impact hermeneutics and the decisions as to what God has said i.e., doctrines.

## The challenge

How is the Christian Protestant Bible, a collection of 66 books written between 3,900 to 2000 years ago of any value or significance to people living in the 21C?[[9]](#footnote-9) I was raised to believe that the Bible was inspired by God (2 Timothy 3:16) and thus it comprises God’s truth that is therefore transcending time and authoritative in all that is written in it. It is the reliable source to advise Christians about the nature and ways of God as well as how Christians are to live in all eras of history. However, Christians have so many different answers to the questions facing them in the 21C – all founded on what they believe they heard God say in the Bible. Life in the 21C is complex due to so many technological advances. New environmental, social, and ethical questions are raised daily – from genetic exploration to euthanasia and social movements such as the LGBT movement that advocates for LGBTQ+ rights and acceptance in society and in the Church.

Christians are faced with so many challenges attempting to proclaim the Christian message in the 21C. They are asked about the authority and relativeness of the Bible. Many in the contemporary audience ask why is the Old Testament (OT) God so violent. Why does He tolerate animal sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins or demand the sacrifice of an innocent person to appease His wrath towards human sin? Why does the Bible condone slavery with advice on how to treat slaves rather than clearly condemn it? How can one believe what the Bible says about creation and from only two people (Adam and Eve – all humanity arises)? If the Bible is the inerrant and true revelation by God, then why is there no agreement among Christians as to what it says? Why are there so many variances in theological, philosophical, ethical and practical answers of how to follow God’s

advice or demands to live a good and pleasing life to God? Christians are faced with a huge array of ongoing doctrinal, ethical and practical challenges. From women in ministry, the definition of marriage, divorce, just war, roles of male and female in the family, through to all the doctrinal variances. I do not know how many times I have been asked how it is possible that God has supposedly clearly revealed Himself to Christians via His revelation recorded in the Bible, yet the answer to a theological or ethical question is dependent on who you ask. Almost all of the Evangelical Christians providing answers will claim that their ultimate (and some would add the only) source for answers is found in the Bible. My atheist friends comment that it appears that the Bible can be used to teach any view – so how can the Bible be a trustworthy and reliable source to hear God? Answers are generally prefaced with words to the effect: ‘We need to hear God speak on this matter.’ ‘This is what the Bible teaches.’ Even in the many books I read, I found this statement implicit in what the author was saying. However, I too was hearing contradictory answers all prefaced with a similar statement. ‘The answer lies in what the Bible teaches.’ They had unshakable confidence in an inspired authoritative and reliable Bible that had God speaking to them, that they could hear God and thus have ‘the biblical answer’.

## Exemplars of variance in a major doctrine

### Luther, Zwingli and the Anabaptists.

Cragun (1996:15-28) offers an insightful example of how Christians having the same view of the inerrancy of Scripture manage to lose all notion of the unity of the Church – in the name of the Bible. He links the splitting of Christianity during the Reformation to the doctrine of inerrancy of the Bible becoming entrenched as non-negotiable. In 1517 Luther nailed his 95 theses to the Wittenberg Cathedral door with the anticipation that the Pope and the RC Church would change their ways. He had no intention of leaving the Roman Catholic Church or causing a split. However, Pope Leo X excommunicated Luther and the Protestant Church was born. Within a few years, the Protestant Church splintered over two issues – communion and baptism. Huldrych Zwingli disagreed with Luther over communion and the conflict began in 1525.[[10]](#footnote-10) Zwingli taught that when

Jesus said of the bread and wine ‘this is my body’ and ‘this is my blood’ Jesus meant ‘this signifies

my body’ and this signifies my blood’ and thus communion was a memorial meal. Zwingli argued that Luther’s concept of the physical presence of Christ at communion was a remnant of Catholic superstition. Cragun (:18-19) references some of the transcript of Zwingli and Luther on this disagreement and the how language is condescending to each other. Each side claimed the other side as being unfaithful to God’s word from their own situatedness. At a meeting of the two sides to try to resolve the matter, it is said that Zwingli stated: ‘You have a different Spirit than we’.

Luther’s side responded to Zwingli: ‘You do not belong to the Communion of the Christian Church’. No consensus or unity was reached, and Luther and his followers exclaimed that they could not part as brothers in faith and would pray for Zwingli that God might reveal to them the truth. Both sides held the Bible as the inerrant word of God, and both sides agreed on the Lordship of Jesus but viewed the other side as teaching and preaching against the clear word of God and therefore the other side was against God and the true faith or religion. The Lutheran and Reformed lines of the Church was birthed.

Around the same time, another group came into being -the Anabaptists – who also believed in the inerrancy of the Bible. They rejected infant baptism as practised by followers of Luther and Zwingli and contended that the only Biblical baptism was believers' baptism. One of their leaders, Men Simmons, inferred that Luther and Zwingli were not true Christians as they had not had believers' baptism as commanded by the Bible. Luther countered by arguing that it was his followers that were following the commands of God as seen in the Bible.

Within but a few years of Luther being excommunicated we had three different Protestant groups arise – all reading the same Bible, all believing it was inerrant and alone had full authority for belief and doctrine and yet were arriving at very different doctrinal conclusions as to what God was saying. Each side believed they had heard God, that they had the true faith and were following

God’s word and that the other side was being deceived by the devil. The Anabaptists were heavily persecuted and within nine years (1526-1536) almost all their leaders and thousands of their followers were executed. Many were drowned and the expression ‘Eintunken Eingetungt’ ‘he who dunks gets dunked’ arose. What is striking is that there is no record of Luther or Zwingli speaking out against what was happening to the Anabaptists. They both believed that the Anabaptists were leading people away from true religion to damnation in a false religion.

Cragun (:26-28) shows how before the Reformation the authority was found in the Pope and Bishops. After the Reformation, it was found in the doctrine that Scripture was the inerrant word of God – *sola scriptura*. I would argue that in only a few years the justification by faith had in a sense become justification by faith and acceptance of definite true doctrinal statements. Cragun (:26-28) records over 2050 major splits into denominational groups since the Reformation splits and argues that most of them are linked to one key point - the doctrine of inerrancy. Christian groups would find justification in the Scripture which is the inerrant word of God so that they now had the truth, and all the others were thus in error or wrong. They then used this to defend their interpretation as what God has said and is true and thus the other side was wrong and even failing to listen and follow God’s word – and that is then the sin of the other side.

### Atonement

It is perhaps useful to provide one other example of how there exists so much variance in doctrines – all claiming to be grounded on the Bible’s teaching. Atonement theories to explain the Crucifixion are formulated using the Bible and solicitous Christian scholars throughout the history of the Church are seen as offering and affirming a diversity of formulations. Strengths and weaknesses of views are debated yet no one argument prevails. This was so well unveiled in Eddy and Beilby's (2006) consideration of four distinct views of Atonement (there are more than 4 variations of the doctrine of Atonement).

Then, there is the issue of the proclamation and relevance of Atonement models for its era. In the first part of the 21C. Today, the bulk of countries have condemned the death penalty as inhumane and unjust and thus have outlawed it. Furthermore, the concept of animal and particularly human sacrifice to appease gods is seen as abhorrent, barbaric and the practice of uneducated ancient cultures. Many commentators contend that the demand for the death of someone as a penalty paid, as seen in some Atonement models concerning the crucifixion of Jesus, is an unjustified contemptible act of violence. The imagery of the crucifixion in the Scriptures and as portrayed in film and the arts (the movie ‘The Passion of Christ’ and Renaissance artists such as Cranach and Grünewald) reveal the crucifixion as an incongruous and gross human sacrifice.

Within various Atonement views, there are all sorts of questions raised. Perhaps a few examples can highlight this. Stibbe (2014:34) argued that if Christ placates God’s wrath, ‘then Jesus ends up saving us from the Father as much as from sin’. It can also be argued that Jesus Christ did not genuinely suffer the penalty for sin. Christ patently did not suffer if the supreme expression of

God’s wrath is perpetual cognizant suffering. Schreiner (2006:80) said that ‘God’s anger is not capricious or whimsical or arbitrary,’ but it ‘flows from his holiness…from his goodness, his matchless character’. Numerous Christians and non-Christians find it problematic to envisage how such wrath fits into Jesus’ representation and interpretation of God. How does one identify a loving merciful gracious God as righteous in His wrath and retribution of sin? How is God's wrath conciliated whilst His revered Son is bloodied and abused, in utter travail for days?

Finlan (2020) says that in the book ‘*Raising Abel*’ Alison (1996) argued that Jesus subverted all violent language and imagery about God. The God of Jesus’ teaching does not use violence but seeks to provide a new social image concerning the nature of God to convert everyone to love. Further on in the essay, I will explore the concept of social imaginaries as presented by Charles Taylor (2003) but for now, the suggestion is that even Christians need their social imaginaries and thinking transformed – perhaps more so when related to the Crucifixion.

Evangelical Christians believe that in Jesus, God became a full partaker in humanity. However, many prominent theologians have articulated disquiet concerning the satisfaction and substitution models of Atonement. This relates to the Biblical lucidity of the theory and the solemn challenge to understanding and appreciating the love of God as revealed by the model of the crucifixion. Thus, a judicious question arises of whether there exists only one knowable, orthodox, and true dogma of Atonement. When one desires to ‘hear God’ on this matter one soon finds that in many written works on Atonement, models are juxtaposed against each other seeking their biblical weaknesses or strengths. For example, John Stott (1986) in *The Cross of Christ* appears to promotes a Penal Substitutionary Atonement (PSA) model (he does not hold to this model alone) whilst Denny Weaver (2011) in *The Nonviolent Atonement* argues for a narrative Christus Victor model. They all use the Bible to authenticate their position.

For many, the PSA model claims scriptural priority as a doctrine to elucidate the person and work of Christ and the importance and significance of the crucifixion. Since the birth of Christianity, the Cross of Christ has become the central symbol of Christian theology and experience. However, the reality is that the crucifixion, its symbolism and theology, has become the source of both positive and harmful experiences and here the PSA doctrine stands out. Since the early 19th century there was an increasing refutation of a doctrine grounded on Penal Substitution violence. Holmes (2007:273-274) comments that the changing European perceptions of criminal justice had moved away from the public imposition of violence towards a more rehabilitative stance. I think this partly illuminates why many contemporary individuals and communities are most reluctant to consider or accept the social imagery and narrative of the Crucifixion which has a fixed situatedness, in its understanding of penalty in an older cultural tradition of sacrifice. People today are schooled by psychological, sociological and cultural shifts to often view and understand the earlier tradition as heartless, cruel and even barbaric.

Marit Trelstad (2006) edited a persuasive and insightful work with a potent paronomasiain its title.*Cross Examinations* accentuates and exposes how so many outstanding theologians are scrutinising and evaluating the critical issues relating to the interpretation of the crucifixion in our contemporary world. In this trailblazing assemblage, important questions are posed - such as if some traditional Atonement theology valorises violence or suffering. Theologians are asking if the ransom, substitution or debt satisfaction models of Atonement are appropriate and fitting for contemporary social imaginaries and worldviews. Others, with a more pastoral approach, ask if some specific Atonement models encourage and sway Christians (especially women) to acquiesce in pointless suffering. Several raise the question of how, any particular Cross or Atonement theology, meets and speaks to the vast anguish, suffering and injustice seen throughout and, in the world, today.

Today, even a superficial and cursory study of history soon divulges how images and doctrines of the Cross have been used to show love, compassion, travail, suffering and humility. Tragically, one will also find how the Cross and doctrine have also been used to tyrannize, oppress and persecute individuals and people groups. One example of this today can be grasped when considering feminist theologians' contention that the crucifixion has been interpreted to enforce the victim's passivity and oppression (gender being one example) through to the use of the meaning of the crucifixion to encourage and ratify racism, imperialism, repression and violence. The crucifixion and the symbol of it – the Cross – have had diverse meanings and messages in the situatedness it has found itself. Evidentially, I would think that one can say that so much of Christian theology is reflected in one’s understanding of the crucifixion – from soteriology, the doctrine of original sin, the doctrine of God and God’s nature through to eschatology and Christology. Here again the issue of situatedness rises.

Some of the young atheists I meet with had some very straightforward issues about the death of

Christ having any meaning. They commented with statements such as ‘Why am I seen as a sinner because of the sin of Adam and Eve (the doctrine of original sin was seen as illogical and unjust). ‘If the punishment for sin is eternal death, then God should not have raised Jesus from the dead.’

They then asked questions such as: ‘If Jesus died by giving his life but knew that he would be raised from the dead and then go to this marvellous place called heaven – then what is the big deal

– this is no profound sacrifice’ They also struggled to comprehend how a loving God would require the brutal death of a loved one to appease His wrath. They showed surprisingly good knowledge of specific Biblical texts and commented how I spoke of a loving merciful God, yet they read in the Testament of God demanding that Israel kill all men, take women and children as slaves, commanded priests to kill their daughters if they became prostitutes etc. A more detailed list with Bible references is set out in section 5.5. These straightforward questions on one doctrine have all kinds of implications for a Christian proclamation that will be listened to and heard in the 21C.

### Example of the Bible not speaking directly to a situation.

For many thoughtful Christians, it is sometimes problematic to see how all of Sacred Scripture can be beneficial when there are clear discrepancies or specific parts of it seem to be at such variance and incongruous to the particular needs of any culture or the common issues that exist uniquely in today’s western world. A few examples in the essay are provided to show that on many contemporary issues the Bible has little or nothing to say directly and clearly about the matter. This then implies one must construct a theological answer or response by bringing together different texts. This is a necessary but precarious process, and one must be vigilant of one’s own situatedness to avoid reading into the text. Here follows a good example of gender questions - a very contemporary issue that highlights why humility must guide Christians. My wife has an aunt who grew up believing that she was a boy trapped in a woman’s body.[[11]](#footnote-11) She was told by her doctor, minister and psychologist that God made men and women and self-evidently, she was a woman (by a biological definition). She got married, had two children and then got divorced. She raised her boys as their mother but when she was diagnosed with cancer in the womb and operated on the doctors discovered undescended male organs. With the blessing of her children and family, she had the necessary corrective surgery and treatment and finally, today is happy, at peace and loved as a father, grandfather, and Uncle – as he lives fulfilled as a Christian married man. Yet, there are still many Christians who say ‘she’ has sinned and offended God. Even when it comes to homosexuality some Christian doctrinal positions condemn them to hell with a literal claim that it is what God says in the Bible. As a compromise, the gay person might be told ‘well if you are gay you need to be celibate as a Christian’ denying them all possibilities of experiencing a loving relationship with another human being and also forgetting that celibacy is described in the Bible as a gift from God - one does not simply choose to be celibate. The Bible seems to be silent concerning many contemporary ethical and cultural issues. Furthermore, it has been used by Evangelicals to defend slavery or its abolition, to uphold or argue against abortion, to defend the belief that women are subservient to men or that they should be emancipated, who rationalize violence and just war or who are pacifists and condemn all war. The list is endless.

### Missional significance and basic guidance

From the examples above arises a commitment to discover and understand how interpretations of the Biblical text are in some way connected to situatedness - the interpretation, historical thinking as well as religious, personal, and contemporary social contexts. That is why I am convinced that situatedness is so critical to understanding. We are working with a Biblical text that has its own social imagery for the original context it was written in to have meaning in its time of writing and thus, we need to think carefully about how we wish to interpret it and how we are to convey it in the 21C.

Smith (2011) argued in his ground-breaking work ‘*The Bible Made Impossible’*, that the widespread interpretive pluralism of Scripture within Evangelicalism offers apprehensible testimony of an incongruous doctrine of Scripture. What makes his work so interesting is that he is a sociologist by profession, and this then provides a different perspective and evaluation as he expounds on Evangelical biblicism from a sociological perspective. Smith said the problem (for

Evangelicals in particular) is the ‘pervasive interpretive pluralism’ (2011:x). Smith does not initially directly question the doctrine of inspiration when referring to biblicism and Evangelicals, where the underscored belief is the Scriptures’ inerrancy that then leads to claims such as infallibility, lucidity and internal consistency, and self-evident meaning in the text. This then leads to the biblicist claim of Scriptures as the sole authority and of certainty and universal pertinence for Christians in matters of belief and practice or, faith and life. Can the Bible live up to such claims involved in the conservative understanding of inerrancy? Smith argued that Biblicists are vanquished in significance and consequence ‘by the undeniable lack of interpretive agreement and consistency among those who share the same biblicist background” (:xi). I think that whilst we might never remove this ‘pervasive interpretive pluralism’ it is feasible that we might understand why this is so and thus promote life and unity amongst Christians despite the variance in answers to theological questions.

In my own library, I have around 40 books with titles such as ‘3, 4 or even 5 views’ on many doctrinal issues - all upholding their own Evangelical position on a wide variety of doctrinal subjects. The significant observation in reading these views is that they are all using the Bible text to endorse their positions and refute the alternatives. They all sincerely hold to the conviction that from the Bible one can know and hear God. I would have suspected that if biblicism was the correct and true understanding of Scripture then there should not be a need for such a vast variety of interpretive differences. Biblicists agree on imputing inerrancy and ultimate authority to the Biblical text. However, when it comes to saying what they believe God has said as expressed in their doctrines (what they hold that the Bible says), they are not of one voice on hearing God. There is substantial divergence in the positions and beliefs on what they think God is authoritatively speaking and teaching the Church through Sacred Scripture. These can be small variances to disagreements so significant that they are no longer able or willing to fellowship with each other. Thus, one must ask if there is perhaps a more coherent, reliable, trustworthy, and justifiable approach to the claim one has heard God and Biblical inerrancy and authority. It is an important question as I would maintain that biblicism is one of the most ingrained and urgent challenges facing the Evangelical arm of the church in the 21C. Is there a more Christocentric or Christfocused and positioned approach available to Evangelicals? What is the Bible’s nature, purpose, and function? These are some of the issues this paper will further on address and reflect on as they directly impact proclamation in the 21C.

Smith’s work could be partly summed up as revealing how biblicism arose to prominence and whilst that is important to understand it is not the focus of this essay. However, the thesis of Smith is that an Evangelical interpretation and application of Scripture should rather be a Christocentric gospel-oriented reading of Scripture that would nullify any special interest interpretations. I to hold that there is a self-presenting in-built hermeneutic of Christo-centrism within Scripture and this will be defended further on. This Christ-centric lens allows Evangelicals to uphold in general the

Bible’s inspiration, authoritative witness, nature, and content from biblicist conservative inerrancy beliefs that often lead to misappropriations, doctrinal disputes and even inappropriate application in the 21C.

Smith has a warning when it comes to epistemological foundationalism. He states that this kind of biblicist foundationalism is held on the premise that rational humans can recognise a communal underpinning of knowledge ‘directly up from and upon which every reasonable thinker can and ought to build a body of completely reliable knowledge and understanding’ (:150). The problem with upholding a conviction of unquestionable, certain, universal, knowledge claims on the issues the text of the Bible might comment on in some genre or context, will need to survive all the challenges to any subject that it speaks out on. As the Bible covers all kinds of topics from archaeology, history, and geography through to ethics, economic policies etc – it appears that the doctrines of plenary inspiration, infallibility, and inerrancy were necessarily upheld.

It seems to me that for many Christians there exists a fear that without a biblicist literal approach to all matters, the Bible will lose all its authority as a direct revelation from God. It is here I wonder if this is not a clear case of a kind of circular reasoning. In plain language, it seems to be a weak inefficient argument for a biblicist to say that ‘we know the bible is inherent, trustworthy and authoritative in all it teaches – because God is Truth and would not lie. We know this since the

Bible says it is authoritative, trustworthy and inherent.’ They appear to have an either-all-ornothing approach – either all of what is written and recorded in the Bible is true and precisely what God wants us to hear and know or we can trust nothing, for who will then regulate what we should believe – fallible sinful human beings.

Smith goes on to warn that Evangelical biblicism will sooner than later suffer from missional insignificance. This resonated with me as I faced my own failures to proclaim a faithful yet relevant Gospel message. I also doubt we can face the postmodern world with the plausibility structures of the biblicist methodology. Smith’s work ends up arguing for a Christocentric hermeneutic over bibliocentrism. This hermeneutical principle I suggest is a needed component of the road forward for Evangelicals’ proclamation in the 21C (remember that by proclamation I include preach, teach, action and service – all the aspects of the mission of the Church).

There can be no serious disagreement that the Bible as we have it today has a seemingly long list of discrepancies and clear contradictions. The content of the entire text is pre-scientific in its origins and written in different genres and languages using anthropomorphisms, metaphors etc. Piepkorn (2007:34-39) provides us with a widespread list of these issues (and yet still it is not an exhaustive list). The accrued significance of these discrepancies is one of the first and primary arguments of atheists as to why they reject the idea of an inspired authoritative revelation such as the Bible – and consequently why they reject any belief or explanation about the existence of the Christian God. These factors need to be acknowledged and not simply ignored or argued away with an apriori belief in inerrancy. Bart Ehrmanm, a distinguished New Testament scholar, has undertaken ground-breaking textual criticism of the New Testament. He is recognized as a world-class researcher on the historical Jesus and the foundations and progress of early Christianity. He was once a committed Christian but as he reflected on how the Bible justified or explained human suffering, he found the doctrinal explanations from the text utterly unconvincing and rescinded his beliefs. Ehrman (2008) shares his story of how he saw an irreconcilable inconsistency in the Bible regarding the claim that God is omnibenevolent yet the non-debatable reality and overwhelming prevalence of evil and human suffering.[[12]](#footnote-12) Plainly, we need some basic guidance on reading the Bible and talking through the issues and differences.

The well-known Baptist systematic theologian Grudem (1994:32-37) offers guidance on the attitude one should have when doing theology. In my mind, this applies equally to reading the Bible and wishing to hear God so I will briefly summarise them. We always begin with acknowledging our own situatedness and thus we need to ‘begin with prayer’ where we ask God to give us a thoughtful mind and a believing and humble heart. Grudem says that the ‘Holy Spirit gives the ability to rightly understand the Bible’ (1 Cor. 2:14, Eph. 1:17-19). However, we must do this in

‘humility’ *-* quick to hear and slow to talk and that share one’s knowledge gained with humility and love and not with pride or arrogance (:33). Importantly, Grudem says that conclusions drawn from Scripture using reason are never the same or equivalent in authority and certitude as the statements of Scripture (:34). Furthermore, it is essential that deductions drawn from Scripture do not find themselves in dispute with clear teachings of other passages of Scripture. If they do, then a warning bell should ring. Finally, we need to be wary of individualism - so prevalent in the

mindset of the 21C. We need to read and study Scripture in community. If we ask others to join us in hearing God and we listen to others, we are humble and wise (:35).

## The question of the Canon

The research of Carlson (2019) raises many questions concerning the received Canon of the Bible as we have in most Protestant denominations. His work reveals evidence of how both Jesus and Paul quoted from the Apocrypha as well as the Old Testament - as do other New Testament writers. This raises an interesting question relating to the formation of the Canon. Is it conceivable that when the protestant Reformers removed all the Apocryphal manuscripts, they made an erroneous decision by deleting them from the Old Testament? One needs to go back to consider how the Canon came into existence, as if Carlson is correct, and the Apocrypha were in constant usage by the early apostolic Church, then why were they removed from Protestant Bibles (yet maintained in the Coptic, Greek and Russian OrthodoxBibles)?

There is also the question of the lost letters of Paul. In Col. 4:16 we read: ‘After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea’. This letter to Laodicea is not in the Canon. In 1 Cor. 5:9 Paul wrote: ‘I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people’. This Pauline apostolic manuscript is lost and thus not included with the two Corinthian letters. In 2 Cor. 2:4 Paul writes: ‘For I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you’. Then in 2 Cor. 7:8, we read: ‘Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it. Though I did regret it—I see that my letter hurt you, but only for a little while’. Many scholars believe that this shows that Paul is referring to an earlier lost letter known today as ‘the tearful letter’. There exist other claims of missing letters from clues in 2 Cor. 10:10, 2 Thes. 2:2, 15, and 2 Pet. 3:15-16. Johnson (1999:295-327), a New Testament scholar and historian of early Christianity explores and elucidates many of these unanswered enquiries. What are we to conclude concerning these non-extant epistles that are not in the Cannon? What will happen if they are found today? It will present a challenge to the doctrine of Scripture as now held by many conservative Evangelicals who would state that whatever is not included in the Protestant Biblical canon is of no doctrinal importance.

Cragun (1996:128) points out that there are no clear definitions and guidelines to what books are inspired as per 2 Timothy 3:16 and contends that ‘the Church had to struggle over what composed the inspired books for many years.’ He provides his evidence that it was only in 419 AD and not

397 AD that the Canon came into being and even then, certain books were contested and there has always been a variety of Canons. Furthermore, he asserts that by the standards of inerrancy used by Protestants the book of 1 Enoch should be included as Scripture (128-138).

These questions remind us that we need to be marked with keen caution when we consider the inerrancy of the Bible as perhaps, we do not have the full revelation of God without the original text, the lost letters or the Apocrypha. Is it possible that by eliminating the Apocrypha from their Bibles then Protestants are missing something that was important to the apostolic church? This is not going to be debated in this paper, but they are questions that warrant being noted in considering one’s doctrine of Scripture.

## Inspiration

Human involvement in authorship is agreed however to what extent they were controlled or inspired is not agreed upon. What I do wish to achieve in this section is to reveal the complexities of translating and thus consider the connotation of one or two critical verses for the doctrine of

Scripture and inerrancy in particular. Cragun (1996:139-140) argued that whilst one can argue that

2 Timothy 3:16-17 refers to Scripture as being ‘God breathed’ (he claims it is the best translation)

‘it cannot be determined from this verse what is Scripture’. He says that the much of exegesis of 2 Timothy 3:16 has not been exegesis but eisegesis (:25). Wenstrom (2015) offers a 76 pages evaluation of all the possible translations and interpretations of Timothy 3:16-17 - done by highly acclaimed exegetes. The opinions are complex and the lack of agreement among the experts in biblical language stands out got me. On at least 30 occasions the words ‘could, possible and probable’ were used. On 22 occasions the word ‘context’ was used by the experts in an explanation or justification of an opinion - again revealing how in translation and exegesis of the Biblical text, the situatedness of words can have very different meanings – all linked to the context one selects and thinks is best to explain one’s understanding. Often, there was no agreement on the context. If all or some of the *graphē* (Biblical text) is inspired – the translations are certainly not.

It is an unconvincing argument to use a text from a book to substantiate the truthfulness of the book. It is a circular argument like me saying that according to my mind, my mind is reliable. However, almost all Christians will agree that 2 Timothy 3:16 forms the foundation for the doctrine of the inspiration of the Sacred Scriptures. Yet, immediately many questions arise on this one verse. Who wrote it? What is it saying? Hanson (1982:2-11) points out that whilst many believe it was the apostle Paul who authored this text, there is no consensus on this because of variance in vocabulary, theological thought, situation and the historical information supplied by the Pastorals.

Some scholars contend a secretary hypothesis with an amanuensis writing Paul’s dictation (e.g.,

Tertius wrote down the book of Romans). I would contend that a critical but not necessarily always essential aspect of interpretation and translation of Scripture would be influenced by who the author was, when they wrote, to whom they wrote, and their motivation for writing - what were their circumstances, context etc – their situatedness.

The proper and correct translation of the Bible is itself an immensely controversial issue and this one verse of 2 Timothy 3:16 provides an excellent example and awareness of this quandary of translation. I have 9 commentaries in my library and reading their views on these verses was enlightening. Changing as little as one word or phrase may have a substantial impact on doctrine. Blaiklock (1972:115) offered an insight that I find refreshingly honest and brutally frank, and I think it has significance for this paper. He said that often the controversy over the correct translation of verse 16 is ‘sometimes predetermined by the translator’s attitude to the inspiration of scripture.’ I will argue that this is a truism that applies to all interpretations and translations. One’s prior theological beliefs are lenses through which interpretation and translation are done.

Hanson (1982:151-152) points out that this verse has some important issues in translation. One can begin with well-known translations that are similar yet different. The NIV says that ‘all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness purposes.’ The RSV declares: ‘All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.’ The English Revised Version of 1881 reads as follows: ‘All Scripture that is divinely inspired is also profitable… .’ The New Revised Standard *Version* states: ‘Every scripture inspired by God is also useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.’ Stott (1973:100) illustrates some of the problems with interpretation by the example of the NEB translation that declares: ‘every inspired Scripture has its use’. For Christians like me, it seems that the Bible translation we read will determine our beliefs on the inspiration of the Bible.

Hanson (1982:151-152) stated that some leading theologians and Bible commentators such as CK Barrett and JW Roberts would translate the Greek as ‘Every passage of Scripture inspired by God is profitable … .’ This would then imply that some passages of Scripture were not inspired by God. Kelly (1986: 201-204) accepted Pauline authorship and said that one must understand that sacred writings as used by Paul means the Old Testament and it was the only canonical Scripture for Christians (and Jews) for several generations from the apostolic age. He argued that ‘the balance of the argument seemed in favour of ‘Every Scripture’ (:202) as the right translation. He goes on to say that the translation of *theopneustos* ‘inspired by God’ can also be translated as ‘breathed into it by God’ (:203). Guthrie (1983:163-164) does not rule out the possibility of alternative interpretations and translations but believes that ‘All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable …

.’ is ’more in harmony with grammar and syntax.’ His emphasis is that Scripture equips Christians for ‘everything good’. J.B. Phillips New Testament renders this verse as ‘… for teaching and faith, correcting error, for resetting the direction of a man’s life.’ Interestingly, Hanson (1986:152) then argues the phrase ‘correction and for training in righteousness’ is un-Pauline’ and more likely the secretary or writer was ‘seasoning his Pauline studies with what had learned in school from Epictetus who described the Eleusinian mysteries with the same Greek word as in Scriptures. Textual interpretation and translation are highly complicated and involve many disputable arguments and my linguistic capability precludes me from commenting on the reasoning and translation other than to point out the obvious. Sincere experienced experts do not agree on translation, some might be reading into the text and the implications of the position one assumes is critical to one’s doctrine of Scripture

I would suggest that a key point raised here is that there are disputes amongst scholars if verse 16 means the entire Bible or only specific segments within the Bible are inspired by God. If one cannot say ‘every scripture is inspired’ then maybe at the very least one could conclude that ‘every inspired Scripture’ is profitable. Perhaps the debate should shift to the purpose of the Bible. Stott (1973) explains his view that Scripture is brought into existence by the ‘breath or Spirit of God' (:102) and that it is not a book of ‘facts of science’ but facts of salvation.’ Stott believes that the Bible is the primary and essential means by which God can bring humanity to maturity (:103).

Stott’s view indicates that a way forward is to emphasise not so much the inspiration but rather the expediency and usefulness of the Scriptures. Guthrie (1983:164) says that Timothy is not so much being advised of the inspiration of Scripture but was being prompted to keep in mind that the foundation of its usefulness lies in its inspiration (something Jews would have believed). Guthrie (1983:164) contends that this profitableness of Scripture relates to its ability to train Christians. The distinguished Biblical Greek scholar Barclay (1987:198-202) discusses 2 Tim 3:14-17 under the heading ‘The value of Scripture’. He writes that ‘Scriptures give the wisdom that will bring salvation’. However, he stresses that whilst we might argue about the rest of the Bible ‘it is impossible for the Church to do without the Gospels (:200)’ He reminds Christians that Christianity is not founded on a book but on a living person and it is in the New Testament one finds an original primary eye-witness account of that person and all His teachings.’ Barclay believes that the Scriptures are not treasured for finding faults (or doctrine), rather they are appreciated for persuading humans of the error of their ways and for directing them on the right path. He acknowledges that ultimately all doctrines and ethics are to be tested against the Bible and he boldly says that ‘the test must ever be agreement with the teachings of Jesus Christ as the Scriptures present it to us (:201).’ He concludes by wisely informing us that the study of Scripture is never a selfish motive ‘for the good of a man’s own soul’ but it is to be useful to God and to all humanity.

There is one other point worth discussing. To what extent did the authors of the Bible believe that what they had written was to be seen as the ‘word of God’ In particular I think now of the authors of the New Testament who regarded the Old Testament as inspired by God. Demarest (1984:281284) poses a thought experiment when he asks if Paul or any New Testament writer knew that all his writings would become part of the same book that he called Holy Scripture back then. Demarest says they would have explicitly answered no. However, I find that there is some clear indication that some of what was recorded by the writers was seen in the same light as inspired as the Old Testament was. In 1 Cor. 2:13 Paul claims his words come directly from the Lord. On some occasions, Paul seems to claim that he speaks with the authority of Christ (see Gal. 4:14 or 2 Cor. 13-:).

However, to my mind, this is problematic as if he did put this claim in some of his writings and speech it does seem to imply then that not all his writing and speaking were to be seen in the same light. Why otherwise did he feel the need to raise some proclamation to a higher level of inspiration and authority? Demarest does point out that he thinks Paul and the other writers of the Bible would say they are less concerned with what the Scriptures are and more concerned with what they can do (:283). Thus, I concur wholeheartedly with Demarest when he says that the bottom line for Paul is in verse seventeen. Demarest (:284) writes: ‘The Scriptures are not given to us to develop theology as an end in itself. They are given to us to produce good works in and through us.’

Too often 2 Tim. 3:16 is quoted without considering the following verse. In verse 17 it clearly states that Scripture is to equip Christians for every good work. This observation is of serious significance for this essay. This section has shown that there are at the very least some concerns when we equate all the Scriptures as being synonymous with the ‘Word of God. However, there remains a difference to be noted as then we need to see the Bible as the ‘Word of god’ written and

Jesus as the ‘Word of God’ incarnated. The translation of one verse – 2 Tim. 3:16 has been disputed by well-qualified, prominent and sincere Christian commentators. Thus, it is perhaps a little clearer why I am hesitant to refer to the Bible, the book I read daily, as the ‘Word of God.’ Certainly, the various Bible editions I own are all translations from texts that are copies of texts that come from non-extant original texts. I thus prefer to say I am reading the ‘word of God’ and not literally the words of God, whilst maintaining I can hear God when it is read carefully in its situatedness - as will be clarified further on. Jesus remains for me the ‘Word of God’ however, I am well aware of some of the issues with even that claim.

Numerous theological perspectives are willing to say the Bible is inspired however, there is seldom standardisation and uniformity as to what is intended by inspiration. Is it the text, the writers or the readers who are inspired? Does inspiration apply to the extant or only the original texts – or both or none? There are obvious concerns when we apply it to a book that has no original texts and has seen many translations. The issue of inspiration was seen very differently by Karl Barth (2004:110-

112) who argued that the ‘Bible is not in itself and as such God’s past revelation’. This striking statement means that he did not consider the book we hold in our hands as the word of God. The Bible becomes the word of God in the proclamation of the Church. Otherwise, it is only words on paper.[[13]](#footnote-13) He says that the ‘Bible, then, becomes God’s Word in this event, and in the statement that the Bible is God’s Word the little word 'is' refers to its being in this becoming. It does not become

God’s Word because we accord it faith but in the fact that it becomes revelation to us’ (:110). Where I stand firmly with Barth is his belief that the Word of God is Jesus, not the Bible

(as stated earlier). Thus, I believe the written word of God, the Bible is a witness of the Word of God – Jesus Christ. I would know little about Jesus if there was no Bible. Thus, I believe the Bible is God-breathed in that he wanted us to have it and that within it we can hear God so that we can be trained for good works. The Bible teaches and coaches Christians to reveal the loving God to the world. That is how I will safely understand inspiration. I will not unpack ‘good works’ other than say that it is all that I call proclamation and action, and would also agree with what Barclay has said earlier in this section. There is much more I need to clarify on this matter however it is perhaps sufficiently clear and allows me to proceed to consider inerrancy and infallibility.

## Inerrancy and infallibility

In my library, I have over 180 books dealing with the Bible in terms of hermeneutics. There were all the heavyweights in academia with vastly different situatedness.[[14]](#footnote-14) A very conservative mathematical calculation based on averages (each book 300 pages, 300 words per page) revealed that this amounted to well over 150 000 pages and easily exceeds 16 million words.[[15]](#footnote-15). There sure is plenty to say about inerrancy and the doctrine of Scripture. Evidently, the task ahead was overwhelming, and my reading soon became a conundrum of finely tuned and persuasive arguments from all sides. Then, when I focused on inerrancy and infallibility, I found a book by Boyd and Eddy (2009:15-31) that summed it all up in a few well-written pages. After over 100 hours of reading many different arguments and viewpoints, I had what I felt was the essence of

what was needed to be written in a handful of pages that would help me to answer my RQ and not side-track me.

Questions concerning Biblical inspiration, authority, and inerrancy have been and still are widely debated Christian doctrines. Thus, there is little hope that one as unlearned as me will be able to offer any final resolution to the questions. However, I am endeavouring to highlight how we are to be honest and sensitive to the situatedness of views on theology and thus to the context or situatedness in the proclamation of the Gospel. Perhaps we will comprehend how a position on inerrancy might or even will influence that message and its relevancy in the 21C? What I do contend is that the view of inerrancy will lead to specific doctrinal positions and that a different understanding of inerrancy or not agreeing to it, will possibly conclude in a different understanding of a doctrine. This can be partly seen in Merrick, and Garrett (2013) where the five writers offering their understanding of inerrancy were asked to consider three Bible passages that might challenge inerrancy. They looked at Joshua 6 where both archaeological and historiographical data cast doubt on the specific content of the transcript. Then they considered one incident recorded in Acts that had two different statements. Acts 9:7 claims that the travellers heard a voice but saw no one but Acts 22: 9 says they saw the light but did not hear the voice of the one who was speaking. Finally, they had to consider Deuteronomy 20 where God instructed Israel to completely exterminate His enemies as a matter of Israel’s obedience, submission and pureness before God. This had to be compared with Matthew 5: 38-48 where Jesus teaches that faithfulness to God requires turning the cheek, non-retaliation and the sacrificial love of enemies. These passages raised the issue of truth and inspiration (:23) yet they also confirmed my belief that views on inerrancy lead to variance in doctrinal claims. This particularly applies to one’s doctrine of God and His nature as will be explored in 5.6 when looking at a Christo-centric hermeneutics.

It might be useful to begin with a few clarity statements. I do not believe that the concepts of inspiration and inerrancy are 100% synonymous. This will be clarified further on. It is the original text of the Bible that is inspired by God. The surviving early texts that we have today are not precise copies of the original text. Furthermore, I am not defending in any manner or form verbal plenary inerrancy (VPI) that implies that one considers all of Scripture is inspired - down to the very words of Scripture – for some Evangelicals even the translated Bible has VPI status. If VPI is valid it can only be to the original texts that we do not have access to. However, there is some validity in holding to non-verbal plenary inerrancy or verbal plenary preservation (VPP) means that one deems all of the Bible is inspired, but only as to its concepts and not all the words. VPP thus would allow for the Bible to contain errors.

Secondly, often theological concepts are not clearly defined, and one concept may have different meanings as used by the situatedness of the writer or as read or heard by the listener. The explanation of a word includes words that need explanation. This I found many times in reading for this section. Ryrie (1999) lays out his very conservative doctrine of inerrancy in chapter 10. He acknowledges the lack of exactness in stating exactly what inerrancy is. He shows how the initial statement ‘I believe in the inspiration of the Bible’ then had to explain it refers to the text. So now it was ‘I believe in the verbal inspiration of the Bible’. Does this apply to all the text? This led to ‘I believe in the verbal, plenary inspiration of the Bible’. Then it became ‘I believe in the verbal, plenary, infallible, inerrant inspiration of the Bible’. However, soon ‘infallible’ and ‘inerrant’ began to be restricted to matters of faith only rather than incorporating all that the Bible documents (from historical facts, through to genealogies, accounts of Creation, etc.). Thus, it was crucial to add the concept of ‘unlimited inerrancy’ (:99).

This example from Ryrie shows how over the last century or two - Evangelicals have been contending and competing on exactly what the doctrine of inerrancy means. The term seems to be morphing (see section 5.6). Some of the scholars I read defend inerrancy as a doctrine held since the inception of the Church. However, most of the scholars I read argue that the Evangelical concern with inerrancy and infallibility grew in Protestant churches as a response against an overall movement towards modernism within some Christian denominations in the last two centuries (McGrath 2011:136). The move towards fundamentalism was in response to the growing numbers of scholars understanding the Bible as a historical text that then raised doubts about its divine foundations and also concern over the discrepancies and clear errors. The work of Charles Darwin also led to many questions concerning the creation account of Genesis. Inerrancy thus developed in importance to claim that the Bible is truthful, without error and factually precise in everything it says. The essence of the contention was that If God does not lie then His revelation would not contain any lies or mistakes.

The final definition is infallibility. Here, I am delineating my position that Biblical infallibility is the principle that the Bible is entirely dependable and trustworthy, and the only infallible rule of faith and practice, and will achieve its purpose as a guide to salvation and training for a life of faith and good works. This then leads me to some of the concerns around inerrancy definitions and the implications and here Boyd and Eddy (2009:15-31) are my primary source.

The works of scholars such as Lindsell, *The battle for the Bible* (1976), have controversially inspired many to contend that unless one accepts inerrancy then the implication is that one is not an Evangelical. Davis (1977:30) describes Lindsell’s book as a ‘militant’ defence of inerrancy. This raises the critical question of whether a belief in inerrancy a prerequisite to be Evangelical.

Lindsell (1976:18) taught that the Bible does not contain errors of any kind. The Bible is inspired and cannot be inspired unless it is inerrant - this is the flawed position of his argument (:34-25).

The fundamental characteristic or ‘distinctive’ of Evangelicals is the confidence in the inspiration of Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16). From this emerges the authority of Scripture and the assumption of *Sola Scriptura*. However, it is the next step of inerrancy, reliability and authority that has become confusing and contested. Here I must ever so briefly highlight the positions and provide some responses to them. Boyd and Eddy (2009:16) point out that Evangelicals do not believe that the

Bible first becomes the word of God (in proclamation) as in Karl Barth’s position, and the meaning of the Bible is not found in the events as the teaching of *heilsgeschichte* adherents claim (salvation history advocates who argue that the Bible’s text or words themselves only become the word of God in events). Harold Lindsell’s book (1976) is premised on the claim that the Bible is absolutely unerring or inerrant on all matters that it addresses. Boyd and Eddy (2009) call this position the ‘inerrantists view’. They go on to show how the debate on inerrancy grew. Jack Rogers and Donald Mckim (1979) responded shortly after the work of Lindsell (1976) in a work titled *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible* where they argued the Bible is infallible in that it does not fail believers when trusted to do what God inspired it to do. They argued believers need not and should not claim that it is absolutely inerrant in all matters it speaks to. Since then, many refined, hermeneutically delicate and subtle shades of meaning and enunciations of the inerrancy of the Bible have appeared (Jack Rogers and Donald Mckim 1979:16-17).

A conservative inerrantist position asserts that the Bible is without error in all matters it refers to. This is not just in matters of faith and practice but includes history geography science etc. They would say that Bible itself upholds the inerrant list view and if God cannot make mistakes, then all who are motivated to speak for God cannot get it wrong. The conclusion then is if one does not believe in inerrancy, it will result in other Evangelical doctrines being denied. The primary reason to defend the inerrantist view is that God cannot ever tell a lie or make mistakes and thus the Bible God gave to Christians cannot contain mistakes or discrepancies. All through the Gospels, Jesus expressed an absolute confidence that scripture is infallible and corresponds to the will of God. In Mat. 5:18 and John 10:35 one can infer that Jesus says the words of Scripture will not be invalidated. Jesus often used the phrases ‘scripture says’ or ‘God says’ interchangeably. This approach of total trust was embraced by Jesus's disciples and the authors of the NT (Tim. 3:16). The kernel of their argument was that if we determine that Scripture does contain inaccuracies, we must then conclude that what Jesus said was also then prone to error. Thus, inerrantists would claim the word of God supports their claim and meaning of inerrancy (1979:18), and the declaration all scripture is inspired by God or God-breathed provides confidence that extends to the smallest details of scripture.

Many inerrantists hold that the Bible cannot be mistaken at any point. Why? If there are mistakes or discrepancies, then it is human beings that are the authority in determining what is or is not

God’s word and it is the Bible that needs to be our authority. Nevertheless, textual criticism highlights that the inerrantist is required to admit that the Bible we enjoy today contains inaccuracies. Inerrantists have a response. They then claim that the Bible is *adequately accurate*.

However, Boyd and Eddy (:29) point out that with the inerrantist logic, we can’t trust any segment in the Bible unless we can trust every paragraph and word in the Bible.

Several qualifications of inerrancy have arisen. The general position is now that one does not declare that the Bible is error free (obvious errors are there), only that it is without any real errors.

This is because there are things about the Bible our limited minds cannot comprehend or clarify. They then turn the problem around. The setting of the problem is not the text of the Bible, but it is found in our partial comprehension of the Bible. Furthermore, some inerrantist will argue that this only applies to the original texts and not to subsequent reproductions of these documents. Those who copied texts were never divinely inspired in the process so it is realistic to assume that their copies might have inaccuracies. However, this is nullified by the conclusion that the Bible we acquired today is very similar and faithful to the original but not identical. This belief in a conservative view of inspiration leading to inerrancy is justifiable.

Davis (1977:23) wrote: ‘The Bible is inerrant if and only if it makes no false or misleading statements on any topic whatsoever. The Bible is infallible if and only if it makes no false or

misleading statements on any matter of faith and practice.’ I think that this distinction and clarification of definitions are important. Davis (:25) deals with the argument of inerrantists that any errors arose in the transmission of the original autographs. says that because there are no surviving Biblical autographs, ‘there is no way to refute this claim’ and this then is ‘intellectually dishonest’ as there is no textual evidence that the alleged error is indeed due to a transmission problem. He then suggests that there is an apparent circularity to the Biblical argument as the argument says that the Bible claims to be inerrant therefore, the claim that the Bible is inerrant is true. This claim does not follow from the first claim (:49). Even if one adds in ‘whatever the Bible claims is true’ all one had done is sneak in the conclusion into the premises (:50). Davis argues that ‘one will search in vain for a Biblical passage that teaches that the Bible is inerrant, that it is nowhere misleading or mistaken on any subject whatsoever’ (:51). Davis will acknowledge that the Bible testifies to its own inspiration as seen in 2 Timothy 3:16 but he rules out any dictation theory. He writes that the Bible was written by human authors ‘whose theological concerns, historical and cultural settings, and idiosyncrasies of style influenced their writing.’ He believes that inspiration must involve both God and human beings as instruments as written in 2 Peter 3.1 says: men moved by the Holy Spirit wrote the Scriptures. The critical point is that what they authored was a dependable and authoritative account of how God has revealed Himself in history, and anything they wrote was a reliable and authoritative theological interpretation of God’s revelatory acts (:54). Davis (:61) shows how inerrantist argue that a ‘book is inspired if and only if it is inerrant; the Bible teaches that it is inspired; so the Bible is inerrant’. Davis takes exception to the validity and soundness of this type of reasoning and writes:

The Bible surely was produced through the instrumentality of its human authors, who themselves were fallible. They wrote with their theological convictions, cultural and historical frames of reference, and stylistic idiosyncracies intact. I do not deny a priori that the Holy Spirit could have produced an inerrant Bible by use of inspiration (despite the instrumentality of fallible human authors) had he chosen to do so. What I deny is the reasonableness of the claim that this is in fact what he did do. The Bible does not claim that he did so, nor do the phenomena support this claim (:64).

Boyd and Eddy (:25) contend that God has not given us an inspired theory of inspiration. We read in 2 Per. 1:21that God moved humans to communicate His word. We do not know the extent of how much influence or control God exerted over the authors. How much of their own situatedness is reflected or influenced the text? What we do know is the text reflected the authors' individual styles of writing indicating this is not dictation from God to the pages of the writer. ‘The Bible is thoroughly inspired but also thoroughly human’ and this human element is clearly revealed in the premodern view of the world. Boyd and Eddy (:25-27) provide numerous examples of this – from the world resting on 4 pillars (Job 9:6), the sky is as hard as a molten mirror (Job 37:18), and the domes of the earth (Gen. 1:7; 7:11, to the cosmic monsters Rahab and Leviathan (Psalms 74 and Job 41). They show that God left the primitive world views intact to communicate to the people at that time. If God 2000 years ago used present-day known accurate scientific knowledge one could easily see that it would have been almost impossible to convey the theological truths God wished to convey back when the original texts were written. The inerrancy of the author's script must be appreciated in harmony with the kind of literature the author was using, and the people and culture the writer was writing to – all the situatedness issues need to be addressed. We cannot expect a scientifically accurate view of the world in this ancient Book and clearly, much of the language of the world then cannot be in a literal sense inerrant. Inconsequential incongruities in the Bible only become a concern when someone holds a system of inspiration that proposes that there should be no inconsistencies or ambiguities in the Bible.

I conclude with one definition of inerrancy that might have more merit going forward. Feinberg (1980:294) writes:

Inerrancy means that when all facts are known, the Scriptures in their original autographs and properly interpreted will be shown to be wholly true in everything they affirm, whether that has to do with doctrine or morality or with the social, physical or life sciences.

Undoubtedly, we do not have the original books of the Bible. Thus, this definition acknowledges the role of original autographs, sound hermeneutics and all facts known today as errors, can and will arise due to the situatedness of the Bible, its authors and that of the interpreter. When all those conditions are fulfilled – then one can talk of inerrancy - but for obvious reasons that will never happen. Here again, there is always the urgent need to continuously consider issues such as situatedness – the literary style, genre, intention of the author, and the context of the original audience they wrote to. Furthermore, it is possible (debatable I agree) that some books are lost and perhaps others should be in the Bible, there is no universal agreement on translation, and there are evidentially clear errors in the copying of the original texts. Decisions and positions on any one of

these concerns may lead to a conclusion in one’s doctrine that is incorrect and/or in contradiction with other doctrines or claims in the Bible. I am contending that divine inspiration does not rationally suggest inerrancy as it is an unchallenged fact that all the Bible editions that exist contain inaccuracies and discrepancies. What I would contend is that divine inspiration implies that the Bible is dependable in all that God proposes to use it for. Inspiration does not mean meticulous accuracy of everything recorded in the Bible. My view is that this unwavering stance of confidence in Scripture always associates with what Christians are to believe and how they are to live. As contended earlier in this section, the supreme intent of Scripture is to make all who are called by God equipped to live a pleasing life in fellowship with God and equip Christians for good works.

Thus, we can all agree that the inspiration is primarily if not exclusively related to faith and praxis.

Perhaps then an Evangelical can say that his view of the Bible is that it is reliable and infallible on certain matters of faith and praxis, but it is not inerrant on all matters. There are no doubts that the Bibles used by the Church for 2000 years and the present Bibles of today have errors. God did not prevent errors from creeping into translations and copies of the Bible and thus it seems that God does not concur with the advocates of inerrancy on the ‘importance of our having an inerrant Bible’ (1976:79).

Wright (2011:115-116) convincingly articulates the character and connection of the Bible with the Kingdom mission given to the Church by Jesus. In this, he touches on the authority of the Bible.

He writes:

The whole of my argument so far leads to the following major conclusion: that the shorthand phrase “the authority of scripture,” when unpacked, offers a picture of God’s sovereign and saving plan for the entire cosmos, dramatically inaugurated by Jesus himself, and now to be implemented through the Spirit-led life of the church precisely as the scripture-reading community *… .* this means that “the authority of scripture” is most truly put into operation as the church goes to work in the world on behalf of the gospel, the good news that in Jesus Christ the living God has defeated the powers of evil and begun the work of new creation.

Without belittling the importance of doctrine, we find in Wright a strong hint of an emphasis on the value of the incarnational engaged model for proclamation. It was this model that was argued for by Foshaugen (1997:232) when he said:

Evangelism is founded in who God is and what God has done for humanity through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Christians demonstrate the Gospel, as they love their God and their neighbor through their devotion and conduct (adoration and action). They proclaim God’s love with plausibility when they reveal God’s love in action.

This suggests that maybe the plausibility of the Bible being accepted and heard as God’s word lies more in the actions of Christians rather than their reasoned arguments. If inerrancy collapses, then Christianity will not collapse. Why do I say this? It is for this reason - that authority of the Bible lies in God and not in the doctrine of inerrancy. When I say the Bible has authority, I mean that the Bible's authority must be understood according to the authority of God. All authority belongs to God and God has in some way endowed this authority in scripture. I am very wary of those who claim, ‘there is no authority other than scripture’, as what then follows is often nothing more than their own situatedness in interpretation. Wright (2011) deals with this whole issue in great depth. In his introduction, he introduces three critical questions when talking about the authority of Scripture. He essentially argues that when dealing with doctrinal or ethical debate it is not right to ‘appeal (say) to Romans 13 to justify military action, or to Romans 1 to forbid homosexual practice, as though a simple reference settled the question’. Wright states that this would be a serious failure to give attention to the genuine debates that have gone on about what I will call the situatedness – the context and implication of both these passages, and the crucial fundamental questions. He would ask: questions such as: ‘In what sense is the Bible authoritative in the first place? How can the Bible be appropriately understood and interpreted? How can its authority, assuming such appropriate interpretation, be brought to bear on the church itself, let alone on the world (:13)? Wright (:21-22) then offers some critical reflective advice on the authority of the Bible. He points out that Jesus, at the end of Matthew’s gospel, does not say, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth is given to the books you are all going to write.’ Rather, Wright quotes Jesus as saying: ‘All authority in heaven and on earth is given to me.’ According to Wright, the essential prerogative of his book is that ‘the phrase ‘authority of scripture’ can make Christian sense only if it is a shorthand for ‘the authority of the triune God, exercised somehow through scripture.’ He writes:

Scripture itself points—authoritatively, if it does indeed possess authority! - away from itself and to the fact that final and true authority belongs to God himself, now delegated to Jesus Christ. It is Jesus, according to John 8:39–40, who speaks the truth which He has heard from God.’

I would add that in John 5:39 we read that Jesus challenges the Pharisees. Jesus says: ‘You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me.’ The Scriptures bear witness to Jesus – His teaching and ministry. Suggesting inerrancy from one verse in the Bible is problematic, however, I suggest that 2 Timothy 3:16-17 is clearly teaching that the Scriptures are profitable – it ‘is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work’. Thus, the inevitable conclusion is that the Bible must be interpreted in light of the Son of God revealed to us in the Bible – The teaching and ministry of Jesus is the situatedness of Scripture and this is further argued in section 5.5 where I consider a Christocentric hermeneutic. There, I propose a basic principle (that is expanded on in the section) - that the ministry and teachings of Jesus always take precedence over any interpretation of any passage of the Bible - if there is a conflict in what is being said. I recognise that this still leaves the question concerning what exactly Jesus taught and what it means.

## Synopsis of Marcus Borg's view of the Bible

Marcus Borg was known for his impeccable research as a Bible scholar and theologian. His childhood memory of Christianity is an inflexible, conservative and controlling Christianity in a little Lutheran church in North Dakota. After a life-changing experience (on an aeroplane) Borg realised that Jesus taught that God desires mercy and compassion, not holiness and purity as the

Pharisees of His day taught. Despite Borg’s rejection of the orthodox Trinitarian concept of Jesus,

Borg believed fervently that it was Jesus who shows us who and what God is like – Jesus reveals

God’s character and passion.[[16]](#footnote-16) He has a supposition that speaks clearly to my objectives as set out in section 5 - when it comes to the hermeneutical task of hearing God today. In his book ‘Speaking

Christian’ Borg elucidates his views on how one needs to understand the Bible in its situatedness (2011: 55-64). He points out that if the Bible is read and heard uncritically as ‘the Word of the

Lord’ then ‘these words convey the notion that the Bible is the direct revelation of God’. The authority of the Bible is thus based on its divine origin (:57). He goes on to argue that both the Old

and New Testaments are ‘voices’ that tell us about how our spiritual ancestors saw things and not how God sees things. He makes clear that this perspective does not deny the reality of God or deny God’s inspiring presence (:58). He convincingly argues that the Bible is sacred Scripture and then controversially states ‘not because of its origin but because our ancestors in the faith declared these particular books to be sacred, that is authoritative’ (:61). Thus, the Bible is not to be interpreted as only a legal document, however, Borg makes it clear that the Bible is constitutive of Christian life and identity (:62). Borg sees the Bible as ‘the Word of God’ but this does not mean it is the ‘words of God’ To be ‘the Word of God’ Borg portends that the Bible is ‘a means of communing with God’. With pragmatic insight, Borg states that both a book, or a person (Jesus) can be ‘the Word of God’ and a ‘vehicle or means to commune with God’. Thus, he concludes that the Bible is ‘sacramental - divine not in its origin or authority, but in its purpose and function in the Christian life. It is a means whereby the spirit of God continues to speak to us.’ Borg then concludes that the

‘Word of God’ as known revealed, disclosed and embodied in Jesus is the decisive ‘Word of God’. Whilst we wouldn't know much about Jesus if we had no Bible, Borg is saying that Jesus ‘outranks the Bible’ and ‘Jesus is the norm of the Bible’. Borg succinctly explains this all by concluding that Martin Luther once said that the Bible is the manger in which we find Christ (62-63).

## Certainty

The one reason inerrancy is valued as it seemingly provided certainty. In section 3 we saw how certainty is very much a product of modernism. However, we now concede the limitations of language as will be further argued in section 5. Human speech struggles will always be inadequate to express divine reality. The literal meaning of a word or phrase is not always the planned meaning, e.g. ‘He has his head in the clouds.’ It can be tricky to ascertain where literal meaning ends, and metaphorical meaning begins. Many words are vague or ambiguous and their meaning depends on context for example: he ate fast, or he hit a bat. The meaning of a word is oft related to the mental image it stands for and different people at different times often have different mental images. Words do not always have denotation – they often connotate – a word like school has different meanings for different people depending on their experiences. By the Christian's own chosen word definition of God, any attempt to express God in human terms will involve a degree of vagueness and ambiguity and uncertainty. Words have imprecise meanings that are functioning in their own situatedness and thus there are always problems with framing the eternal God and then translating this from one language into another or one situation to another. God is infinitely greater than any particular doctrinal formulation of the truth in it. How is certitude ever possible?

There is another serious flaw in any insistence on certainty. When you have certainty there is no need for faith! Holloway (2012:184) argues that ‘the opposite of faith is not doubt, it is certainty’.

On more than one occasion in this essay I point this out - doubt and questions are vital components of a vibrant healthy faith. Christians should never deify their interpretations or the Scriptures – that would be sin. The issue of inerrancy oft ignores the problem of interpretation.

## Concluding reflections

Wolterstorff (1995) provided a well-crafted argument for the claim that God speaks today. He delves into three topics related to this essay - divine revelation, language and hermeneutics. He concluded that God speaks (but he does qualify this by saying Scriptures need to be understood under the category of divine speech, rather than a divine revelation – an issue I will not address). He offers an assessment of divine speech via the speech-act theory of John Austin and John Searle upholding the critical role of the speaker or author in fixing the meaning of a speech-act or text. Thus, the Bible is both a divine and a human product and God does speak.

This section revealed that the issues of the doctrine of Scripture are not certain. If we have no agreement on the inerrancy and inspiration question, then one can clearly see the pattern of situatedness emerging stronger. Merrick and Garrett (2013:12) show how for many inerrantists, inerrancy is an axiom and necessary truth that follows from their doctrine of God that claims that

God is truthful - He will never lie. Thus, inerrancy is less a conclusion ‘drawn from exhaustive investigation into the veracity of scriptures claims but a rule for reading scripture in ways reliable with the conviction that God is truthful.’ They point out that often the confession of inerrancy is at the head of the doctrinal statements of an Evangelical Church or organisation, and this then would declare that whatever statements follow is a trustworthy and true expression of the Bible (:13). Inerrancy is seen by many as logically deduced from the inspiration of Scripture and thus is a nonnegotiable doctrine for supporting the Evangelical conviction that when the Bible speaks God speaks. However, it has now been shown that this is not necessarily the case and that inerrancy on its own does not necessarily imply anything about God speech. The authority of the text lies in the authority of God. However, Merrick and Garrett show that human language is needed to speak, and language is always temporally structured and constrained. Human language by definition is incapable of simple reference to divine reality. The difference between God and creatures meant that human language and predication are adequate but not exhaustive of divine truth (:20). This I will expand on in section 5.

My deduction is therefore that any doctrine of Scripture needs to acknowledge its own situatedness.

Conservative views of inerrancy are primarily based on the argument of self‐substantiation of the Bible yet part of the problem of self-attestation is itself a hermeneutical issue. In my research, I have not found one Bible verse that by itself clearly and unambiguously attests to inerrancy. What I did find was the way that Scripture refers to or quotes other Scriptures and from this one might find enough Biblical affirmations to ‘build’ a doctrine of Scripture. I can accept this; however, it is non-negotiable that establishing the doctrine of Scripture has to be within the broader Christian doctrine of God and Jesus is the Word of God and not the other way around. Therefore, I will suggest that the guiding principle is a Christological reality – the doctrine of Scripture must reflect the nature and character of God as revealed in the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. If it fails in coherence with this Christological verification, then perhaps the doctrine needs to be reviewed.

I end with a few significant observations. Firstly, the word inerrancy does not have one meaning. Thorsen (2010: 88-90) goes into detail on this. There are three examples I will highlight. Inerrancy is often described as ‘absolute inerrancy’ with any possible discrepancies having an explanation or in time, they will have one. Then there is ‘limited inerrancy’ where it only applies to theological and spiritual matters and not science or history. The final example is ‘purpose inerrancy’ which basically argues it has no errors for the purpose that it has. I prefer none of these terms and would simply say I am not an inerrantist, but I do lean towards the infallibility of the word of God with certain reservations that become clearer further on. The Bible records and interprets some of the acts of God in the past and in doing so we discover God’s nature. God speaks to us on matters of faith and praxis. Here I stand wholeheartedly with Davis’ conclusions that are similar to mine (1976:115-116). Even if all Christians agreed on the exact meaning of inerrancy and even if we all believed that the Bible is inerrant in its most simplistic form - without any errors – the Bible still must be interpreted and herein lies another situatedness problem to be explored in the hermeneutical questions of section 5 and then further in terms of proclamation in cross-cultural or dissimilar contexts as seen in section 6 and 7.

# HERMENEUTICS AND IT’S SITUATEDNESS

As an Evangelical I would argue that the Bible is considered as our foundation for truth as taught in John 17:17 and 2 Tim. 3:16-17, but whose interpretation of the scriptures should we follow? Are there inerrant interpretations that accompany the original texts of the Bible?If not, why not? Thus, I see a need for contemplating a few underlying issues related to interpreting and contemporary communication of the Bible that explain the divergence in doctrine and practice and that cause discord and disunity. More importantly, I am concerned with the actual content of the Evangelical messaging in the 21C – to be contextual, relevant and wary of imposing interpretations of Scripture that are often not consistent with a Christocentric message.

As a practical theologian, I have an interdisciplinary and cooperative or collaborative approach to the hermeneutics of lived Christianity. In essence, I wish to ensure that there is no separation between theory and praxis in Christian theology. Thus, I consider hermeneutics as both the theory and method of interpretation of a text where interpretation involves an understanding and explanation that can be justified by an appeal to situatedness, reason and common sense.[[17]](#footnote-17) An interpretation brings something ‘hidden’ to presence, thus manifesting or revealing what, how and why it is as it is. It portrays both a body of historically disparate methodologies for interpreting concepts, texts, and even objects, and a theory of understanding them. This section will contend that if one accepts and understands the complexity as well as recognises hermeneutics varying methodologies, then there is more validation to acknowledge the reasonableness of the polymorphic nature of much of theology (the ability and need for core theological truths to be adapted and change yet remain faithful to their quintessence) as is shared further on in this section. Whilst there is disagreement on the general principles of Biblical interpretation, as an evangelical practical theologian, I maintain that the central purpose of hermeneutics, and the exegetical techniques employed in interpretation, have always been to uncover the values and truths of the Bible.

This essay is premised on the acknowledgement that the Bible has a sacrosanct status for Christians as a repository of knowledge. However, I also accept that there is no one universally accepted hermeneutical principle for its interpretation. In the record of Biblical interpretation, many types of hermeneutic approaches have developed. These include the allegorical (hidden secondary level), anagogical (mystical), moral (ethical lessons for life) and literal (plain meaning) approaches. Added to this are the more recent academic and philosophical trends that lead to the historicalcritical and structural interpretation. Much of this is surveyed and reviewed in the work of Johnson (1999) and Thiselton (1980; 1992).

Schleiermacher (1977:196) adopted as a principle the notion ‘just as the whole is understood from the parts, so the parts can be understood from the whole. This principle is of such consequence for hermeneutics and so incontestable that one cannot even begin to interpret without using it.’ This is sometimes referred to as the hermeneutical circle that one's interpretation and comprehension of the text as a whole are determined by allusion to the individual parts and one's understanding of every individual part by reference to the whole. This implies that neither the whole text nor any

specific portion can be grasped without reference to one another, and consequently, it is a circle. The circular character of interpretation does not make it unfeasible to interpret a text, but it does caution and highlight that the meaning of a text must first be found within its cultural, historical, and literary context.

For the purposes of this essay, hermeneutics is limited to a short concern with the process of understanding. It is conceded that interpretation and comprehension may be directed by analytical principles or a rule-governed science, but it should not be reduced to them. To ensure a proclamation that is heard in the 21C one needs to comprehend that hermeneutics is, in addition, the name for the philosophical discipline concerned with analysing the sources and conditions for understanding. Furthermore, one needs to recognise that seldom, if ever, should the Bible be understood as the only source for claims of doctrinal veracity whilst acknowledging that it is the primary source.

The objective of the essay is to argue that there are essential matters in any proclamation. First, Christians need to make every effort to hear God in terms of reading Scripture and then consider the issues involved in contemporary proclamation – to ensure God is heard. To accomplish this, it is essential to consider clarity on the foundation of authentic Christian truth claims and therefore briefly consider the variables in how one hears God before reflecting on how one should proclaim God to promote the possibility that the new listeners are able to hear what is proclaimed. One also needs to ask what the appropriate sources are for doing theology.

## Sources of dogmatic truth claims

Gregersen (1988: 303) plainly states that ‘Christian interpretations of God as revealed in Christ’ is the ultimate subject matter of theology’*.* This is Jesus Christ’s life, teaching, death and resurrection. If Christian teachings have a propositional nature concerning the truth about God and His creation then the doctrine of any systematic theology that reflects and makes propositional claims needs to meet the basic benchmarks of consistency, coherence and the specific criteria of theological authenticity.

Logical consistency is demanded if one wishes to contend validity for a propositional statement and conclusions on doctrine. That is a basic principle of any epistemology. However, propositional logic does not really care about the content of the statements. Thus, one needs to consider a particular theory for truth claims. Of the many possibilities, the two that are most employed are firstly a coherence theory of truth that states that the truth of any (true) proposition consists in its coherence with some specified set of propositions. The truth conditions of propositions consist of other propositions.

Secondly, there is the correspondence theory that in disparity with the coherence theory, states that the truth provisions of propositions are not (in general) propositions, but instead fact-based objective features of the world. However, it appears that it is impossible to equate beliefs with reality because the experience of reality is always mediated and negotiated by beliefs. The correspondence theory is no more than a definition of truth and is of little value as a yardstick of truth. Thus, the coherence model is suggested as the important one for theology when considering the universality of the Christian tradition’s truth assertions.

Here one has a modicum of a paradox in that some viewpoints of Christianity make the claim of knowing the nature of reality (correspondence theory of truth) as it proclaims that Christian interpretations are in accordance with the revelation of God. However, Gregersen (:304-305) points out that the propositional nature and composition of Christian interpretations involve an awareness of a possible difference between ‘the semantics of Christian interpretations and their referent’. It is here where Systematic theology that will either justify or reject truth claims as God is beyond the understanding of theology as a science (empirically verifiable or falsifiable) and is thus substantiated or falsified in respect of the consequences and implications for the world and man.

Thus, I believe that for the 21C proclamation, theology must be coherent with the broadest possible range of other relevant propositions generally held to be true in our Christian tradition but also in our present context. This coherency is a useful guide to confirm the validity of any doctrine and section 6 will show one way forward when Biblical text and teaching do not cohere with other texts and doctrines. Gregersen (:304) offers guidelines in stating that coherence is birthed and justified through assimilation to the common patterns of thought (historical-critical research) as well as recognizing different levels of propositions (such as seeing creation as a mythological or a historical account). Furthermore, I note how a theology must show how significantly the Christian interpretation of reality can provide both a wide-ranging perspective and expectation on life as well as a cohesive and amalgamating point of view on the diversities of life. This is done whilst having a unity of agreement concerning the divine intent for and within the world. Gregersen warns that seeking ‘knock-out’ arguments is not reasonable however I think that by applying the criterion of consistency and coherence, the result will be a useful and rewarding learning process moving us in the right direction. The above points are raised and expanded on in section 6 where Taylor

(2003:23)) said that social imaginary describes ‘the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations’.

On an anecdotal note, I have found that many Christians in Norway follow the argument for the

Lutheran position of ‘*sola scriptura’* and thus doctrine being exclusively deducible from the Bible. This is one reason that one often finds dogmatic essentialism in doctrinal matters. This type of hermeneutics neglects the semantic issues in Bible translations that Beckmann (2020) pointed out and is referred to later in section 6. It neglects the influence of classical writers on any contemporary doctrine. It disregards the subjective nature of the individual and the linguistic historical and cultural situatedness of the one who reads and interprets the Bible. It neglects the situatedness of the whole process. Gregersen (1998:305) correctly points out that all contemporary Christian dogma can only propose a possible but not necessary development of Biblical intentions.

I am suggesting that Christians need to consider that all suppositions for any doctrine may arise from more than one source despite it being claimed as only arising from the Bible. When one asks a Christian what they believe one can in general determine what denomination type they attend. The legitimacy of any contemporary interpretations and subsequent dogma proclaimed rests on more than pure exegesis as the interpretation hinge on the capacity to state analogies between the Biblical interpretation and the reconstructive proposals and recognise the limitations of doing theology as previously hinted at. Proclamation does not rest solely on hermeneutical conclusions from the text. In this viewpoint, Gregersen offered a sound warning. Any theological renewal and understanding needs to be compared to the classical traditions and rival proposals to not become mere ‘questions of fashion and taste’.

For me herein lies the inspiration and heart of my project in this essay. How are we to both understand the full message of the Bible, the theology of the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus and then present it to our contemporary context? One of the challenges in answering this is the commonly used hermeneutic method of proof-texting and declaring the Bible as the only source for Theology and true knowledge of God. This issue deserves some deeper consideration. Regretfully, the length of the essay precludes the depth deserved by the topic however the purpose is to underline why Christians need to be cautious with dogmatic claims. The objective of section 5 is to contend that recognising the validity of the reasons why humility, doubt and the possibility of error are wise positions to take when listening and claiming to hear what the Bible says. No doctrine is *sola scriptura* – all doctrine is done in situatedness, with the conclusion always entangled with various other influencing aspects other than only the Bible.

## The Bible and interpretation

The Reformation claim of *sola scriptura* posits the Bible as the only infallible source of authority for Christian faith and practices, but this does not imply proof-texting. Turretin (1982: *Institutes,* I, 37-39) considered the issue of claiming that a doctrine is only Biblical if proof texts are provided. He argued that it was not only ‘by the express word of God’ but doctrine was also concluded from the ‘consequences drawn from Scripture’. He reasoned that ‘a thing may be said to be in Scripture in two different ways’. The one is via *kata lexin* which means explicit in the written words of the text. The alternative was *kata dianoian* that means implicit in the words of the text. Turretin provides the example of Basil’s answer to the Arians who had mandated the need for proof‐texts to institute the concept of *homoousion*. Basil apparently called them ‘syllable‐catchers’, and Gregory of Nazianzus, who depicted anyone who repudiated the divinity of the Spirit because of no particular text explicitly affirmed it, as ‘an ABC Sophist and a pettifogger of words’. However, if we accept *kata dianoian* (as we must if we wish to hold to some doctrines such as the Trinitarian formula for God, then there is evidently a human element in selecting verses to come together to formulate doctrine.

There are so many examples of contested teaching in the Bible. Perhaps a personal one may be shared here. It is one that raises the ire of my wife and daughters and is found in 1 Tim. 2:11-14: ‘A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. But womenwill be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.’ Is this God speaking or is Paul motivated by a God-given principle of creation that must be seen as a Biblical command, or is it the Fall of Adam and Eve that results in his teaching and conclusion, yet it remains a Biblical command? The issues relating to the roles of women in the Church raised by this teaching of Paul have never been resolved despite many interpretations that probably are interpretive judgments based on other theological assumptions and linked to situatedness. As with most doctrines, I suspect it will always remain unresolved and there will always be variance in doctrine on this and other issues.

In the pulpit, at a group Bible study or in a private reading the Bible is viewed as God speaking to us. The books included in the Bible are called canonical - and this simply means the rule or measuring stick. The Bible has become our primary source for our knowledge about God - our doctrine. There are now many issues to begin to consider as we consider the most important question of hermeneutics – what are the general principles for sound and valid Biblical interpretation? Despite many efforts, there are no singular agreed uniform principles. In section 5.5 I will suggest a Christocentric guiding principle but in general, we discover that throughout history, we find different types of hermeneutics, from the literal, moral, and allegorical, to anagogical principles. We have seen new ideas in the historical-critical/grammatical, existential, and structural interpretation approach, Porter and Stovel (2012) reveal the diversity of views where five well-known theologians proposed very different hermeneutical approaches used today. They suggest a number of ‘orienting questions and issues in Biblical hermeneutics’ that need to be considered (:21-21). This essay cannot do justice to them all, but I believe it has considered many of them as they relate to situatedness. Here are a selected number of their questions –that I suggest all hermeneuts must consider and this essay has touched on some.

‘Where does meaning happen? Is meaning to be located in the author's intent? What about the reader's engagement? What is the role of the ancient believing community, the continuing community or the modern community in reading the text today? Does meaning change from one context to another (whether from Old Testament to New Testament or from Biblical text to reader)? Who or what arbitrates a "correct" reading or at the very least a "helpful" or "harmful" reading? What is the role of theology in Biblical interpretation? Is it assumed, primary or merely derivative?

Our interpretation of this amazing book called the Bible, our resulting theology, is not as *sola scriptura* as we would like to believe it is. This essay is arguing that doctrine is predisposed predominantly by our situatedness and resulting worldview. That does not mean I am suggesting that the Bible is not the final authority (as an Evangelical I still hold to this *sola scriptura*) but I am suggesting that the view we have of what the Bible teaches also reflects one’s situatedness. This I claim is a truism, that one’s situatedness births a worldview that defines the principal set of assumptions which we then bring to our interpretation and comprehension of the text of God’s revelation. Any questioning or challenges to these presuppositions are often seen as threatening the very foundations of our world. Thus, it is sadly not uncommon that variances or differences in theology are seen as ‘wolves in sheep clothing’ or heresy and thus often opposed with deep-rooted passion. Why? Because such questions that challenge one’s theology appear to jeopardize our knowledge and understanding of scriptures, our doctrines and our reality. This is because it is the assumptions, principles, values and obligations encompassed in one’s situatedness and worldview that give order and meaning in life. They are the social imaginaries we will consider in section 6.1. Thus, any change or challenge in the understanding of the subject matter in a received doctrine is viewed with a great deal of suspicion and often almost immediately rebuffed as ‘unbiblical’

However, without understanding it, what is actually meant by the term ‘unbiblical’ often means nothing more than ‘this view does not fit with my situatedness and view’.

What is frequently neglected by the interpreter is the willingness to understand the process that occurred when ‘a view’ becomes ‘my view’ or the’ Biblical view’. Any respectable systematic theologian knows there is a range of interpretations of the Bible; extending from receiving every word as a literal history dictated by God, to God-inspired myth and stories that communicate significant ethical, moral and spiritual lessons, or to viewing the Bible as an entirely anthropological sociological or psychological conception that chronicles human experiences, thoughts or encounters with perceived deity. Theologians also know there is no universal agreement on the specific books that should make up the canon and we have a different number of books in some denominations. To give one example we know that the great reformer Luther regarded the books of Hebrews, James, Jude and Revelation as disputed books and placed them at the very end of his newly translated canon. I suspect this was because these books seemingly went against certain Protestant doctrines such as *sola scriptura* and *sola fide*. This is a superb example of how one's situatedness, worldview and doctrinal perspective held directly manipulated both thinking and decisions – and they were significant decisions that Luther made.

Additionally, we do not have the original books and there is much debate about the redaction of the content of many books. There are multiple ancient sources that force compilers of a Bible to make educated choices. Then there is the inevitable controversy that relates to all the linguistic issues in the translation of ancient languages into contemporary vernacular as well as the possible theological bias of a translator (this is explored a little later in this essay). These were dealt with earlier in the essay.

Some Christians are astonished to hear that the chronological order of the books of the Bible is divided for the sake of expediency and logical historical development - there is no preordained sacred order. Furthermore, chapters and verses were not found in the original texts. Several people had tried to divide the longer books of the Bible into more manageable units, but Langton (11501228) is accredited by most scholars as having a version that became the basis of the chapters we use today. The division of chapters into verses came much later.[[18]](#footnote-18)

In his book ‘*Anthropology for Christian Witness’* Kraft argues that there is no one single Christian worldview (1969:67). Thus, it is understandable that situatedness and cultural differences will shape different versions of Christian worldviews and beliefs concerning doctrine, yet I maintain there are some fundamental similarities. It is these similarities I will suggest that may morph into context-relevant doctrine. There is no easy way to resolve the many questions that arise when considering the interrelation of the Bible and the reader to formulate a systematic doctrine. We can agree that our understanding of God is derived from revelation, but we need to acknowledge that our reading of the Bible is further influenced by our own situatedness and particular context and culture. Our doctrine is also a result of our reading of the Bible which is elucidated and explained

through our culture and experiences. So clearly, we need awareness of the need for a more sensitive, informed and careful study of the Bible which allows us to begin to transcend the biases of our finite and limited worldviews. That might take us some way to a more agreed and less conflicting understanding of what the bible does teach yet allow for insight into why variances might always exist. However, we must do this in community and draw together the vast experiences of Christians throughout history and from different cultures and denominations and consider this in light of our primary source and our situatedness. Then only can we begin to possibly say we have heard God – but always with the proviso that we might – just might – not have got it all right.

We noted in section 4 the contentious issue of the doctrine of Scripture and in particular the concept of inerrancy and fallibility of the Bible. These flow over into hermeneutics. I will suggest what I (in a sense apophatically) think the Bible is not and then proffer a basic way forward. Some theologians are literal-inerrant and adamant that the Bible is the complete and inerrant depository of God's revelation. They claim all scripture is God-given, without error or fault in all its teaching, in what it states about God's acts in creation, about the events of world history, and its literary origins under God. However, they tend to ignore translational errors, the conclusive evidence of text inserted and/or changed by scribes and copyists – done on occasion from their own theological bias or interpretation. Furthermore, there are debates over the number of books and passages that are reproduced in some Bible versions but not in other versions. One well-documented example concerns Mark 9:44 - 46 which appears to contain later additions to the original manuscripts.

There are also questionable inclusions (Song of Solomon) and exclusions (Apocrypha) in today’s canon. Then we have many passages that if taken literally would present a serious challenge to our view of God as a loving Father as is shown in section 5.5. There is also clear evidence of redaction or altering in the Bible and the dating and authorship of many books have never been agreed upon by scholars. There are genealogical, numerical, factual and chronological inconsistencies or discrepancies. Finally, (and this is not a full list of challenges) there are issues relating to violence and the treatment of women and slaves. In my opinion, the Bible itself shows that a biblicist or literal-inerrant interpretation is not defensible and should not be the foundation of a theology.

I suggest the honest and authentic approach to the Bible needs to accept the Bible with the issues we noted in the last paragraph and remember we are not reading a systematic theology but rather we are reading a book that features many different genres from prophecy, prose, satire, anachronisms, narrative, poetry, myth, proverbs, history, apocalyptic imagery, satire, etc. In the Bible, we have a record of God and His relationship with His creation. We learn about the character of God and how humans have responded to Him. The way to define the Bible as inspired is to argue that the human writers (and editors) of the Bible were directed or influenced by God in a particular setting, with the result that their writings may be designated in some sense as the word of God that needs translation and interpretation in a local vernacular whilst recognising the interpreter's situatedness.

## Language

One of our primary ways of knowing is via language, to the extent that our understanding of the world is given and unveiled via language. Yet, it is obvious that we do not all come from the same situatedness or participate in identical worlds as we have a multiplicity of languages and cultures that historically give birth to our understanding of the world. Furthermore, the problem is that the worldview one has, determines what kind of world comes to be viewed and this is strengthened by language as a medium to gain knowledge. In section 6 we will develop this notion that there are distinct social imaginaries and world views of communities and individuals and if one does not participate in the identical worldview, the social imaginaries and worlds may be very different. Consequently, there needs to be recognition and understanding of the multitude of situatedness in every historical epoch and geographical space, the fluidity of interpretations and the role language has. Different languages perceive and divide the world up in different ways and several concerns need to be considered. Word-for-word translations frequently don’t make sense and different choices of words can cause slight or large divergences in meaning. Different languages separate and explain the world in different ways. Bible translators know that word-for-word translations often don’t make any sense. Alternative selections of words can cause differences in meaning – as seen with the translation of Timothy 3:16. Context can change the meaning of a word. And some words are simply untranslatable. Finally, words have power.[[19]](#footnote-19) Thus, we see that meaning can be lost in translation.

Nida and Taber (1969) explored the two significant approaches in the translation of original manuscripts (that also reflect on interpretation). There is *dynamic equivalence*, translating the meanings of phrases or whole sentences with faithfulness, understanding, and readability as the objective). Then one has *formal equivalence* (keeping to a word-for-word translation that maintains the meanings of words and phrases in a more literal way and thus maintaining literal fidelity). Nida later dissociated himself from the concept of dynamic equivalence and favoured using the phrase ‘*functional equivalence’* that suggested that function can be thought of as a property of the text. Equivalence examines what is the intention and function of the source text in the source culture and the function of the translation in the recipient culture.

Each approach has advantages. Formal equivalence will allow those acquainted with the source language to consider how meaning recorded in the source text was used allowing for perhaps a more subtle interpretation of the text. However, this only applies to a select few who have mastered languages that are no longer considered living languages. Thus, it will be difficult to comprehend a literal translation without amending and/or reordering words when the source language varies from the recipient’s language. When the source language contains words for an idea that has no obvious corresponding equivalent in another language then I think a more dynamic translation must be used. Here, it becomes apparent that we need to consider carefully the various social imaginaries of communities as expounded by Taylor (2003) and reviewed in section 6.1. In both approaches, one will be challenged with the problem of the lens one uses. We noted that there is always a possibility that translators can and do interfere in the translating endeavour as they feed their own situatedness, their own understanding, ideology, theology and beliefs into the processing of a text.

The use of different approaches will result in distinct degrees of literalness between the source text and the translated end text. Walk into any bookshop selling Bibles and one will find various Bible translations using one of these two approaches but also note that they all have different texts. The implications of this are obvious. There is no complete agreement on the translated text, but this should not distract from the general reliability as there is substantial accord. However, if doctrine hinges on a specific translation, then obvious problems arise. This was shown in section 4.4 when we considered the issue of all text being inspired or some text being inspired in the translation of 2 Timothy 3:16. It is also part of the problem we observed with the example of Atonement doctrines. This translation hermeneutical issue is also an issue when formulating or renewing and sharing doctrine via proclamation in a particular and different context. When a person wishes to share the doctrine of Atonement in a cultural context they need to carefully consider if they are seeking dynamic equivalence or formal equivalence and seek to avoid their own bias and consider the hearer's situatedness.

We can continue using the example of Atonement theology and doctrinal claims. My position is that Jesus Christ is the Word of God, the full and final revelation of God and that the writings we have in the Bible are an inspired and inspirational narrative of humanity's pursuit of purpose, meaning and moral guidance in life. It provides reasonable and practical guidance and offers what I would like to term a map of reality. However, in what I have just said there are so many concepts that need further explanation and unpacking. If one looks at modern maps today one will notice that it is a two-dimensional representation of a three-dimensional object. Thus, even the sizes of countries and continents are misrepresented. And why is Europe in the middle and the north pole on the top? The map reflects a European view of the world. An alternative depiction could be drawn with Africa in the center. This map of reality I tried to provide in the previous paragraph is not the true reality of the territory. It reflects my own situatedness. Reality exists outside our mind, and we thus construct models of this reality or 'territory' based on what we receive through our situatedness, our culture, experiences, social imaginaries, reasoning etc. That then becomes our map (beliefs) – but it is not the territory – only a map of it.

We must acknowledge that even the best possible maps are flawed and incomplete. That’s because they are reductions of what they represent. That applies to my statement and to any doctrine that is in a very practical sense a map of what the Bible says. This critical insight is taken up in a different way in section 6, but it is worthwhile reminding ourselves of a compelling insight discussed by Gregersen (1998:303-305). He points out that the propositional nature and composition of Christian interpretations involve an awareness of a possible difference between ‘the semantics of Christian interpretations and their referent’. He contends that etymologically, theology is defined as knowledge about God. However, God by His nature is not some empirical thing in the world or a theoretical/hypothetical principle or assumption. If this is true, then God in Himself cannot and is not the direct subject matter of theology. God is not a transcendent mystical object or idea that can be deduced via a priori argument or induction with validity. Thus, if God is the territory, then all we can have are the doctrines (maps) that reflect but are not perfect depictions of the territory. As will become very clear by the end of this essay, the doctrines or maps are all impacted by situatedness – from the author of the Biblical text, the original audience, and all the interpreters over the history of the church and right up to the 21C. The map (doctrine) is not and can never be a perfect reflection of the true reality (God). Thus, the picture, description, map or model of the thing is not the thing itself. This truth is perhaps the strongest argument for one to accept and acknowledge situatedness when we have to devise doctrine from the Scriptures to process, determine and understand the complex reality and nature of the living loving eternal supreme one God revealed in Scripture. Whatever doctrine, map or understanding we have is limited by situatedness and language in particular. Thus, we err if we claim that our doctrine is the true representation of the territory for that only reveals that we do not know or understand how the map was created and its limits in representing the full reality of God. We need maps (doctrine) but every map reflects the situatedness of the reality of God.

This map metaphor explains the differences between belief and reality and is useful when applied to systematic theology. A doctrine should be seen as a map but not the final definitive definition and explanation of who God is, what He wants etc. This applies even if one determines that the Bible is the only source for a doctrine. Those who believe it is the only source still have to consider the numerous issues raised regarding their interpretation. The concept of inerrancy is a misleading notion. We do not worship the Bible – we worship, have relationship and fellowship with the God recorded and revealed in the Bible and Jesus who alone is the Word of God. This now leads to a very brief consideration of the genre and nature of language as it concerns the interpretation process and formulation of doctrine from Scripture.

Another critical issue is language and the use of symbols and metaphors in the translation and interpretation of the Biblical text for theology. Here again, a particular example might prove useful. The oldest sources of Atonement doctrines are found in the letters of the apostle Paul. There is considerable evidence that the Biblical narrative authorizes an expansive range of images and models for comprehending and articulating the Atonement. In the Bible, we find that Paul uses numerous metaphors and models to illuminate the connotations of the death of Christ.

Finlan (2005:39-62; 2000:25-35) showed how Paul combines metaphors from the cultic, social, economic, and political realms and is therefore difficult to read. He attempts to examine the logic of each metaphor individually, and then see how Paul blends them. He also delves into the more difficult task of understanding the individuals' words and concepts birthed from them (I have put in brackets his explanation of the meaning of the words) such as *apolytrōsis* (refers to the ransoming of captives, the purchasing of slaves, and the manumitting of slaves (buying their freedom, payment); the Hebrew word *kapporet* (mercy seat in English, is the top piece of the ark of the covenant) and its Greek translation *hilastērion* (the place where an expiation or cleansing, a ritual sprinkling, occurs; *hilasmos* (a sacrificial animal); the Greek *pharmakos* ritual (scapegoat, where human scapegoats are selected; consecrated; have a disease, sin, or curse transferred onto them; and are expelled).

Finlan has provided a sound insight into the way Paul was thinking as well as the problems with the translations of sources that form the Bible we have today as highlighted earlier. Paul blends and conflates his diverse metaphors, picturing Christ as ‘the antitype, the fulfilment, of everything that people believed about purification rituals, redemption purchase, and sin-banishment, with the end result, for believers, not only of acquittal in the divine court but the receipt of Godly character, becoming righteousness’ (2005:43).

Finlan (:46) goes on to say that Paul uses social metaphors to describe the advantageous outcomesof Christ’s death for those who believe: *‘*justification (a judicial metaphor), reconciliation (diplomatic), and adoption (familial, relational)’. Paul commonly uses the martyr template and cultic and economic metaphors for the ‘saving transaction’, and then he uses ‘social metaphors for the resulting new status of believers’. Then Jesus' sacrificial or scapegoat death serves to generate

‘status-changing results for humans: acquittal, reconciliation, re-identification as children of God’.

For Paul, redemption can operate in both divides of the saving formula: ‘the act of redeeming is a metaphor for the saving death, but the reception of liberation is one of the beneficial after-effects’.

Thus, believers are afforded a different status: ‘innocent (when they had been guilty), reconciled (where they had been estranged), adopted as heirs (who formerly were mere servants), freed or redeemed (when they had been captives)’. Finlan’s point is that it was not the stress that Jesus laid on honesty, humility and trust in the generosity of God that became the heart of the new Gospel, but the cluster of Atonement ideas grown in the seedbeds of Paul’s metaphors (and the book of Hebrew). If one follows the logic of Finlan, then one can understand the conclusion that Paul was using a creative mixture of metaphors in relation to and concerning ancient cultic practices that are no longer observed today. These ancient cultic practices and social institutions of Paul’s time believed that God or gods could be appeased or conciliated by the display of obeisance or offering. Thus, Paul used metaphors in his preaching and letters that would make immediate sense to his listeners. This affords the logic behind his metaphors. But what about the 21C?

Finlan (2007:28-33) argues that Western Christians are trained to think in terms of penal substitutionary Atonement and thus tend to impose this concept on all New Testament soteriological passages without understanding Paul’s use of metaphors and his preaching objectives (what I call situatedness). There appears to be no one definitive clear doctrine of Atonement in the Bible, only a diversity of images and metaphors that affect each other and to some extent contradict each other. This incongruity is seen in the debate of whether God was induced, pacified, satisfied, or paid by a sacrifice and the implications this has on His nature. Finlan ardently contended that one should not put too much literal emphasis on Pauline metaphors but rather see them as teaching tools. I agree but would add that whilst the judicial imagery of PSA that has the individual sinner standing accused of breaking the law is used by Paul it is neither primary nor sufficient on its own to cover the richness of Atonement theology. The variety of metaphoric Biblical language of Atonement is essentially bringing matters of collective human experience and applying them to illustrate both the theology and the gift that is found in the Crucifixion.

The seminal work of Paul Tillich (2001) helps to enlighten our understanding of symbols. He argued that religious symbols arise from the collective unconsciousness in the groups where they appear. He deems them as ‘living beings’ that can both grow and die. Growth takes place when the circumstances or situation is appropriate for them, and they die when the situation changes. Tillich contends that the meaning and the symbol die when they no longer can produce retort in the group where they originally found manifestation and expression (pp. 49-50). This can be applied to our chosen example - the symbol of the Cross today - and implies that the interpretation of the crucifixion can shift or change, depending on the context or situatedness. Thus, it is so vital to consider the social imagery context of any doctrine – both in its original historical setting in the sources of scripture, through the history of the classical writings as well as its contemporary setting.

In section 3 it was noted how the postmodern world introduced the issue of language used by human beings to reflect, reason on and gain knowledge and understanding of reality. Whenever language is used, it involves an act of representing things in the world through concepts. Language frames the experience to allow understanding and sharing of the understanding. A short example might assist. If I say – ‘there is a large angry black dog’ the language conveys a characteristic of the dog ‘large’ - is a characteristic of size, ‘black’ - is a characteristic of colour, ‘angry’ is a characteristic of the character, ‘dog’ is a characteristic of species, and ‘there is’ represents the concept of time. My description of all these terms are products of my situatedness, my culture and the social circumstances that gave me my language and understanding. However, someone in a different situatedness or culture where perhaps not understand what I said. My dog is seen as small, black is not a colour, and the classification and nature of dogs are understood differently. Thus, my language and representation of what I saw are more suggestive of my culture rather than an objective reality. It is as if only communities construct reality, and this is understandably an unacceptable conclusion for Evangelical Christians. If one can never move outside of the situatedness of language and the linguistic community then Christians have created their conception of God. But Evangelicals do not believe this. They believe that God is objectively real and does desire to speak to all and can be heard.

If situatedness is a cultural reality and no other option is considered, then there can be no universal knowledge claims. However, I suggest the postmodern non-foundationalist position provides an opportunity for theology modelled on mutually shared dialectic dialogical conversations without power issues being involved. The Christian has the situatedness of the revelation in the Bible. Its interpretation and the situatedness of the intended proclamation. However, Evangelicals believe that they also have access to God – the Holy Spirit - to help reveal and illuminate both the Bible as a source of theological understanding as well as the situatedness of the intended audience. The Holy Spirit communicates to Christians in the local setting through the interplay of scripture culture and tradition. One can be faithful to an ecumenical orthodoxy and yet allow the doctrine to morph so it can be understood. The danger is when Christians begin by presenting their proclamation as the only metanarrative that makes sense of all reality. God is brought into the dialogue on Christian terms of language and understanding and in service of the Christian project. That approach can be seen as if the Church has returned to the premodern belief of the authority of the Church and tradition to be imposed on all people. It reminds me of the Crusades and Inquisition as models of proclamation. This is what the postmodern will reject – when the Biblical narrative is proclaimed as a universal non-negotiable doctrine - a metanarrative in a language that seeks to legitimate its own discourse by claiming dominance and universality. I think that postmodernists would acknowledge that knowledge is rooted in some narrative and the task of Christian proclamation is to acknowledge and allow the situatedness of its own understandings to dialogue with the situatedness of the people it wishes to share the Gospel with. If Christians are willing to accept and share their own inability to know all truth with certainty, it will open up the dialogue. Paul said it so well in 1 Corinthians 13:12 ‘For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.’

If it is true that reality is something which is entirely interpreted by a community and is always represented in different languages, then nothing can possibly be understood objectively and concepts such as truth, value, etc have representational meanings that are formed by the language used. I am convinced that Christians can agree in part and show that representations are shaped by things in the world that they are describing, and language is used to reference things in the world. Christians need to proclaim within the limitations of the social imaginaries and language people have. The Christian metanarrative is not to work at dominating the local narrative in a power struggle of truth claims. Rather it is to persuade via embedding itself, becoming fully immersed into the local social imaginaries and via dialogue within an incarnational engaged process, discover new ways of social imaginaries in the local culture that are accessible to the local culture, faithful to foundational ecumenical orthodox theology – to let God be heard.

The key point in this brief expose on language is to accentuate the need for sensitivity to the role of language in communication and its original particular context and intended purpose. When it comes to the interpretation of a text (language) that is in itself an interpretation then we must be wary of claiming truths, as whatever is claimed is possibly only one more interpretation. The Bible came in a language, and we now are fully aware of the many issues with language usage. To my mind, mathematics is the only ‘language’ that has the potential to be called universal and be understood irrespective of culture. We have the urgent responsibility to transform, morph or translate one story into the language of another world, and then another world. We are well counselled by Derrida (1981:98-118) who explained and then declared that the gift of language is also the poison of language. In theology, truth claims are true within a certain approach or paradigm that provides the light shined on the text of interpretation and understanding and thus truth is often not presented but re-presented within that light. This will become clearer in the next section where the three horizons in hermeneutics are suggested.

## The three horizons in Christian hermeneutics connected to situatedness

Gadamer’s (2006) work explored the ways in which historical and cultural circumstances essentially affected human understanding. It is not always easy for me to understand all that he wrote but he has some profound insights that Christians need to consider in both interpretation of the Bible and contemporary proclamation in the 21C. To explore all the intricacies involved in the science of hermeneutics by way of a short subdivision of an essay is always going to be inadequate.

However, there is a distinct value in briefly considering the concept of the ‘three horizons’ approach to apprehend the hermeneutical matters relating to an understanding of any Christian doctrine at three well-defined stages. Firstly, as it is stated at present; secondly, at its original point of formulation in the text; and finally, as understood through history. Today it is well recognized in academia that any textual interpretation is always a discourse concerning the text, its understanding throughout history and the reader. This will help clarify why there is at the very least some value in understanding some theology as polymorphic as we recognize the ‘historically affected consciousness’ and how the ‘horizons’of the text and interpreter are and have been affected by the interpretative traditions (Gadamer, 2006:291-306). This model was further developed by Jauss (1982:3-45) and it is this delineation of horizons that we now explore as for me it is about situatedness.

All readers of a text begin with the horizon of what Rush (1997:319) calls *‘*faith experience’ on the part of the reader(s). Because one belongs to a faith community one has embraced a preliminary dogma, creedal or belief system that exists as one’s ‘preunderstanding’ (Schleiermacher 1977:59). In plain language, this means that when anyone studies any particular dogma such as Atonement in the Bible, they bring to it a prior understanding already held concerning the Atonement.

Most Christians belong to a Church denomination that has a statement of beliefs or confession that individual members have to believe or adhere to. The content of this statement of beliefs is the preunderstanding of the doctrine brought to the text. Furthermore, one's understanding of other doctrines also has a substantial impact on one’s reading of the sources of doctrine such as the Bible. The acknowledgement and comprehension of this reality are vital if one is attempting to understand the subjectivity that prevails in our valiant attempt to be objective. I recall how my lecturers at my Baptist seminary pressed the importance of attempting the historical reconstruction of what Rush

(1997:321) called ‘the original horizon of production and reception’ of the doctrine. We use our exegetical proficiencies to attempt to understand the primary context of the origination of the doctrine.

Scripture abounds in various genres, symbols, images and metaphors and Jesus often taught in parables and as we noted earlier in the essay this can all be confusing (and in particular Pauline metaphors concerning the crucifixion). Schmiechen (2005) explored ten Atonement theories claiming to be Biblical truth based on the use of various metaphors and images found in the Bible. Finlan (2005:39-60) undertakes an in-depth study of the use of cultic imagery by Paul in the Bible. They both show how various doctrinal positions are developed using these different genres. Humanity is sanctified, glorified, justified, adopted, redeemed, ransomed, healed, sanctified, recreated etc.

Rush (1997:322) explains that one has lessons in the history of Systematic Theology and Church history so that we could move on to the next step that concerned the historical development and treatment context of any doctrine by the Church, or ‘any context beyond the original horizon of a doctrine’s production when a Christian community has attempted to apply the doctrinal formulation to a new context’ These aspects of doing good theology are further considered when discussing Gregersen (1988, 2008) in section 6. There we will see the value of doing what Rush is claiming.

When we consider historical understandings of doctrine, we can ask the why and how questions. Why was the doctrine adapted and how? Christians in different historical contexts considered preceding doctrinal interpretations and constructions and thus could find ways to utilize past doctrinal formulations to articulate contemporary relevant formulations for their current Christian needs and praxis.

It is this ongoing dialogue that is so essential to accept as part of the reality we face when attempting to discern and apply Biblical teaching. We need to recognize that there have always been sequential formulations and applications of doctrine – in their situatedness. This unceasing process proceeds throughout history until the horizon of the present-day interpreter is reached. As with the secondlevel reading, the judgments derived from a reading of Scripture concerning the common subject matter of the doctrine are of paramount importance. The more conclusive and defined the judgments are, the less room for manoeuvring within the reception and subsequent reformulation of the doctrine (Rush,1997:322).

I am of the persuasion that the recognition and acceptance of these three horizons of interpretation, whilst not able to guarantee the emergence of one clear proclamation, would allow for the critical consideration and formulation of proclamation that is faithful to the essence of the Gospel but has morphed into a voice that is more relevant, heard and understood by present-day recipients.

It is my fervent conviction that if we do not recognize what I will call ‘a delineation of horizons’ when formulating our cherished foundational beliefs, we will become so trapped in dogmatic essentialism and never distinguish or even consider that what we believe is ‘God's truth’, is possibly nothing more than subjective received doctrine from our own faith community. Thus, the final word is given to Rush (:322-323) who believed that it is essential to allow the questions from the horizonof the doctrine at present and the questions from the horizon of the doctrine through history to interact with the reconstructed question of the past or original horizon, so that understanding may come to a certain closure through a ‘differentiation of horizons’. Thus, it is now I wish to introduce and consider what might be termed a thought experiment. This involves a term or concept that might prove to be of some reasonable and pragmatic value in considering the contemporaneous nature of theology and the desire that Christian proclamation is heard in the 21C.

## Christocentric hermeneutics

There is a critical working Evangelical hypothesis that undergirds this essay. It is the conviction that ultimately underscoring all theology is the claim that the definitive subject matter of any Christian theology is the revelation of God in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is beyond the needs of this essay and in my opinion, not possible to construct a single hermeneutical methodology that will be acceptable to everyone. However, I would like to highlight a hermeneutical principle that has helped me navigate some of the hermeneutical and doctrinal questions I have. It is far from finished but where I am in this model has at least provided a degree of peace if not providing all the answers.

Boyd (2017) in his magisterial work *The Crucifixion of the Warrior God: Interpreting the Old Testament's Violent Portraits of God in Light of the Cross* was determined to resolve the discrepancy between the God revealed in the OT with the one that Jesus revealed. He followed up this work with a shorter more accessible work in 2018 titled *Cross Visions: How the Crucifixion of Jesus Makes sense of Old Testament Violence*. Further on I will provide the essence of what Boyd said that resonated with what I was doing in my daily reading and study of Scripture. What is important is to fully comprehend some of the driving forces to seek a hermeneutic that has Christ at the centre. Thus, the next few paragraphs are going to focus on what the problem was for Boyd (and many other Christians like myself).

In the less complex of his two books, Boyd sheds light on the issue of a violent God portrayed in the OT (2018:7-21). It is this work I lean upon, and I shall extract from and summarise Boyd’s position. In Deut. 20:16-17 God instructs Israel not to leave alive anything that breaths. Boyd points out that this command from God is given or carried out 37 times in the OT and he shows that fulfilling this command is seen as ‘an act of devotion to Yahweh’ (.9-10). In Ex. 32:27-29 we read

‘This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: “Each man strap a sword to his side. Go back and forth through the camp from one end to the other, each killing his brother and friend and neighbour.’” After then killing about 3000 men Moses tells them that God has blessed the Levites this day. In Num. 31 God instructs the Israelites to take vengeance on the Midianites. They do this but spare women (taken as slaves). They are then told to kill all the boys and women who are not virgins (vv 17-18). The virgins become the spoils of war. This is common practice in war, and we see it even today in the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In 1 Sam. 27:9-11 one can read that king

David’s practice in war was to never leave a man or woman alive. God instructed Israelites to execute adulterers (In Lev. 20:10), fornicators (Lev:21:9), homosexuals (Lev. 20:13), people who had sex with their siblings (Lev. 20:14) sex with daughters-in-law (Lev. 20:16) or animals (Lev. 20:15-16). In Lev. 21:9 the daughter of a priest who became a prostitute must be burned to death as she ‘disgraced her father’. Capital punishment was prescribed to anyone who cursed God (Lev. 24:16) or worshipped or sacrificed to an idol (Ex. 22:20); who practices sorcery, false prophets, anyone who worked on a Sabbath (see many more examples at Ex. 22:18; Lev. 20:27; Deut 18:20; 31:14; Ex. 19:12-13; 33:20-21; 31:14, 35:2-3; Num. 4:15-20; 18:3,22, 32; 15:33-36).

Of particular concern for a priest was if the entered the tabernacle with his hair unkempt, clothes torn or had had any alcohol – they faced execution (Lev. 10:6-10). Perhaps the most disconcerting and shocking was that children could be executed by stoning for being stubborn, lazy, drunkards, gluttons or if they struck their parents (Deut. 21:18-21; Ex. 21:15, 17; Lev. 20:9. I know that if I lived in that period – I would have had a very short life. Boyd also considers where the OT shows God more than commanding death but actually engages in violence. The flood (Gen. 6-8) and the incineration of all living in Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19). Then in Exodus we read of God slaying all the first-born sons of those without the blood on the door and the drowning of Pharaoh’s army. In Ex 15:3, 6 God is described as a mighty warrior. In Numbers 16 there is a horrific account of Korah leading some followers to complain and rebel against Moses's leadership. They were judged and the earth opened up and some ‘fell alive into Sheol’ (v32) whilst others were incinerated by fire that fell from the sky (v35). These judgements caused more Israelites to complain and ‘wrath came out of Lord’ and a plague hit them killing 14700 of them (vv 42, 46, 49). Some acts seem capricious – such as the devoted servant Uzzah being struck dead when attempting to keep the Ark of God from falling off the cart. (2 Sa. 6:6-7).

Some of the acts of God are puzzling. Ez. 21:2-4 has God telling the Israelites that He is against them and will draw His sword and ‘cut off from you both the righteous and the wicked’. This is nothing but the indiscriminate killing of the guilty and the innocent. In Jer. 13:14 one reads how

God says ‘I will smash them one against the other, parents and children alike, declares the Lord. I will allow no pity or mercy or compassion to keep me from destroying them.’ Let me remind the reader of this essay of the macabre claimed words of God when He says He will punish disobedience of parents ‘You will eat the flesh of your sons and the flesh of your daughters’ (Lev. 26:28-29). Finally, in Hosea 13 one can read about God’s anger against Israel. In verse 16 one reads: ‘The people of Samaria must bear their guilt, because they have rebelled against their God. They will fall by the sword; their little ones will be dashed to the ground, their pregnant women ripped open.’

All kind of hermeneutical contortionism and models have tried to explain these and other difficult texts.[[20]](#footnote-20) Boyd has developed his particular approach that I find most useful as it relates to the RQ of this essay. He described the problem as a conflict between Jesus who reveals ‘an agape-cantered, other-oriented, enemy-embracing God who opposes all violence’ and the many OT ‘portraits of Yahweh violently smiting his enemies’ (xxviii-xxix). My own reading of the Bible often found me struggling with God commanding horrendous violence in the OT and the unambiguous teachings of Jesus in the NT that were nonviolent. I have read many attempts to explain or reconcile them, from that there are two different Gods to various hermeneutical, literary and social-cultural theories - and none had succeeded. The problem was that I knew Jesus and the apostles all saw the OT as inspired scripture so I could not simply reject what I read (see section 4.4 on inspiration). Boyd himself had this concern and he stated that he does take the concept of inspiration of both the OT and NT seriously, including its violent delineations of God. However, he affirms the unconditional supremacy and centrality of the crucified and risen Christ as the superlative revelation of God (2018:6, 56-57).

Many of his arguments are persuasive and I will only underline some of his conclusions. Boyd was attempting to develop a hermeneutical model or theological interpretative archetype of Scripture that he characterised as ‘a cruciform hermeneutic.’ Within this paradigm he endeavoured to claim that all the problematic violent images of God should be viewed, considered then interpreted with a Cross informed faith (:3). His hermeneutical lens is thus the life and teaching of Jesus and the theology of the Cross and resurrection.

I am aware of some of the critiques of Boyd’s work and in particular that as an Anabaptist he commences with the assumptions of ideological pacifism and reads that into his evaluations. However, perhaps Boyd is right in arguing that these OT depictions and texts are not to be taken as literal truths revealing God but rather to be comprehended as ‘literary artifices (2017:548). I agree with Boyd that if Christ is the literal representation of God and exposes God’s own being as

love, grace, mercy, compassion and nonviolent, and loving all sinful people in a noncoercive manner – then we do face a problem with some of the OT revelation that seems to depict both a sadistic violent God as well as a loving and faithful God.

Feinberg (1980: 267–304) discusses the methodological options for a doctrine. He raises one particular point that I think fits with what Boyd (2018) is attempting and why Boyd came to his ‘cruciform hermeneutic’. Feinberg (1980:273) writes:

A paradigm, or conceptual model, is formulated through an informed and creative thinking process, generally involving the data to be explained, and is then brought back, adduced, or tested against the data for ‘fit’, or accuracy … The theory is not created strictly by induction from data or phenomena nor by deduction from first principles. Yet both induction and deduction operate in the imagination of the scientist so that a theory is born

When one finds inconsistencies, this does not immediately mean that the doctrine is invalid or wrong, but it does mean that somewhere further clarification of the doctrine is required. This implies that doctrine has a shape that is always involving the text, conclusions and how they relate to other doctrines. I would add that the unclear needs to be understood in what might be seen as more explicit. This is the endeavour of Boyd who is deeply concerned with God as Father, with all the connotations of benevolence associated with that name. Boyd believes that the revelation and teaching of Jesus concerning the nature of God needs to be the preeminent guideline in assessing any doctrine. I tend to concur whilst acknowledging that there is a place for a variety of conclusions in the ongoing understanding of the doctrine of Scripture as pointed out by Feinberg (1980).

Wright (2011:41-43) looks at the way Jesus fulfils Scripture. He says that in Christ’s fulfilment of the Scripture, He never imagine Himself as fulfilling a few verses or one or two prophetic expressions dotted around the Bible, Jesus saw and taught that all of or the entire narrative of the Bible encapsulated in his own life, death and resurrection. What better reason for a Christocentric hermeneutics or as Boyd called it – a ‘cruciform hermeneutic’?

The way forward on this matter is perhaps to keep hold of Boyd’s ‘cruciform hermeneutic’ as an advantageous addition to our hermeneutical problems that we have recognised in this section. Add to this the insights from section 4 concerning a doctrine of Scripture then I suggest we might have a little ‘light in the darkness’. I have shown that hearing God is not always easy to do. Often what is heard is not God but our own situatedness. If we are not sure of what we heard, then how do we be sure of what we must proclaim? However, even if we assume what we heard is what God said – then how are we to ensure others hear God in our proclamation? I now turn to the next section where I will propose (and it is a suggestion from a pragmatic Evangelical – not a dogmatic claim) a concept that might provide some insight into the road forward.

## Polymorphic theology – proposing a new concept for situatedness

I premise this section by acknowledging the conception of polymorphic theology is a fledgling concept I have devised and developed to aid me in understanding and exploring situatedness and variance in doctrines and to aid the concept of allowing God to be heard in different situations and eras. It is nowhere near a flawless analogy or dogmatic assertion and should be appraised as such.

Meadors (2009) edited an excellent book on the different ways one derives theology from the Bible (one of the many 4, 5 or 6 views books I have in my library). Four renowned scholars present their own positions. In the introduction, Meadors proffers some sound advice to readers, and I think it is completely applicable whenever considering the issue of hermeneutics and theology. He suggests that one must see the Bible teaching us at three different levels. There is what he calls ‘direct teaching’ which is what the author expected the initial (or original) audience to hear from the text.

Then there is ‘implied teaching’ that is relatively certain when one examines the text. Finally, there are ‘creative constructs’ that reflect the interpreter's theological comprehension to best represent the Bible. For example, one can see how the OT food laws are rescinded as direct teaching in the NT whilst implied teaching (such as the Trinity) can be insisted on even without the backing of specific agreed by all texts. Creative constructs such as seen in the baptism of the Holy Spirit, miracles and healing, eschatology etc are far more contestable and controversial. Here systematic theologians step in to impose some kind of system to understand numerous texts. What makes this system useful is that Biblical teaching is reflected in all three categories however it is feasible to argue there is a distinct difference between direct teaching and constructive doctrine. Now the question then becomes – what is direct normative teaching and what are created constructs that have become normative but perhaps should not be so?

When I consider what Meador has said together with the work of Taylor (2003) on social imaginaries (considered in section 6) and some of the findings from sections 3 - 5 of this essay - then I see the pressing need for a rethink on the way one reads, understands, interprets, and then reimages and proclaims the Biblical text in one’s own milieu. It appears that it is almost obvious that at least in some cases, the Biblical text has to be transformed (or morphed as I will introduce further on) into its new context to be understood.

This leads to the idea of a polymorphic theology. I must stress that I am not claiming that all theology is polymorphic in any dogmatic fashion. Rather, I am thinking more along the lines of Taylor and Meadors in suggesting that it may be a helpful and practical term to help explain and understand the reality that throughout the history of the Church there have existed many variances of several Christian doctrines. The concept of polymorphic theology allows for certain Evangelical essentials to be maintained yet allows for differences in other doctrines that have been and should be clothed in a social imagery and language pertinent to the period and culture it is being proclaimed in. It is introduced by me as a possible mechanism to assist in both hearing God via the Biblical text as well as supporting contemporary proclamation that offers the opportunity for relevancy and ability to proclaim the Gospel whilst remaining faithful to good news

The term ‘poly’ means many. To morph means to change or transform. In mathematics, a morphism is a ‘structure-preserving map from one mathematical structure to another one of the same type’.[[21]](#footnote-21) Alternatively, a morphism is an arrow between two objects.[[22]](#footnote-22) Biology has also developed the concept where polymorphism involves one of two or more variants of a single particular DNA sequence. For example, there is more than one conceivable trait in terms of a lion’s skin colouring; it can be light brown, white or dark brown. Alternatively, a butterfly transforms via holometabolism or metamorphosis from an egg, caterpillar, or pupa to an adult butterfly.

Thus, when I say that something is ‘morphous’, I am indicating that it has the ability to change. If it changes it has ‘morphed’, and if it is capable of and makes more than one change it is

‘polymorphic’ yet always maintains ‘the arrow’ or the connection between the two or more concepts or objects involved in the transformation. In my theological application of the term, polymorphic is a concept that is indicative of the ability of a Biblical text, message or teaching to be displayed in more than one form – it can and does morph. Thus, my concept of ‘polymorphic theology’ evolves.

A different type of analogy to understand polymorphic theology is found in the Jungian concept of archetypes (Jung 1980). In Jungian psychology, the archetypes represent and are described as universal and hereditary (innate) blueprints, patterns and images that are part of the same collective unconscious for all human beings. Jung believed that all humans inherit these archetypes much in the way we inherit instinctive and distinctive precedents of behaviour. We are each individually born with this identical collective unconscious, and it encompasses a series of shared memories and ideas, which we can all identify with, regardless of the culture that we were born into or the historical time in which we live. Archetypes, according to Jung, seek actualization within the context of an individual's environment. These shared archetypes move through the personal consciousness where they are adapted or modified and then manifest in the consciousness of everyday life. If we understand an archetype as the model image in the collective unconsciousness, then in one sense, it can be equated to the Biblical communal central theology or beliefs (collective

unconsciousness) that then navigate each epoch of time and culture (personal unconsciousness), where they are adapted and revised to actualise and manifest as the doctrine of the day (consciousness). This imperfect analogy helps a little to explain how agreed central Biblical communal beliefs may possibly morph in different eras and communities. Perhaps now we need to consider some terms in theology to make the polymorphic concept more palatable.

Systematic theology attempts to create a coherent theological theory running through the various doctrines within the Christian tradition – from hamartiology, and eschatology to pneumatology and Christology. A likely problem underlying this endeavour is that in fashioning a systematic theology, certain elements may be coerced into a presupposed composition, or completely ignored, to maintain harmony and the coherence of the complete system. Belief is often intellectual assent to propositional truth claims and the Bible is then read to find supportive texts.

Constructive theology derives its name from the awareness that all theological articulations are constructions and is in one sense attempting to avoid some of the problems associated with systematic theology. I would define constructive theology as premised on the recognition that systematic theology is a construct that has the mark of the theologian on it. The work of Wyman (2017) provides a great deal of insight into the motivations of a constructive theologian. Wyman writes about the numerous differences between a systematic versus a constructive theology. I think that Wyman essentially is asserting that Systematic theology seeks to systematically portray a crucial and even fixed reality, while Constructive theology does not claim to be comprehensive.

Thus, Wyman’s work implies that Constructive theology has a more modest epistemological attitude to theological claims. Furthermore, it can be contended, that if all knowledge is in one sense constructed, then one can and must access other sources of knowledge.

As I understand Wyman, he believes that by attending to the tangible needs of a society one develops a Constructive theology, a methodology that has a more interdisciplinarity approach to theology and results in a more relevant and practical engagement or activism. This would include many of the burning issues of the day - from unjust economic systems, child labour, climate change, the plight of refugees, and patriarchy, to name but a few. Constructive theologies speak to a generation who mandate that for the Christian faith to be socio-culturally relevant (contextual) it must be multiplicative of justice, fairness, equity etc.

Polymorphic theology is not a synonym for, or to be confused directly with constructive or contextual theology that considers both the historical practice and experience (the documentation of divine revelation in the scriptures and the tradition of the Christian institutions and people) and the experience of the present - what is termed the ‘context’ in which Christians and institutions develop their doctrines and ministry. Contextualization is the process that attempts to connect the Gospel in word and deed that offers sagacity to people within their local cultural context and relates to their worldviews. Polymorphic theology incorporates this understanding but argues that theology has the kernel of truth derived from Christian Scripture and then has numerous drivers – from hermeneutics, tradition and historical theology to critical aspects of accommodation, bridge building and relevance to culture - that will affect what it morphs into whilst always endeavouring to maintain faithfulness to Scripture.

Foshaugen (1997) argued that the initial position in meeting postmodernism worldviews is with a praxis-orientated apologetic, and he defines this as: ‘A willingness to offer one’s life in adoration and action, in true worship and spirituality (144).’ He continues to argue that what it necessitates to be a Christian is indissoluble from what it means to be the Church of God. His key point is said as follows: ‘The Church has a word to speak to the world because it embodies an alternative way of ordering human life made possible by Jesus Christ. This concept is further enforced by Kenneson (1995) who claimed that beliefs and convictions should be seen as habits of acting. Foshaugen (1997:144) explains Kenneson as a ‘model of plausibility and persuasion is one in which the facts or truth one cites are available only because certain convictions have been acted out.’ Kenneson

(1995:163) writes: ‘The paradigm I am advocating frankly admits that all truth claims require for their widespread acceptance the testimony of trusted and thereby authorized witnesses. The belief that Christianity has a relevancy and a truth to convey (that both Sire and Allan believe) is one thing, a reason to be heard is another. Thus, Foshaugen (1997:144) resolutely states:

The certainty that Christianity is relevant and has a truth to convey is one thing, a motivation to be listened to is another. Christians are to be grounded in the Word, prepared to give a rationale for their hope (1 Peter 3:15). However, there is an existential reality for many people that needs to be heeded. No person cares how hat or how much you know until they know how much you care.

My understanding of polymorphic theology is prefaced on my position and convictions as an Evangelical, scriptural and practical theologian. However, I recognise that there are many sincere and committed Christians with different versions of the Christian faith and disagreements exist in theology, Thus, I believe that holding to the concept that theology is polymorphic incorporates the common threads that hold together Evangelical theology. For example, these embrace but are not limited to the incarnation where God, the creator of all, became a human being, that God’s nature is grace, mercy and love and therefore reaches out to save and empower those who are suffering, and that aspects of the story of God are revealed in the Bible. The Bible speaks and we can hear God.

It was noted earlier in the essay that Taylor (2003) saw social imaginary as an awareness of the way a culture imagines its communal social life. Social imaginary designates the ways people envisage their social reality and the profound normative beliefs and images that underlie these expectations. How humans ‘imagine their social worlds is expressed in ‘images, stories, and legends’. This social imaginary is that shared common understanding that makes possible communal customary practices and thus provides a widely shared sense of legitimacy (:23). This ties in with the concept of polymorphic theology that is thus concerned with the way that Christians reflect their faith via the meaning of the stories of God it is today. It reflects the process and the practical application of the core beliefs, teachings and practices.

A polymorphic theology is a theology that has reflected on the social imaginaries, teaching and ideas that are embedded in the sacred stories and the questions and needs of the present. It is premised on the confidence that God’s story is recorded firstly in the Christian Scriptures but with the recognition that this revealed story does not interpret itself by itself. Thus, earlier interpretations might not satisfactorily, correctly, or even appropriately relate to the social imaginaries of later readers of the Scriptures. In one sense, Christian Evangelical theology always begins with the incarnated compassion-orientated Jesus who came to live and die for the integrity of others, yet theology must also simultaneously commence with the actuality of the present existential human experiences and social imaginaries - if it is to speak wisely and be relevant to the world.

It was the Noble prize-winning theoretical physicist Richard Feynman who is attributed as commenting that he would rather have questions that cannot be answered than answers that cannot be questioned.[[23]](#footnote-23) That is in one sense the substance of a polymorphic approach to theology. It will not hold to ‘forced’ explanations or denial of inconsistencies in the Bible. It will not hold enforce one ancient social image on all others over time. Here I think of those who hold to ‘a young earth creationists view’ as an example. They tend to be Biblicists and provide their answers from literal Bible interpretation and will allow no questions or evidence to count against it. Polymorphic theology recognises that the story of God is revealed in sacred Christian Scriptures in a specific social historical milieu and each writer might have had a different agenda. For example, the life and teaching of Jesus came in at least four different versions (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John). Thus, theology is a blend of the recorded divine revelation of the words of God and ongoing human experience and imagination. Theology is birthed and constructed out of the honest and best efforts of us human beings to interpret the Christian Scriptures; to understand the ineffable reality and experience of Divinity in the world; as well as an engagement in the world that begins with the

social imaginaries and existential needs of the world and its people. Therefore, I contend that understanding aspects of theology as polymorphic is reasonable. However, it must and should never attempt to leave the mission it has - to be a Biblical, systematic, contextual and constructive theology.

In the prolegomena, I raised many questions concerning the variance in doctrinal positions held by Evangelicals. I might now conclude that there is not only one doctrinal position that reflects the Biblical understanding of God speaking through Scripture. If that is true, then we need to be careful and maybe even not be locked into an interpretation of any doctrine that might be entirely historically situated. If we neglect morphous drivers or influencers such as situated contextual social imaginaries as it impacts our understanding of the nature of the triune God, then we could become irrelevant in our proclamation. '

I am aware some might claim I need to be wary of a possible contradiction in presenting arguments that claim doctrine can morph and yet argue there are some essential timeless truths. How can a balance be struck to avoid the accusation of falling into dogmatic essentialism? It is perhaps essential that this be explained here before continuing and my explanation reflects my Evangelical leanings.

Whilst I have no substantial issues in using the terms dogma and doctrine synonymously, there is some soundness in the understanding that there are *various ugiainousē* (sound) *didaskalia* (precepts or doctrines), certain axioms, basic teachings or doctrines that most Evangelicals will agree to.

These I will call *ugiainousē* *didaskalia* or ‘sound basic teachings’ as they are generally settled points of departure in the understanding of the Bible’s teaching. A conviction representing this would be the belief that it is God’s desire to be reconciled and in fellowship with all His creation and thus He has an unconditional loving salvific will for all humanity.

Secondly, salvation is a necessity for fellowship and the key to understanding the person and work of Jesus. My short minimalistic definition of salvation is defined at the basic uncomplicated level as ‘one of a sincere heart seeking and accepting forgiveness and consequently being liberated and in fellowship - a loving union, with God’. This salvation is made possible by God through the person and work of Jesus Christ who as the Word (Logos) is the unique revelation of the nature (love, grace and mercy etc) and the will of God. It is Jesus Christ, who as the Atoner, enlightens humanity to the truth of the Kingdom of God.

Thus, the mission of the Church is to share the Good News of salvation with all people. This is the *ugiainousē didaskalia*, the sound central basic belief of Christianity. So, most Evangelicals would make this *ugiainousē didaskalia* statement: Jesus has done and is doing something for humanity – for us.It is these basic teachings that morph out into various expressions and dogmas. an example would be the various understandings of Atonement – from Christus Victor, moral theory, satisfaction theory to penal substitution – all having the Bible text as the grounding for their claims. Thus, I can maintain my Baptist beliefs in core or central *didaskalia* such as that Christ’s death was

‘for humanity’ and ‘because of humanity’s sin’ in a real and practical manner, without being overly prescriptive in any one exclusive methodological explanation of soteriology. Thus, I am convinced there is a degree of consensus to be found that relate to certain teachings and the central tenets of the faith as taught in Scripture and held historically and traditionally by the Church throughout its history. However, even these need to be clothed in contextual social imagery.

Then, there are also systematic doctrines or dogmas that I would say are of secondary importance, and Evangelicals hold various views on them (eschatology, pneumatology etc). Some theologians embrace the prerogative that all doctrine is a deconstruction of Scripture and a reconstruction of perceived Biblical intention into a contemporary idiom. Notwithstanding this possibility, I wish to contend that the concept of the polymorphic nature of theology in a theological sense still prevails. This is because if one holds to operating as a scriptural theologian – then one commences with the incarnation event and the Bible as the primary source to reveal and explain it, and then attempts to both construct and formulate a systematic doctrine whilst understanding how theology morphs. Note, I say that one begins with the incarnation event as I argue we should read all Scripture with what we clearly see and know concerning what Jesus Christ has revealed concerning the nature of God and the mission of the Church. Due to the plethora of images, metaphors, genres, social imaginaries etc found in the Scriptures, as well as numerous issues such as matters concerning the interpretation and application of the Biblical text, (that are discussed in earlier sections), it is inevitable we might end with ‘difference’ yet underlying it is a harmony or commonality.

Another example of the morphing of theology yet maintaining a commonality is found in the work of Jeremias (2002, p. 79) who in his work *Jesus and the Message of the New Testament* noted that the images and metaphors of the Atonement may be dissimilar however underlying them is a similar purpose. They illuminate and validate the ‘for us’ of Atonement’s purpose. Thus, we can have different Biblically based perspectives or doctrines (dependant on our own social imaginaries and the metaphors chosen from the text) but as in the Atonement example - the core truth of 'for us’ remains. Thus, in this essay, I use this morphing concept as a supportive theological term to mean the ability (and arguably even the necessity) of the sound basic exegesis/teaching/understanding of Biblical text may be modified to take on more than one form that is both scriptural yet contemporaneously relevant. It is legitimised by the social imaginaries of the group one is proclaiming to whilst it always remains faithful to the very roots of the proclamation – the person and work of Jesus and the revelation of God in scriptural declarations. Longenecker (1984) wrote a book that seriously challenged the comfort zone of Evangelical conservative hermeneutics. His key question was in what way ‘are the ideas and solutions of the writers of the New Testament relevant for contemporary social issues when society has changed so dramatically, and situations are not at all the same (ix)’. His hermeneutical model is a ‘developmental hermeneutic’ and I see how neatly his thinking fits in with Rush (1997) as well as Gregersen’s (1988: 301-303) three theses that relate to both the character of theology as well as the undertaking of theology (that is explored later in section 6.3). Rush, Longenecker and Gregersen seem to question and contest how some Evangelicals see and utilise the Scriptures as a rule book set in proverbial stone. These three scholars present robust and sound reasoning to understand hermeneutics as an ongoing active process that each successive generation of Christians must engage in if Christians wish to ensure that God is heard in each new period or different cultural milieu.

## Concluding reflections

There are many Evangelicals that believe that sound exegesis will answer all the questions that I and others have raised and presented in this essay However, as was shown in section 4.4 regarding inspiration of the Bible highly capable scholars claim to have disagreed with other competent scholars – all experts in language and translation. Claims to have the ‘right’ answer often reflect more the interpretive judgments of scholars than the actual text. There is the danger of exalting one’s own view over another’s. The certainty we can have is that the human process of interpretation is complex and, in my view, it is always ongoing and never final. Furthermore, I believe it is clear that there is no viewpoint, no opinion that is from nowhere, and every position on any subject is to some degree interpretive.

The Bible is pertinent if it is made pertinent in changing epochs and cultures. I suggested that we might need to recognise the possible polymorphic nature of doctrine throughout the history of the church and why it is thus. Then we are more likely to be both faithful to Scripture’s intention and relevant when bringing the essential truths from Scripture to our present-day situatedness and context. In that sense theology today must morph in the awareness that it must be post-Protestant but remain pro-Reformational, because for it to be correctly situated - contextual and pertinent, it surely needs to be reflective, continuing, and purposeful whilst being sensitive and listening to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Thus, I suggest that any other approach to contextual cultural challenges is likely to be less successful and perhaps even doomed to be irrelevant noise with God not being heard.

Whilst my Evangelical foundation would maintain that Scripture is foremost or primary in terms of our learning and understanding of God and the Christian faith, the Holy Spirit has worked with all the generations of believers in the historical Church ever since its foundation. From this, we learn how doctrine has been transformed and restated in different eras and cultures. Admittedly it also led to forms of heresy or misguided applications, yet perhaps morphing remains a key principle and crucial guide for Christians today to consider when wishing to share the Christian message in a contextual and applicable manner. The interpretation of the Bible to formulate doctrine is never done in isolation or completely naturally without some bias. This section has noted that many factors may influence the interpretation of the Scriptures and the formulation of dogma and thus suggested that perhaps at least some theology is possibly polymorphic in nature. This extrapolation can become the premise that can thus serve as a means to assert that at least some doctrine can be reviewed. The analogy of God being the territory, and doctrine is the map, provided an example of how situatedness functions in one’s doctrine of Scripture and the hermeneutical process. This proposes that dogmatic assertions are always secondhand interpretations of the Bible (and all other sources) and thus dialectally become new Christian texts but not the same as the autographs. They represent what Gregersen (2008:130) calls ‘a certain mode of Christian experience’ To further enhance these premises, one should always consider how theology should be done and applied in culture. That then leads into the next section focused on the association of situatedness and proclamation.

# SITUATEDNESS CONCOMITANT TO THE PROCLAMATION

# THEOLOGY AND PROCLAMATION IN CONTEXT

The RQ is asking what influence and bearing will situatedness have for Evangelicals on hearing God and the proclamations of the message of the Bible. The first part of the essay considered the critical question of the situatedness of the Bible - the origin and interpretation of the text as we find it today. Now the seeds of reflection have been sowed for the second part of the essay. I wish to consider and analyse the critical issue of the connectedness of situatedness to proclamation.

This section will elaborate on some findings of the preceding sections, however now elucidated with the insightful perspectives of two highly respected scholars - Gregersen (1998; 2008) and Taylor (2003). The underlying question is now asking how contemporary Christian proclamation of God may be received as God intended it to be understood. Earlier it was argued that before one looks at proclamation one has to consider the basic content of what one wishes to proclaim. If we are unable to provide certainty in all matters concerning what the text originally said, what the authors wrote and what God intended we hear – then there exists a substantial warning to Christians to be very careful in what they proclaim. It is possible that some if not a great deal of what Christians proclaim is not what God wants to say or be heard. This matter will never be fully resolved to the satisfaction of all in the Church and disagreement will continue to exist. It might be valid to present a short thought experiment. Even if all Christians had identical doctrines on all matters – there would yet remain the urgent need for the reflections of the situatedness of proclamation. That is the purpose of this section – to consider and analyse the issue of contextual proclamation so that the target audience might now also hear the word of God. Thus, I will contemplate a few of the key concerns and challenges with the relevance of some of the findings of previous sections. This is because I as a pragmatic theologian, hold that the function of doing theology is not limited to the perpetuation of the prior beliefs and identity of the Church as part of an historical continuous tradition. Theology is also tasked with a contribution to the further progress of the Church in its ever-changing contemporary situatedness. An important aspect of practical theology is to be able to define its claims as meaningful propositions in relation to the culture’s propositions. Gregersen (1998:305) says it so well: ‘There exists no conflict between the tasks of theology in relation to the Church and in relation to culture in general. Theology does not only introduce the culture into the Church but also presents the Church to the culture.’

## Charles Taylor’s ‘modern social imaginaries’

There is one philosopher who has brilliantly justified why there are multiple ways in which modernity is expressed. Whilst Charles Taylor (2003) is best known for his effort in the explication of multiculturalism, secularism, and identity formation in modernity I think there are some gems of wisdom that can be considered for my RQ. It is primarily the first 4 chapters of his book that struck me as pertinent to this essay. The key concept of my RQ and title is entirely interconnected and housed in my concept of situatedness, and I think what we can and must learn from Taylor is of considerable significance and consequence to the RQ.

In *Modern Social Imaginaries* (2003) Taylor supports his idea of the social imaginary as a comprehensive understanding of the way a culture imagines its collective social life. Taylor writes that social imaginary designates ‘the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations (:23).’ He then points out that there are significant variances between social imaginary and social theory. He adopts the term imaginary for several reasons. First, he says it's because his emphasis is on the way ordinary people ‘imagine’’ their social environments and that is seldom expressed in mere theoretical terms. Rather, it is conveyed in ‘images, stories, and legends.’ Furthermore, he says that theoretical explanations are often the possession of a small minority but ‘what is interesting in the social imaginary is that it is shared by large groups of people, if not the whole society’. Finally, he says that ‘the social imaginary is that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy’.

In chapter 4 of his book, Taylor discusses and explains ‘the great disembedding’ as the people of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment moved out of a premodern religiously determined reality. Attitudes, values and beliefs became more secular, and this thus creates what Taylor describes as new social imaginaries. The work of Taylor seems to be premised on the belief that cultures throughout history have both understood and metamorphosed their concept of reality via what I would call ‘tensional exchanges *in situa*’ via a practical dialectical methodology with their social and cultural surroundings.

Taylor states that his purpose for his thesis is an endeavour to link the primacy of the individual (as we saw in the section on modernism) to the earlier premodern endeavours to proclaim God and convert individuals and society, via the authority of the Church incorporating tradition, ritual, proclamation of inerrant Biblical texts seen as authoritative (:64). He says that science ‘disembeds us from the social sacred,’ the world of medieval magic and ritual, to offer ‘a new relation to God as designer’ in Newton’s cosmology (:65). His book is seen as primarily offering insight into the organisation for thoughtful comprehension of the establishment of modern life and the dissimilar ways modernity has impacted people and cultures all around the world. However, from his thesis, I hope I might glean a few basic insights applicable to the Christian understanding of the Bible and its proclamation in the 21C. Taylor has claimed that one cannot understand modernity if one does not recognise a plurality of modernities. He then proposes that it is social imaginary that best explains the variances in the understanding of the multiple modernities. The key concept for this essay is the way the situatedness of social imaginary is defined as the ‘common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy (:23).’

An example might help us to understand this. When we consider what it is that provided organized unity to a Christian living in Cape Town and one in Oslo - I will suggest it is the cohesive shared imageries that provide a shared worldview that stimulates them to think and act as if they are living in a common societalworld. Yet, it is a truism that in the modern world with the internet and globalisation, we still grow up with various influences that contribute to our world views and thus we may have many different cultural views amalgamating into the one we primarily grow up in.

Taylor (:165) points this out when he says: ‘We each can be placed in census categories in relation to ethnicity, or language, or income level, or entitlements in the welfare system, whether or not we are aware of where we fit, or what consequences flow from this.’ It is for this reason we must grasp that any modern imaginary not only includes categories which enable common action, but also categories of process and classification which happen or have their effects behind the backs of the agents.[[24]](#footnote-24) I understand this as indicating that whilst we might believe our doctrinal beliefs only reflect a Biblical view, we are in reality a collection of social imaginaries and some we are not even directly aware of.

A cursory study of the history of the life of the Church in the world since the days Jesus walked on the earth will reveal that these imageries are often in flux. One primary reason for this is the variety of social imaginaries in Scripture. A prime example of this was presented earlier in the essay as it relates to the imaginaries around the Crucifixion. Here the dominant understanding is the Penal Substitution Atonement (PSA) model however within the Biblical text are other social imaginaries. The Christus Victor model leads to completely different social imaginaries concerning the nature and meaning of the Cross event. The study of doctrine with the history of the Church reveals that through a dialectical process, precious beliefs, doctrines and praxis can morph and there are many factors that can lead to imageries being arbitrated, recontextualized and even deconstructed. War,

economic and political expansion and change, new knowledge or challenges to old ways are but a few one can mention – thus, to new contexts, new imageries are birthed.

Social imaginary in the history of the church is necessarily formed, preserved, replicated and finally, at some point, it is contested. The history of theology plainly reveals this, and an excellent example would be the Reformation. This insight offers one way of understanding why we have so many denominations and such variance in doctrinal statements within the body of the Church. The Bible has a critical role to play for all Christians as it assists to narrow the gap between human beings and the transcendental. The Bible teaches and mediates knowledge of God – however, we need to always remember that it was written and understood within its very own social imaginaries. These social imageries of the Bible mediate knowledge of God and often they need to morph to ensure contemporary mediation and proclamation in a new situatedness. In a general sense, one can agree with Osri (2012:147) who says say that all religion involves the tradition of making the ‘invisible visible, of concretizing the order of the universe, the nature of human life and its destiny, and the various dimensions and possibilities of human interiority itself, as these are understood in various cultures at different times, in order to render them visible and tangible, present to the senses in the circumstances of everyday’.

The view of Osri reveals why the social imaginaries of the Bible are to be morphed by the Church to provide new social imaginaries that can be faithful to the Biblical teaching yet are contextualized to be meaningful and perform their intended purpose of allowing the Church to proclaim its message in a different situatedness. Thus, it is imperative that the Church constantly renews its image and circulates its doctrinal beliefs and praxis in imageries and narratives. Only then can one hope that the social imaginaries of the Church might transform the overall awareness, anticipation and understanding of the people the Church hopes to convince of an alternative reality to modernism and even postmodernism. It is fairly obvious that much of the social imaginaries of the Church no longer materialise into a meaningful proclamation in the 21 C when one considers how the West remains secular - at least in terms of Church growth. Whilst the social imaginaries of believers in the Church might provide meaning to themselves, they are seemingly unable to be mediated to the secular world. Perhaps there is a need for a ‘reformation’ in social imaginaries to be embodied by the Church. Taylor's concept of socialimaginaries reminds the Church that the imagining and embodying of its message in social imaginaries in relevant language and imagery will promote her listeners to think of the possibility of the reality it depicts. Social imageries that are accessible, intelligible and contextual are more likely to be heard and invoke responses. Listeners will at the very least understand the reality embodied in the social imaginaries. Social imaginaries can not only be the ones as found in Biblical texts. It needs to reflect the embodied experiences and imagery of the listeners in their own situatedness to have a chance of producing new imaginaries that mirror the Bible. Biblical social imaginary must be adaptable to inhabit a flexible equidistant ground between Biblical social imaginaries with embodied practices and explicit doctrines and the cultural context it operates in and desires to proclaim its message.

The work of Taylor (2003) reflects an astute investigation of the process involved concerning the development and progress of western societies as they have imagined and reimagined themselves in the endeavour to actualise themselves in different situatedness. Taylor shows that this is always done whilst concurring to present prevalent conceptions of their accepted moral order and thus their situated moral rationale. It is certainly of great value to consider his work in reflecting on the proclamation of the Church in the 21C. Taylor's own words best explain why when he says that ‘the social imaginary is that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy (:23).’ The lesson from Taylor that is so applicable to this essay and doing theology is that the social imaginary is motivated by shared and prevalent understandings of what is good and bad, meaningful or meaningless, wrong or right and has constructive and beneficial value worthy of accomplishing in a society.

Taylor (:64-65) prompts us to consider some critical pragmatic truths as we do theology in the 21C. He says ‘we are always socially embedded; we learn our identities in dialogue, by being inducted into a certain language. But on the level of content, what we may learn is to be an individual, have our own opinions, attain our own relation to God, our own conversion experience.’ He acknowledges that “on the first level, we are always socially embedded”. How? By the reality that for humans to elaborate theories of origin, there have to be the processes of the language we use. This is done in the situatedness – the dialogue community contexts that govern who we communicate to, details concerning the themes we speak about, and in what manner or attitude. It is as if we urgently need to recognise that we all apprehend our identities via dialogue in our community and by being initiated into a specific language game.

The concept of Taylor’s social imaginary enables scrutiny and analysis of both the Biblical text and its interpretation. It also promotes and encourages the Church to adapt its social imaginaries and focus on the relevancy of the proclamation and praxis strategies to focused interest groups. I am convinced that it promotes helpful scrutiny of the manner in which cultures and societies over time change their shared understandings of morals, religion etc. The notion of social imaginaries enables insight into the complex interaction of the Bible text, hermeneutics and contemporary proclamation. In the Church, we need to first acknowledge and then appreciate the practical hermeneutical value of recognising multiple social imaginaries in the Biblical text. Then the Church will be able to better interact with local contextual social imaginaries. We will then allow the inspired Bible to be heard by all. Why? Well partly because of what I think is so true in Taylor's estimation. He says that ‘modernity is secular, not in the frequent, rather loose sense of the word, where it designates the absence of religion, but rather in the fact that religion occupies a different place, compatible with the sense that all social action takes place in profane time and everyday life (2003:194).’ Despite the western 21C world having moved beyond many of the premodern concepts of religions’ understanding of the world, we can still be religious.

Taylor (:51) did not deal directly with religious social imaginaries in detail and left some questions unanswered - such as whether God is a product of the human psyche or is a transcendent spiritual reality. However, he did say:

What stands out, however, is, first, the ubiquity of something like a relation to spirits or forces or powers, which are recognized as being in some sense higher, not the ordinary forces and animals of everyday life; and second, how differently these forces and powers are conceived of and related to. This is more than just a difference of theory or belief; it is reflected in a striking difference of capacities and experience, in the repertory of ways of living religion.

The lesson that the ‘social imaginary is not a set of ideas; rather, it is what enables, through making sense of the practices of a society (:2)’ is one we need to heed to comprehend and adapt to situatedness for ensuring we hear God and God is heard. Whilst Taylor (:11) has a focus on showing how social imaginaries have shifted from the premodern period ruled by the teaching of the Church with moral conversation becoming ‘about us humans’ and this ‘world ‘rather than one touching God or the cosmos, his insights and concepts have substantial value for the Church to learn from. Only when we are cognizant of the ‘ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows’ (:23) will we begin to clothe Biblical social imaginaries into contemporary relevant social imagery for proclamation. In the 21C we live in a very changed world from that of the premodern worldview that accepted ‘spirits or forces or powers’ (:51) and elaborated rituals to invoke and control these powers.

Taylor writes that the ‘modern social imaginary no longer sees the greater translocal entities as grounded in something other, something higher, than common action in secular time (:155). He goes on to state: ‘A purely secular time-understanding allows us to imagine society horizontally, unrelated to any "high points," where the ordinary sequence of events touches higher time, and therefore without recognizing any privileged persons or agencies, such as kings or priests, who stand and mediate at such alleged points (:157). This makes it clear that Christian proclamation needs to recognise this prevailing view and accept that ultimately people do not care what or how much you know until they know you care. Proclamation from the position ‘I know so you need to listen’ will fail. Furthermore, proclamation without a corresponding praxis of unconditional and sacrificial love is doomed to go bankrupt. If we wish to be heard – if we want people to hear God – then we need to understand the social imaginaries of the Bible, understand our own horizons of interpretation, and immerse ourselves in the social imaginaries of those we wish to speak to – so that maybe then – God will be heard. Without a doubt, this is a complex process that requires copious amounts of effort and humility on the part of the Christian.

Christians must first listen to the needs and social imaginaries of the people they wish to address. We must recognize that when we speak to others, we work on the assumption that they care about what we say. Taylor illuminates this with an analogy of fashion - being seen and aware that we are noticed. ‘It matters to each of us as we act that others are there, as witnesses of what we are doing and thus as co-determiners of the meaning of our action (:168).’ The critical point here is that in a real sense we speak to others to make sense of our experience. If there were no others, language and meaning could not exist. Taylor sagely states that the meaning of our participation in the event is shaped by the whole vast dispersed audience we share it with (:169). Why do I think this is such a truism for 21 C proclamation? Taylor (:193) explains it best:

In both individual and social life, the sacred is no longer encountered as an object among other objects, in a special place, time, or person. But God's will can still be very present to us in the design of things, in cosmos, state, and personal life. God can seem the inescapable source for our power to impart order to our lives, both individually and socially.

Palpably, we need to recognise that for many citizens of the 21 C - meaning and wisdom are not so much found in religion, ritual and magic. It is more socially created by the process of social imaginaries and language, as in a most profound manner, our modern concept of identity is bestowed by what I will call ‘community narrative and situatedness’. Is there still a place and opportunity for God to be heard via proclamation? Taylor (:193) says there is space for God in the secular world. The dissolution of ‘the enchanted world’ in the personal life ‘can be compensated by devotion, a strong sense of the involvement of God in my life’. He says that ‘the disappearance of an ontic dependence on something higher can be replaced by a strong presence of God in our political identity.’

Taylor's work reminds me of an oft forgotten missiological and practical theology truism. Before we ever consider the validity of another culture's worldview or social imaginaries it would be wise to embed ourselves in it to ensure we fully understand the worldviews as they do, before addressing them. Proclamation requires that we speak to and with others – not at or past others. In conclusion to Taylor’s insights, I emphatically wish to say it is time we Christians learn that there is no proclamation if there is no audience.[[25]](#footnote-25) There is just a metanarrative heard as noise coming out of mouths. This is an appropriate moment to go further into the issue of contemporary proclamation that will provide the best opportunity for the Gospel to be heard.

## Dogmatics as contemporary theology: grounds for morphing in situatedness

Gregersen (2008) articulated a well-defined program for defining doctrinal studies as the descriptive and normative study of contemporary Christian thought. His lucid premise is that dogmatics is contemporary theology in the two-fold sense (:290).[[26]](#footnote-26) This is important to comprehend. First, it is the understanding of the historical development of theology and the studying of current versions of Christian doctrine, worldview development and character, and of ‘constructing coherent and self-reflexive proposals for Christian teachings in contemporary contexts.’ Gregersen’s work reveals how in dogmatics, one studies major theologians to demonstrate how theological proposals of the past may continue to inform and stimulate contemporary theology in new contexts. However, the study of theology is dynamic, the search for truth is ongoing and must be relevant in a new context.

I concur with Gregersen that the central purpose lies in evaluating and re-formulating contemporary expressions of what I would call timeless Christian faith. The theology expounded needs to be faithful to its origins and purpose, yet it must also consider the potentials of Christian semantics for future Christian communication practices to ensure it may be heard. As was pointed out in section 5.3 concerning language, Gregersen (:290) says that ‘the regulative rules of Christian grammars, the fluid forms of Christian semantics, and the communicative potentials of Christian pragmatics thus make up the core subject-matter of contemporary theology’. A contemporary and relevant theology must be pursued in the interest of the society at large. A caveat is offered in acknowledging that whilst contemporary theologians propose the concept of adaptive theology it is always the communities of faith that decide when it comes to the fate and fortunes of the theological proposals. The subject matter of Christian dogmatics is basically and ultimately the claims that Christians believe and trust to live their lives. This is why I see the value of Gregersen’s (:127) consideration of the definition of the function of theology as a contemplation of the possibilities or opportunities for the future development of Christianity in the current cultural context. Unambiguously, dogmatics relates to the beliefs and practices of the institutionalized

Church however, it also must ‘speak’ to and be heard by those who are not Christians yet have

pertinent questions. It is this realization that Gregersen (:128-135) speaks to that I will now summarize and comment on as it relates to situatedness. Some of the points he raised have been reconnoitered in earlier sections however they need to be accentuated and developed in terms of proclamation in its situatedness that may be heard. The cultural contexts of dogmatics become part of the dogmatic text as various experiences, texts and interpretations might operate as a source of dogmatic exposition of the Christian faith. However, the question then becomes what texts or experiences can become normative (of relevance). They need to contribute to a Christian understanding of creation, human beings and God. Gregersen proposes the need to differentiate between three classifications of theological sources

Firstly, there is the historical text of the Bible. As has been noted earlier in the essay - this is the primary referential source in the Christian tradition. However, it is in itself not a systematic theology and does not make up a systematic harmony of doctrine or dogmatics. Within it is a

‘plurality of ways’ of articulating the beliefs of Christianity. Despite this obvious observation, the Bible is used as the primary test to ascertain the authenticity of Christian dogmatic claims and it functions as the guideline of assessment by which any assertions or developments of Christianity are to be gauged. Thus, Gregersen says that the Bible is generally considered as not in need of any a-priori justification in the subject matter of theology. It is the definitive standard but not the exclusive fount of doctrine. Earlier, I argued that the Bible is generally accepted as revelation from God – the debatable issues relate to issues such as inerrancy and exactly what it is saying and via hermeneutics – what are Christians hearing.

This point can be illustrated via the ground-breaking research of Morten Beckmann (2020) to disclose the reality that there can be numerous vested interests concealed in the organizations and practices of Bible societies and Biblical translations and for that matter any exegesis. His work was based on the translation of the Norwegian Bible in 2011. For the majority of Christians, the

Bible is the authoritative ‘Word of God’ and is often claimed as the only normative source for any doctrine or belief. What is not widely known or accepted is that the Bible they read as the unmediated Word, is a very human work of translation. The majority of readers (including myself) have to have faith in the translation since they are in no position to tell what has actually transpired in the translation of the source text(s). Beckmanns’ study exposes the true degree that translators can and do intervene in the transfer process, feeding their knowledge, ideology, theology and beliefs into their processing of a text. This means that when we read and claim to hear God, we might be hearing the voice of the translator and not God. This is far more critical than often accepted when it comes to dogmatic assertions in proclamation. We noted earlier that even the key verse relating to inspiration and inerrancy in the Bible - 2 Timothy 3:16 has had disputed translations. What does this suggest?

There does not exist a neutral interpretation or translation that transcends situatedness. The question of whether theology or ideology was intentionally or instinctively applied in a translation is immaterial as the outcome is the same, regardless of the intentions. Beckmann concluded his research by showing that there was a deliberate intention on behalf of some of the translators. The work of Beckmann highlights the situatedness in which a translation is produced, and how the contextual factors influenced the result. Recognising that even the Bible as read today is partly a culturally defined product in its own situatedness is a crucial insight as the Bible translation one uses as a primary normative source will be an influential instrument in persuading theological discussion. Thus, without wishing to minimise the value of the Bible as a primary normative source for accrediting dogmatics, the Bible translation is in and of itself always to a degree, a work of theology in the making. The important point is not that we must now distrust all translations but rather recognise situatedness and acknowledge we have to be humbler in our assertions – less dogmatic in our doctrine and thus our proclamation.

Secondly, there are all the sources that can be called ‘the classics of theology’ (from the early Church up to today). These are writings that reflect what Gregersen (2008:303) calls ‘the pluriform transformations of Christianity during its history’. Here one finds evidence of the transformation of Christianity partly dictated by different contexts and the ‘theological filtration of these contexts’ – what I am calling the role of situatedness. These classics have influenced and inspired modern theology. Gregersen offers examples of this. However, it is important to recognize that given the plurality of the classics, theology is selective concerning tradition and there is a correlation between the confessional context of situatedness and the choice of relevant classics by theologians. This means that tradition or understanding as pertaining to or depending on the classics of theology cannot be the ultimate criteria of any claims for dogmatics. On this point, Gregersen astutely points out that theology has no choice but to be discriminatory concerning the rich classical tradition if it aims at an ‘internal systematic consistency’.

Finally, the third resource for theology is contemporary experience and texts – what I will call the ‘present situatedness’. Here one could think of everything from the contemporary philosophy of religion's contribution to theology through to personal experiences from daily life. The philosophy of religion is valuable in its evaluations of the validity of existing religious interpretations and experiences – both past and present.

The important conclusion in terms of sources is that the Bible is the norm but is not exclusive and those religious understandings and social imaginaries within a cultural setting have relevance but then again it does not have a claim to normativity. However, there remains the ongoing challenge and need to ensure that the Christian faith is articulated, heard and understood in its operating situatedness – something the classical writings all attempted.

The problem that is oft not recognized is that dogmatic assertions are secondhand interpretations of all the sources and thus dialectally become new Christian texts. They represent what Gregersen

(:130) calls ‘a certain mode of Christian experience’*.* In effect, those called theologians are attempting to interpret the sources and then develop their metaphors and symbols to be both relevant and understood today in its context. This reality leads to theologians taking the truth claim of Christian discourse and preaching and transforming it into what Gregersen calls a *‘*truth claim’

(:131). This means that the definitive subject matter of theology is the ‘probable truth of the Christian language about God’ (:131).

I see this strong assertion as the essence of the problem in claiming the absolute truth of one’s dogma and rejecting all other reasonable views as wrong, heresy or wolves operating in sheep's clothing. To me, this can lead to what can only be seen as the highest form of arrogance and blind ignorance. In dogmatics, one must accept that the map is not the territory and the premise that no knowledge of God is possible without the concept of revelation – in texts as well as experiences such as praise, prayer, and preaching and one’s situatedness. Like most epistemological matters – there is always the self-evident axiom somewhere in the theory. This point is where Gregersen provokes controversy as he suggests theology should abandon this axiom, as whilst it can be neither verified nor falsified (the self-evidential nature of an axiom). If there is no ultimate foundation for theology and one should not demand from theology what one does not demand from humanity, then theology has to take a more ‘mundane point of departure in the particular expression of a Christian faith in a given culture’ (:131).

If one does not fully agree with Gregersen on this, and desires to work with a self-evident axiom of revelation (as a polymorphic theology does), then it is worthwhile remembering the issue of religious language being metaphorical in character and thus containing a plurality of semantic potentialities and references. It is nigh impossible to interpret and translate religious symbols and metaphors (never mind the original general language of revelation) into clearly understood propositions in different social imaginaries with any claims of certainty of meaning. Furthermore, some metaphors are root metaphors that cannot be replaced with a contemporary expression (such as Holy Spirit, Father, Son etc.). We need to heed and acknowledge the situatedness of all human thought, language and expression. When we accept this reality then we can acknowledge that theology develops language from sources without any guarantee of definitive correctness or accuracy and often ends with what can be claimed to be dynamic equivalents. Gregersen calls this the ‘apophatic dimension in any attempt to express the essence of God’ (:132). I suggest it is the limitations of the map we have chosen in the attempt to reflect God as accurately as possible.

The issue of language in dogmatic assertions results in the conclusion that to some extent any proposition about God is accompanied by a corresponding proposition about human beings and the world occupied. It is here that Gregersen claims that rational discourse can take place (:132). He has separated the ultimate subject matter of dogmatics (God as revealed in Christ and as such beyond the reach of theology) from the generally accessible subject matter (Christian interpretations). This he does whilst acknowledging the presupposition of God's revelation being the primary source.

Doing theology and claiming authenticity in situatedness requires a few criteria. Firstly, it needs ‘inner logical consistency’ and coherence. This is based on Gregerens’ contention that theology should abandon the axiom of revelation that can be neither justified nor falsified. He writes ‘Any Christian interpretation of God, world and human beings must be in coherence with the broadest possible range of other relevant propositions generally held to be true in our cultures’ (:133). The key for dogmatics is to take a point of departure from the already developed Christian interpretations of life and then reconstruct these interpretations by taking partly overlapping, partly competitive outlooks into account. One should not expect a foolproof winning argument but that the criteria for coherence will result in a fruitful learning experience and process. Whilst this makes complete sense, I would stress that my Evangelical mind would say one must also always be checking coherence with the Scripture despite the obvious problems brought up earlier in the essay. Situatedness alone will assure that we will likely always have a plurality of interpretations from the sources of doctrine, but we can still argue that we can be guided by the Bible in validating dogma – as long as we recognize the contingency of revelation and situatedness. However, it is not only asking if the theological proposition can be deduced from scripture alone but rather whether there are structural similarities with the Bible and if the dogma is tenable in praxis. Gregersen has wisely argued that any new proposal in dogmatics must be able to integrate the strong points in other dogmatic proposals. This will help avoid dogmatics becoming merely a reflection of individual likes and dislikes.

Whilst not determinative of the authenticity of any dogma, one must also consider the reception by Christian faith communities. Theology is an ongoing process and needs to always reflect critically on its received wisdom and traditions and consider innovation and progress in understanding and application. Theology is a living ongoing process. It is the ongoing understanding of all the sources, their situatedness and their claims of truth. It is proclaimed in a context and the dogma is considered by both the members of the Christian community as well as those outside the Christian faith community that are now hopefully hearing the proclamation. I suggest that the authentic relevant dogmatics needs to in a sense appeal to both groups. This is not compromised to please the hearer or dilute the ethical content that might be contained in the proclamation. The history of doctrine in the Church reveals that it is not realistic to demand theological consensus for dogma to be authenticated however the demands of the kerygma of love and unity imply it should always strive to seek consensus. Gregersen has offered a way forward on this as we understand both the plurality of dogma as well as the need for sound criteria to both understand the difference and continuously move forward with the Christian message.

The sceptic might ask if there is any value in pursuing any theological questions. The answer is yes but only if one is fully aware of the challenges highlighted in this essay and is humble and willing to accept the limitations of situated finite minds doing dogmatics. Even if dogma is built on the axiom of revelation – that the Revealer (God) and His revelation might be objective, it is obvious that the reader of Scripture is not infallible and so Scripture awaits open, humble, honest and careful study and this is best done in community. Church history and my own experience reveal that many Christians have confused the ahistorical with the historical. They often reflect their viewpoint as if it is revelation revealed by God and not recognised the situatedness of their maps.

Many fundamentalists (defined simply as those who reject all forms of critical scholarship), more liberal individuals and even numerous denominations (in their applaudable desire to promote orthodox doctrine) often have tradition, or culturally and situated determined doctrines that are

presented as ‘the Gospel’. This exclusivist presentation has hurt many e.g. apartheid, inquisition, crusades, and then there are the incalculable masses of individuals or groups that have been abused or traumatised by a particular dogma relating to heretics, racism, slavery, sexuality etc. One might believe in the Biblical tradition that Christians serve an ahistorical omniscient Creator who has revealed Himself and His will through Scripture and the life, death and teaching of the incarnate Jesus Christ. Yet, whilst it remains contentious for many, it appears clear that the sources for theology include the Bible, Church tradition, reasoning as well as personal experiences – all done in their own situatedness. For Evangelicals, the foundationalism of the Bible for theology remains but without consideration or acknowledgement of other sources, one is doing theology blindfolded and in denial of the reality that no one approaches the Bible from outside their own situatedness, no one is neutral in approaching, interpreting and applying the Bible. We can also debate the exact nature of the subject matter of theology. For these reasons, this essay might also be described as having a foot in the field of systematic theology but at its heart – it is driven by a practical theologian’s heart.

Don Browning (1991) believes that practical theology brings the general fruits of systematic theology back into contact with the action. In this essay, the issue is the Evangelical conviction that Christians can hear God. However, one must acknowledge both the character and functionality of situatedness to understand why there will always be variance in Evangelical answers to questions as reflected in doctrines. This is then taken into the whole concern for contextual cross-cultural proclamation and how again the influence of situatedness prevails. Thus, this essay is an important practical theology issue. Why? Foshaugen (1997:1-3) says that practical theology studies the method and means by which the Church as the community of faith maintains and protects its identity. In one understanding it is a theology of practice and a conversation between theology and praxis. Practical theology involves itself with the way in which the theology and doctrine work out in praxis in the world and then should bring up questions about what it observes, directing them back to theology. Foshaugen (:3) quotes Gerkin (1991:13) who pleads for all practical theological inquiry to be governed by theological concerns on the one hand and by practical considerations on the other. Gerkin’s premise for effective pastoral work entails’…a dialogical relationship between the issues and problems involved in the particular human situation at hand and the core metaphorical values and meanings of the Christian story’ (:19). His statement succinctly reveals the issues. This particular human situation he writes about is nothing more or less than the situatedness that this essay has raised as a critical influencer in hearing and proclaiming God.

Working on the assumption that the subject matter of practical theology is the praxis issues in hearing and proclamation of theology in the 21C one must ask key questions. What is the kerygma or essence of the Christian message? Is there only one set answer to this question? How does one proclaim the answer(s) in diverse situatedness and new social imaginaries? Is there a way to morph the message into a language and social imaginary that can be heard, and understood yet be faithful to its core message? Herein lies the dilemma as there is little consensus. Dogmatic essentialism has been a matter of dispute in the history of the Church. Gregersen (2008:124-125) wisely suggest

that systematic theology (dogmatics) should take as its ‘point of departure’ an acknowledgement of the plurality of statements as a source of amelioration for theological proposals. This is because theology has its own standards of evaluation or ‘self-referential system’ and ‘linguistic code’ in arguing for what belongs in Christian theology, but any Christian theology must view the world it exists in and ask how the present context or milieu can contribute to the future development of Christianity. The failure of much of theology arises when it only refers to a structure or social imaginary given once and for all time. Gregersen described this as the erroneous premise of dogmatic essentialism.

The challenge of dogmatics begins with the original setting and teaching of the Church. Even if we wished to have dogmatic essentialism for all time that is only birthed in Scripture – there remains the reality that in the Church there is a great deal of unresolved dispute on doctrine and this essay has made clear why this is so. These disputes have persisted throughout the history of the Church to the 21C. An example we explored earlier is the use of metaphor by Paul when exploring the Atonement. Different understandings of this led to disputes in dogmatics as relating to Atonement. It seems evident that there is no agreement on an essential doctrine even when only sourced and deduced from Scripture. When considering contemporary context there exists the obvious challenge that different contexts will lead to different possible theological interactions. There appears to be less disagreement about the fact that Christianity’s message is a universal truth claim even if the specifics of the message are disputed. Grenz (2003:30-31) argued persuasively that the quest for a culture-free theology is both ill-founded and unwarranted. Rather, culture must be viewed as a resource for theology. He wrote:

A theology that is culturally relevant seeks to articulate Christian beliefs in a manner that is understandable to people within the wider society in which the church ministers. Consequently, the theologian draws from the cognitive tools – including language, symbols and thought-forms – by means of which people in the host society view and speak about their world, so as to engage in a kind of ‘translation’ task in which the categories of a society, including its philosophical conceptions, become the vehicles for the expression of the Christian belief-mosaic.

In fact, it is perhaps more precise to concur with the world-famous Missiologist Lesslie Newbigin (1986) whose work is premised on the claim that the belief of an uncontaminated gospel, extracted untainted by any cultural additions or accretions is an illusion, and I would go further and say, ‘a delusion’. I concur that the gospel is embodied in culturally conditioned forms from beginning to end, it is always in some situatedness. I am not simply arguing for the modification of theology in the light of current thought. However, I am deeply concerned with the question of how cultural hypotheses about ‘truth’ may incarcerate rather than set free the message of Jesus. This then leads to considering Gregersen’s voice on some of these concerns of the task of theology so that one might be able to say, ‘I heard God’.

## The theses of Gregersen: an escort into situatedness

Gregersen underscores several critical theses that are essential insights to understanding a future theology of culture (1988:301-303). These are considered by me as necessities and foundational hypotheses to move forward in any Christian doctrine that can say ‘I heard God’. His theses relate to both the nature of theology as well as the task of theology. The work of Gregersen is foundational in demonstrating that theology is always an ongoing project and sometimes polymorphic in nature.

He argues that within any worldview (or what Gregersen calls ‘lifeworld’) theology and culture consist of ‘different cultural sub-systems’. (This for me is very much Taylor (2003) and his social imaginaries.) Whilst each is ’self-referential’, they are both exposed and open to the environment.

This implies that dogmatic essentialism and those Gregersen calls ‘theological or modernistic bombast’ in approach and doctrine are overlooking the reality of the position of theology in culture. (Think back to section 3 and the example of the umpire calling the pitch in the baseball game where the first umpire is a modernist and believes there are objective ‘balls’ and ‘strikes’ and we can know them.) There is no need for a doctrine to be isolated or assimilated – rather the focus of relevant theology is to actively pursue, to inaugurate, states of ‘interpenetration with the cultural subsystems’ it operates in. This results in a situated and contextual theology rather than dogmatic essentialism that will not move from the idea of a super-cultural doctrine that simply makes no sense to the culture it now operates in. Without considering the situatedness a theologian becomes the ’theological or modernistic bombast’.

This is all premised on the idea that doctrine is an intermediary or liaison between the Christian tradition and the operating cultural context. This is challenging for many Evangelicals to accept as it demands that one accepts that doctrine is based on a provisional theology and not a conclusive theology and situatedness can change it. Gregersen offers some insight into this dilemma when he contends that etymologically, theology is defined as knowledge about God. However, God by His nature is not some empirical thing in the world or a theoretical/hypothetical principle or assumption. God is not a transcendent mystical object or idea that can be deduced via a priori argument or induction with validity.

If this is true, then God in Himself cannot and is not the direct subject matter of theology. This is a profound statement that many will react to. However, it proves to be very useful to say this when one is trying to understand the variance of answers to theological questions. It helps to understand what we can mean when we say we hear God. This leads me to one obvious deduction, that the primary subject matter of theology is thus limited to God in His revelation. This line of argument leads to the obvious conclusion that the subject matter of any Christian theology is the revelation of God in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Theology is reliant on and conditional to revelation. This revelation is a historically situated and recorded event and thus not directly identifiable with semantic propositions. This can be understood as the problem of language and interpretation. Gregersen provides a constructive and perceptive proposal that one must distinguish between the accessible subject matter of theology - that is Christian interpretations of God as revealed in Jesus Christ versus the ultimate subject matter of theology – God in His revelation who is beyond the direct scope of theology. Why is this relevant for understanding variances in doctrine? The answer is the conclusion reached above that to give a true likeness or description of the Revealer or revelation is an unfeasible task for theology. The map is never the territory. This is an epistemological truth that needs to be recognised as we endeavour to hear God and proclaim God in a manner that He may be heard. Gregersen says that to represent a message that is timeless, without context, results in committing the ‘essentialistic fallacy’.

Any student of the history of doctrine in the Church will soon uncover the ’plurality among

Christian interpretation’ – a point highlighted earlier in this essay by Smith (2011) in his book *The Bible Made Impossible.* Thus, one now is compelled to conclude and accept that the dispute over doctrine is inevitable. There will always be variance in answers to theological questions. However, with a small correction, we open up a new way of understanding what we mean by hearing God. Doctrine is not the description of Christian belief. Rather, doctrine is the content of the Christian message defined relative to the Christian culture. Herein lies what I suggest is its polymorphic nature. Gregersen offers a road forward in proposing that systematic theology involves both hermeneutical-descriptive and argumentative-normative assignments (:302). When Christian interpretations are making doctrinal truth claims of any doctrine, they are often made within distinctive situatedness, a context and culture, and thus one needs to consider reformulation of some of one’s propositions when considering another context to make it possible for God to be heard.

What is becoming abundantly and perhaps even disturbingly apparent is that ultimately Practical Theology is saying that theology involves the challenging task of either renovating or reforming the Christian tradition and exactly what it is saying. This is perhaps the only way to make sense of the variance in doctrine that is glaringly obvious when doing historical theology. This does not mean we have nothing to guide us when faced with disputes over doctrine. As an Evangelical Baptist, I still hold that all disputes must ultimately take place within the boundaries of the received Canon – the Bible (notwithstanding some of the concerns raised in the section on interpretation) and the clear instruction of Jesus to the Church concerning love and unity prevailing.

Gregersen (:303) speaks of a ‘continuous Christian tradition’ that can guide and I would take this one step further and suggest sometimes even mediating between disputes in the interpretation and application of doctrine. The important point here is to recognise the different sources that inform theology. Baptists like me enjoy being called ‘people of the word’ however often fail to recognise the extent of situatedness and that their theology has been influenced by other sources and forces.

We tend to regard the Bible as ‘the Word’ and forget that it is Jesus himself in His life, works and teaching who is the ‘Word of God’. Karl Barth had said something worthwhile listening to. We need to heed Gregersen (:303) who writes: *‘*Only a religious interpretation, presupposing the will of God to reveal Himself here and now, make propositions about God possible.’ God is not only heard when we Christian’s study and interpret the Bible to formulate Christin doctrine, God needs to be heard in every century by all people. As considered in section 3, there are at least three sources used for interpretation. Firstly, there is the text of Christianity known as the Bible which is the apriori starting point. We noted briefly the reliability issues in terms of the received written text we use (Beckmann 2020) and the many problems with translation to a local vernacular. We also noted the rich history of classical interpretation written since the inauguration of the Church and this has not stopped – nor should it. If we say we have arrived at full knowledge of the Bible and hear God with no bias or situatedness involved, then there is no place for further possible corrections as we had with Luther and the Reformation.

The basic realities of the problems associated with hermeneutics uncovered earlier in the essay, and the significant concerns about social imaginaries and relevant proclamation, and the rich history of Christian writings about God picture the plurality of interpretations and what Gregersen (1998:303) calls *‘*the pluriform transformations of Christianity’ reveals the truth about the situatedness and thus contextuality of theology. For over 2000 years the Church has had dedicated sincere scholars and theologians producing hundreds of thousands of texts and millions of sermons– most explaining the Biblical text and forming doctrines applicable to their situatedness. These writings are seen as a perpetual rich resource for theology. However, a resource is never seen as the basis for authentic unequivocal truth claims and it should be recognised that they themselves are products of a context and are used selectively in construing doctrine -just as the Bible is. Most Christians receive their doctrines from the pulpit and thus find the texts to support the doctrinal position. Today, we have what Gregersen calls ‘contemporary religious interpretations’. They operate as new modes of articulating the essential Christian message and are constantly accessible for reconsideration to amplify the Christian tradition but have no necessary standardizing or normative influence when it comes to claims of an authentic dogma.

If we are willing to acknowledge the situatedness of theology and the possible morphing of doctrine, then we need to ponder how best to move forward in any context. The work of Freire in section 7.5 has much to commend to this project.

## Concluding reflections

One might have expected a discussion of how specific doctrines might be formulated within the social imaginaries of our time or in relation to the communicative potentials of Christian pragmatics however, I intended in this essay to only analyse and discuss the general conditions for the biblical texts and/or doctrines to be communicated within the social imaginaries, or the situatedness of our time. The task of contextual relevant proclamation is a non-negotiable function of the Church if it is to fulfil its God-given calling to represent God to all people and ensure God is heard in all cultures. It is a task that faces many challenges however this section has offered some practical, judicious, and in some cases, almost prescriptive guidance without ever being dogmatic about the actual content of theology. It has become clear that contextualizing proclamation requires Christians to translate and transfer Biblical understandings to a new context. Without situatedness being considered in proclamation then I am convinced that only noise will be heard. As Taylor (2003) pointed out – these new contexts may have social imaginaries with very different symbolic universes than those held by the one making the proclamation or that found in the Bible. Therefore, it is important to be flexible and embed the proclamation in understandings and traits that facilitate the new culture listeners may hear God as they acquire meanings and functions roughly similar to those had in the original context. It is now appropriate to cogitate on a few critical questions relating to practical theology and possible ways to advance the mission of Evangelicals ‘despite differences and situatedness’ or perhaps it is best said ‘because of situatedness’.

# THE EMERGENCE OF A WAY FORWARD IN SITUATEDENSS

The RQ has credibly revealed that situatedness is conceivably the most important consideration in explaining how Evangelicals hear God, why there is variance in Evangelical doctrines and that situatedness has the most prodigious significance for the contextual and relevant proclamation to ensure God may be heard today. Furthermore, I have shown the value of prioritising a Christocentric hermeneutics. Now is the time to consider practical theological issues of this more Christocentric approach and offer a handle and/or a consensual position on what Evangelicals might always hold in the forefront of anything they might say they heard, believe or wish to proclaim – especially if it might be at variance from another Christian’s view or belief. I now reflect on situatedness and selected particular conditions for God or proclamation being heard.[[27]](#footnote-27)

## Christ and Culture

Niebuhr (1951) suggested five models to understand Christ and culture. They are 1) Christ against culture; 2) Christ of culture; 3) Christ above culture; 4) Christ and culture in paradox, and 5) Christ the transformer of culture. The one extreme has every expression of culture found outside the Church should be seen as corrupted and to be avoided. In the middle, one has cultures that are not intrinsically evil, but they require some correction by the teaching of the Church. On the other side is the belief that culture has become corrupted and tainted by sin (from the Fall of Adam and Eve) and Jesus Christ has come to transform culture.

Carson (2008), as an Evangelical scholar, evaluated Niebuhr’s work (Niebuhr was known as a liberal theologian). Carson conceded that in cross-cultural proclamation Christians must find a balance that will continue to become more uncertain as Christianity is today over 2000 years from the Judeo-Christian origins of the Christian faith (:119). For me, the real value of Caron’s work lies in the implication of his book that what works successfully in one era and situatedness might not work in another. I think this adds to what Gregersen (1998:303) called ‘the pluriform transformations of Christianity’ He writes: *‘*Only a religious interpretation, presupposing the will of God to reveal Himself here and now, make propositions about God possible.’ This ‘here and now’ is by definition and existential experience changing all the time. This implies that no one approach can be applied in all cases. Kraft (1979) has a view that is comparable in some ways to Carson (2008) in that his model has Christ above but working through culture (:114). I see this perspective and the fifth option of Niebuhr (1951) as useful when considering how to ensure that Christian proclamation can be heard in its situatedness. In my thinking, I concur that in one sense God exists outside of culture and humans exist within cultures. However, the incarnation reveals a God who chose to come down to earth into a specific cultural milieu. God has decided to interact directly with His creation in the cultural milieu they live in – in their specific situatedness that is unique to them. Thus, any contextualization of doctrine will always involve certain risks and one should acknowledge that the New Testament never demanded a mandatory uniform culture among Christians (Foshaugen 1997:161). Foshaugen points out that the New Testament ‘only requires life-styles congruent with the nature and meaning of Christ within all cultures.’ However, even if there is no single set of rules to aid Christian proclamation there are certainly some guidelines. I would suggest the key is a willingness to exercise our discernment as the apostle Paul did.

## Pauline insights on cross-cultural missions

The apostle Paul grew up in Tarsus in a Greek culture but was raised a Jew. Later in life, he was trained as a Rabbi and Pharisee in Jerusalem. Here we have a man who would have understood cultural differences. In 1 Cor. 9:1-23 we have Paul ministering in the multi-cultural city of Corinth and have the opportunity to glean a few insights into Paul’s approach to different cultures. Paul is considering the question of the permissibility and acceptability of Christians to eat meat sacrificed to idols. From Paul’s Jewish background the answer would surely have been no, as the meat was not kosher. However, Paul realised this was not the context. What strikes me as important is that it was perhaps the first time that he had to speak to such an issue and the way he goes about it is informative and revealing for contemporary Christian proclamation in different contexts and cultures. Paul was challenged by what some thought was a theological issue and he had to address the question with practical wisdom and his attitude and willingness to be a servant to people. I with great regret that I recall how I often wanted to correct wrong ideas and practices and set people straight - not serve them. Now I understand better what Jesus meant when He said that He came to serve - not to be served. Who did Jesus serve? He served the outcasts, the sinners, the poor and unjustly treated and even the Roman and Jewish leaders who would ultimately reward His love and service by killing Him. Paul's decision reflects his desire to imitate Jesus. Both Jesus and Paul understood that service was the essence and beginning of proclamation to people in other cultures. In verse 12 where Paul asserts what it actually means to love our fellow Christians and people from different cultures. He says that ‘we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ’. He wants no obstacle to stand in the way of proclamation of the Gospel. This does not mean that

‘anything goes’ as Paul says in verse 21 ‘though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law’. However, he was willing to adapt and even give up his rights and expose himself to inconvenience or suffering for the sake of proclamation of the Gospel. Paul was determined to change so as to fully identify with the community he was proclaiming to. This would incorporate adapting to their culture and way of life as much as he could. He thus says that he would do is give up his right to support and a wife etc (verses 7-11) and become a servant. Herein lies the kernel of the advice we will glean from Freire (1993) further on in this essay.

Paul then broadens the discussion to speak to how our liberty in Christ traverses the proclamation of the gospel in a different culture or cross-cultural setting. Paul says in verse 22 ‘I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.’ The work of Fraser and Campolo (1992:191-212) considers the interaction of both God and culture. They offer the same insight that Paul has given - that Christians are ‘pilgrims’ in every cultural grouping. The essential point being made is that there does not exist any one social or cultural context that fully compromises and exemplifies Christianity and the Kingdom of God. Every cultural community that has ever existed (or will exist), with its economic, social, or political way of life and worldview is never fully God’s order in any direct or Biblical sense. However, Christians are called to live out the Gospel within the culture and society they live. Gibbs (1990:70-100) discussed issues of culture and showed that ultimately all people are to an extensive degree creations of their culture. Here we have a warning that Paul was addressing when considering the eating of meat offered to idols. There is a grave danger of ethnocentrism (observing another culture's habits and customs or way of life in terms of one’s own cultural practices or lens). God’s self-disclosure in the Bible was always presented in terms of the original hearers’ own situatedness. This inexorably means that misinterpretations may occur, and key facts or ideas may be overlooked when read by people of a dissimilar culture who are unacquainted with the situatedness or cultural environment of the Bible. If we wish to learn from Paul, we can understand that we need to value the people and the Gospel more than we value our own rights or own culture.

To this point, we can add what we learned from Taylor (2003). We must be sensitive and aware of the social imaginaries of the culture we wish to proclaim in. Many years ago, I recall reading a missionary article that offers some insight into this.[[28]](#footnote-28) Missionaries were horrified to learn that a once-isolated tribe in eastern Papua New Guinea called the Fore had a long-standing tradition of eating their dead at community funerals. The Fore were horrified to hear that the missionaries bury the dead in the ground. The Fore ate their dead to honour them and buried their rubbish. So, the tradition to bury the dead seemed to the Fore to show no respect for the dead – one was treating them like rubbish. What I think was ‘missed’ was the commonality in their differences - both believed in honouring their dead.

Learning about local social imaginaries implies identifying with the people Christians are proclaiming to so that they can serve them. It allows Christians the confidence that their proclamation inside the social imaginaries of the culture, will be heard. Paul valued the Gospel and the people from a different culture more than his own rights, more than his own comfort, or his own culture.

How is the Church going to proclaim in a manner that the world will notice and hear? I wish to suggest that there are certain matters Jesus has been very clear on, that need to be essential parts of proclamation to ensure that God is heard. I am now suggesting that there are universal ‘identifying marks’ that were given by Jesus Christ to characterize the Church through all the ages. These are explored in detail in Foshaugen (1997:187-223). Two areas are selected and expanded on for the purposes of this essay. They are the marks or distinctives of love and unity. They are chosen at this point, as in this essay I have seen no evidence that conformity in doctrinal belief is achievable, yet

there is the undeniable charge to proclaim the Gospel in a manner that can be heard. This I call the

‘unity of love’. This section is focused on the two distinctives of unity and love that flow into one distinctive, that can and must be seen and experienced, not just spoken about in Christian proclamation.

The variance amongst Christians over doctrinal truth claims. often result in a split of some kind. This can be anything as large as the split between the East and West Church many centuries ago, to the Protestant Reformation and then right up to the many contemporary splits in the local church in various denominations. This almost inevitably causes so much hurt and confusion that many people then choose to leave the church and even more sadly, some become so disenchanted that they then also leave their Christian faith. In the case of many splits, there is often a common thread amongst the many other possible causes, and that relates to the doctrine of Scripture, its interpretation, understanding and application. Tragically, the Bible’s teaching of love and unity is often forgotten. Love and unity among believers are very clearly taught by Jesus Christ and one can argue it was part of the reasoning why He offered up His life to secure it (Eph. 2:12-14). Why is a unity of love so important? Unity and love are critical as together they have a missiological rationale of witness to all creation as seen in John 13:34-35 and 17:20-23. In Eph. 4:3 Christians are urged to always nurture and maintain a vibrant unity of the Christian faith.

## The Church as the body of Christ

There exist several images to describe the Church. The most noteworthy is perhaps that of ‘the body of Christ’ (1 Cor 12; Eph 4). The teaching is that it is Jesus Christ who is the head, and thus He determines the nature of the body. The Church is then the body and with the aid of the Holy

Spirit, the Church becomes the vehicle for proclamation of the Gospel. This means that in the 21C (as at any other time) the body is the living expression of Christ’s Spirit.

I have earlier suggested that a central reason for the Church is to continuously review and promote God’s work of reconciling the world unto Himself. The model is the servant heart of Jesus Himself and the example of Paul that was examined earlier in cross-cultural ministry. The proclamation in speech and praxis of Christians, as it operates in different situatedness or cultures. must be recognized as the proclamation of the body of Christ - a living organism. It is not a static institution perpetuating its traditions and just making a lot of noise. Christians must adapt to situations and the culture it is in. It does this by contemporizing and contextualizing its message; translating the Bible and allowing doctrine to morph as if it were written to humanity in its present situation. Morphing the message so that it might be intelligible and understandable does not mean making it acceptable by losing faithfulness to the essence of the message. Rather, we learn from Jesus and Paul, the body (Christians) must be the instrument for the transformation of humanity and not let culture or ideology transform it or its message.

The warning is that whilst there is a culture the Church is called to protect – too often it is seen as the culture of the one proclaiming when it needs to be the culture Jesus proclaimed – the arrival of the Kingdom of God that Jesus taught (such as the Sermon on the Mount) - and a culture reflecting His unconditional and sacrificial love for all – His servant's heart. Christians need to recognize that they are a fellowship of redemptive love and not a creedal institution. Christians represent a chosen community that has the high calling to represent God as the body of Christ with unity and love expressing itself in the life of the body. It is concerned with God’s connection to humanity and humanity’s relationship to God as well as humanity’s rapport with its fellow people. The prayer of Jesus for a unity of love makes perfect sense in this three-way relationship. Therefore, I would concur with a single sentence to summarize proclamation that sums up the law of God. Christian proclamation should be to increase in humanity the love of God and neighbour.

## A Unity of Love

The RQ has asked about and reflected on the influence and bearing that situatedness has for Evangelicals on hearing God and the proclamations of the message of the Bible. There is a distinctive characteristic of the Church in all situations it might find itself – whatever the situatedness of the Church – she is called to be seen as manifesting a unity of love. This love is experienced and heard - not just preached but revealed as action. It is expressed as a life of service and via a unity of love says Foshaugen (1997:188-189). In John 13:33-35 Jesus calls His disciples to him. He uses the term *teknia*, ‘little children’. It is the same word His mother used when she found him lost in the Temple. In employing this term there is an appreciation of approaching perilous times, and the need for extraordinary care for the ‘little children’, the disciples say Hosier (1981:121) and Mitchell (1990:260-261). Jesus was soon to be physically permanently absent from them, but they would still have each other’s presence. Therefore, Jesus gives them a new commandment. Bruce says it is new because Jesus imparts a new depth of meaning to it as now the disciples must love one another as Jesus loves them (1983:294). It is not centered on Mosaic Law and its birthplace is Jesus’ teaching and ministry.

Hendriksen (1961) says that this command is illuminated by Jesus’ life and teaching as it is a

‘constant, self-sacrificing love’ (:253). Jesus loved His disciples unselfishly, with no constraints to what His love would offer up. His love was forgiving to those who were blind, selfish, and insensitive (Barclay 1985:149-150). There it is. Christians are called to love without reserve – with sacrificial and unconditional love. I have over many years seen how fervency for ‘true Biblical doctrine’ has grown yet it is a unity of love that Jesus prays for. That is why I say that it is a significant error to make faith or belief in doctrinal assertions rather than love the test of Christianity and understanding situatedness would make this clear. The medieval Church tried and ultimately failed to enforce a uniformity of belief. Their tools were not love, but threats of torture and death or economic, political and social isolation. We are now in the 21C and still, I find that even today mental assent to the clauses of orthodoxy reigns supreme. ¨How many times have I been told ‘you are not believing what the Bible says’ and thus ‘fellowship with you is not possible’. I now understand that what they are saying is that I do not believe their belief as to what the Bible is saying so I am less angry as I understand a little better why this happens. Faith is far more than mental assent to a proposition or dogma.

Jesus explained the value and purpose of the new commandment. ‘By this all men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another.’ He gives the world a litmus test, the right to judge whether one is a Christian. It is a test based on a unity of love. Christians are called to love others as Jesus loved them - a sacrificial and unconditional love. In John 17:21 we find this prayer Jesus prays for the oneness of the Church. Bruce (1983:335) says that this is a unity in love and that this oneness would be a powerful witness to the reality of God’s love. A unity in love reveals the unity of association between God and Jesus, which was always a relationship founded on love, trust, and harmony of intention. It seems obvious that if Christians express these characteristics, then their proclamation would at least be experienced and heard. The method of this unity is the interdependency that exists between the Father and Son, and it is this interdependence, a model of creative diversity within the Trinity that the Church is to replicate (Hendriksen 1961:364).

It is important to recognize that this is never a model of total agreement on doctrine or praxis, nor is it ecumenical unity. This essay has shown why this is not likely to ever occur. This unity in love is best understood as a form of spiritual unity. Whilst there will always exist a diverse grouping of Church denominations with all having their own identity in ecclesiastical distinctions and doctrinal issues, it is feasible (but very difficult) that they should recognize that they are all one in Christ. They share a purpose to reveal a unity and love - an inner concord in intent and love visible to the world. This is non-negotiable according to Jesus. Foshaugen (1997:194) says whilst it is not a forced conformity, Christians must be ‘wary of loving their own ecclesiastical organizations and traditions, their own rituals and creeds, more than they love each other.’ He goes on to stress that unity in the Church must have a visible outward expression if the world is to believe that Jesus is sent by God and the claims of Jesus are true. Herein lies a huge appeal. The world must see the reality of the unity and oneness of Christians. This essay has shown that because of situatedness, this will never be achieved by seeking uniformity in all doctrines. The postmodern world denies a single universal metanarrative and I suggest that conformity in doctrinal matters is perhaps less important today. My anecdotal conclusions from my experience with non-believers in ministry have shown they are not overly focused on whether all the detail of my doctrine is correct. Perhaps if we moved away from insisting on people accepting ‘right belief’ that this essay has shown is more likely to be ‘my belief’, and found common ground via a unity in love, we will be closer to

Biblical proclamation. I say this because Jesus’ prayers seem to indicate that a unity in love is embedded in the being of God, and manifests as love one for another. It is a profound claim from Jesus – that the unity and love that He prayed for will convince the world of the truth of Christianity and the truth of Jesus’ claims.

Back in the 1970’s I recall some incredible months in L’Abri learning under Francis Schaeffer who certainly had a far more conservative view of inerrancy than I have. Yet, he seemed convinced that ultimately people will never judge Christianity on the content of its teachings but on the love Christians demonstrate for one another. He said: ‘Yet, without true Christians loving one another,

Christ says the world cannot be expected to listen, even when we give proper answers’ (1970:17).

He called the observable love of Christians for Christians ‘the final apologetic.’ This great man of learning, with some very strong beliefs on doctrine, was expressing what I believe is a truth that resonates with this essay. If we seek to allow people to hear God in our proclamation but we forget the praxis aspect of proclamation that includes this unity of love – we have lost the most powerful and relevant apologetic. We need less focus on a consensus for all theology and more focus on a proclamation that reveals a unity manifested by forgiven sinners who love one another as the Father loves the Son and as He loves the world. The Church is to be the incarnate love and glory of God.

The world is going to say, ‘See how they fight and bicker with one another’ or ‘see how they love one another’.

Foshaugen (1997:194-195) contended that when Christians love one another relationships of equality are built. It is in the context of human relationships that the Scriptures come to life as it is in this fellowship that the healing of hurts and maturing as Christians, take place. From the outside, the world observes and judges. The creation story of Scripture teaches that human beings were made for relationships and that the Church is to be a therapeutic community. In this unity of love, there is an emphasis on forgiveness (Eph 4:32), acceptance (Romans 15:7) and unconditional love (John 13:34-35; 1 Corinthians 13; Romans 12:9-10; Gal 5:13). This unity of love results in *koinonia* (fellowship). Importantly, the fellowship is a result of participating in the receipt of God’s grace and is not formed based on any common interest or doctrinal agreement.

The parable of the Good Samaritan has a revealing concept relevant to this essay. It was not the highly educated and doctrinally well-trained Priest or the Levite, his well-learned assistant who answered the question ‘Who is my neighbour?’ It was the Samaritan who understood that love is an action – something you do. Perhaps Christians need to understand that even if they have perfect doctrine but no love, then the people they wish to minister to see them as self-righteous, selfish people making a noise. Love has a shape and Jesus called the proclaimers of His Gospel to have a unity in love – not a perfect doctrine on all matters. I think God knew that people will always have variance in doctrines and ‘get it wrong’, and He knew why – their own situatedness. The commands of unity and love demand that Christians examine and test the shape of their love more than they test their variance in doctrines. I think that it was uncritical hermeneutical and theological methods and customs that led to dogmatic essentialism and that ultimately led to the failure of the Priest and Levite to love. ‘Love always seeks opportunity to be expressed. The words of a man who might not be on the same page as me concerning the doctrine of Scripture have much to say to me. Schaeffer (1970:25) wrote:

And if the world does not observe this (love and unity) among true Christians, the world has a right to make the two awful judgements which these verses indicate: That we are not Christians and that Christ was not sent by the Father (1970:25). Love – and the unity it attests to – is the mark Christ gave Christians to *wear* before the world. Only with this mark may the world know that Christians are indeed Christians, and that Jesus was sent by the Father (:35).

The words of Meyer 1988) illuminate the need to comprehend situatedness and the need to love.

‘If you do not love, though you count yourself illuminated with the light of perfect knowledge, you are in the dark’ (:203). This idea of a Christian standing as the knower of all knowledge but not relating or identifying with the audience leads to insights from Paulo Freire.

## Paulo Freire’s explication of proclamation in situatedness

Cragun and Kesler (2018:263-264) quote the Brazilian educationalist Paulo Freire who challenged all hierarchical and privileged approaches to abetting or serving the poor. Whilst he does not use the term, I think that his proposals recognized situatedness. The context of Freire’s writing is helping and liberating the poor and education and he has an agenda and dedication to meaningful social change and human liberation, and from this, his counsel is presented. I see Freire’s blueprint and commitment included in the agenda of Jesus as seen in the suffering servant of Isaiah 61:1-4.

Thus, I think that many of Freire’s principles can aid and help model Christian proclamation. Why? The ultimate goal of the proclamation of the Gospel is for God to be heard and the liberation of people into the Kingdom of God and I recognized in Freire the similar challenges Christian proclamation faces. I find a sameness of the situatedness of Freire’s ‘teachers and students’ and ‘those who wish their proclamation to be heard and those they wish to proclaim to’.

In one sense Freire’s work is the unfolding of the discourse between two or more people holding dissimilar points of view about a subject- His work stresses that the process must presuppose equality among participants. Freire criticised what he called the “banking model” of education in which the teacher is the all-knowing sage who bestows their knowledge on the empty vessel student (:71). In terms of this essay, this is the same as proclamation being made without any consideration of the situatedness of the audience. No matter how important the message is to the proclaimer, it needs to be delivered in a sensitive and contextual manner, showing respect to the audience. If not, it is like a forlorn street preacher – almost no one stops to hear the full message. Freire (:79) introduces what is deemed as ‘problem-posing education’. What he is encouraging is a less structured one-way dialogue from the teacher to the student. Rather, he encourages that together, they participate in a dialectical discursive exploration to successfully discover knowledge together and from each other. This is a sound principle for Evangelicals to consider and I will suggest that it is an essential approach to avoid the criticism of postmodernists who would see much of Christian proclamation entailing the arrogant enforcement of a metanarrative with no respect for the audience and their social imaginaries. If proclamation is to be heard and understood, it needs to be proclaimed within the social imaginaries of the audience as a joint venture. I found some of what Freire said so insightful, enlightening and relevant for contextual Christian proclamation. Thus, I have chosen to select a few of his insights verbatim and offer minimum comments as they speak so clearly to my hypothesis that situatedness is critical to consider for proclamation that ensures God is heard. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* Freire (1998:71-72) writes:

We have a strong tendency to affirm that what is different from us is inferior. We start from the belief that our way of being is not only good but better than that of others who are different from us. This is intolerance. It is the irresistible preference to reject differences. The dominant class, then ... does not intend that those who are different shall be equal. What it wants is to maintain the differences and keep its distance and to recognise and emphasise in practice the inferiority of those who are dominated.

Freire (1993:178) said that ‘leaders who do not act dialogically, but insist on imposing their decisions, do not organise the people - they manipulate them.’ He vehemently contends that all efforts to unshackle the oppressed without their reflective involvement in the act, is to treat them as objects that must be saved from a ‘burning building’ (:65). Is this not true of some Evangelical preaching that presents nothing more than a ‘heaven and hell and turn or burn’ message’ and give no credence to the need for embedding themselves and their proclamation in the audience’s world. I suspect it is not God that people reject as they never had the proclamation address them in their world. All they heard was noise. Freire would term such people as ‘grievously self-deceived’ and stresses the need for being willing to embed oneself in the culture to be heard.

Those who authentically commit themselves to the people must re-examine themselves constantly. This conversion is so radical as not to allow of ambiguous behavior. To affirm this commitment but to consider oneself the proprietor of revolutionary wisdom—which must then be given to (or imposed on) the people—is to retain the old ways. The man or woman who proclaims devotion to the cause of liberation yet is unable to enter into communion with the people, whom he or she continues to regard as totally ignorant, is grievously self-deceived (:60).

Here lies a powerful and meaningful lesson for proclamation in that so often the proclaimer comes with this ‘superiority’ attitude that ‘I know something, and you better listen’. How should we approach the audience so that God might be heard? Freire (:58) talks about the relationship between teachers and learners and this reminds me of the relationship between proclaimers and their audience.

...our relationship with the learners demands that we respect them and demands equally that we be aware of the concrete conditions of their world, the conditions that shape them. To try to know the reality that our students live is a task that the educational practice imposes on us: Without this, we have no access ' to the way they think, so only with great difficulty can we perceive what and how they know. ... there are no themes or values of which one cannot speak, no areas in which one must be silent. We can talk about everything, and we can give testimony about everything.

Thiselton (1995:160) contended that ‘a love in which a self genuinely gives itself to the others in the interests of the other dissolves the acid of suspicion and deception’. He points out that if

Christians loved (and I add proclaimed God) in this manner, then there is no need for any manipulation, or for the other to suspect this love. There is then no ’teacher–student’ relationship and the postmodern fear of enforced metanarrative is in essence nullified by the non-violent, compassionate and loving Christocentric approach to relationship and proclamation – that reflects this genuine selfless love focused on the other. Christians who wish to ensure that proclamation is contextual need to continuously consider what could hinder their proclamation and service. It is as of Freire (1998:60) is speaking to Christian proclamation when he writes, ‘Those who authentically commit themselves to the people must re-examine themselves constantly’. Freire contended that the development of a reflective appreciation of one’s social context and reality through reflection and action is what brings about transformation. This is the situatedness this essay has been centered on. He said:

At all stages of their liberation, the oppressed must see themselves as women and men engaged in the ontological and historical vocation of becoming more fully human. Reflection and action become imperative when one does not erroneously attempt to dichotomize the content of humanity from its historical forms (:65).

Christians will only have genuine access to the audience if they are embedded in their social imaginaries and know their reality. Then only can a suitable proclamation be made in a way that it can be heard. Thus, Christians must grow their knowledge of the audience's situatedness. Freire (1973:92) provides a sound insight into the situatedness of knowledge:

Knowledge is a social construct. ... knowing is a social process, whose individual dimension, however, cannot be forgotten or even devalued. The process of knowing, which involves the whole conscious self, feelings, emotions, memory, affects, an epistemologically curious mind, focused on the object, equally involves other thinking subjects, that is, others also capable of knowing and curious. This simply means that the relationship called "thinking" is not enclosed in a relationship "thinking subject - knowable object" because it extends to other thinking subjects.

This is so pertinent and valid for Christian proclamation – to understand the interconnectedness of knowledge and situatedness. For Freire, learning is a process where ‘knowledge is presented to us, then shaped through understanding, discussion and reflection’ (:31). The proclamation of Christians is to be presented within the audience’s social imaginaries where both parties are engaged in discourse to learn from each other to discover knowledge and truth- Only when proclamation is embedded in the situatedness of the audience allowing for genuine open dialogue, has it a realistic chance of being heard and learned (accepted). For this reason, I have argued for humility in proclamation born out of acknowledging situatedness in the Biblical text, its interpretation and proclamation. Freire (:39) highlights humility and comments:

Humility helps us to understand this obvious truth: No one knows it all; no one is ignorant of everything. We all know something; we are all ignorant of something. Without humility, one can hardly listen with respect to those one judges to be too far below one's own level of competence. But the humility that enables one to listen even to those considered less competent should not be an act of condescension or resemble the behavior of those fulfilling a vow... .

I have suggested that situatedness explains why variance exists in answers to theological questions.

Christians often feel that there can be only one truth and it is usually the one they hold. Freire (1998:83) says: ‘There may not be life or human existence without struggle and conflict. Conflict shares in our conscience. Denying conflict, we ignore even the most mundane aspects of our vital and social experience. Trying to escape conflict, we preserve the status quo.’ Groothuis (2011:148149) supports this and proffers both sound advice and a warning when he states:

After the dust of a good argument settles, we may err by either understating or overstating the force of our conclusions. If we understate, we are not being humble but timid. If we overstate, we may be too proud to admit the limits and weakness of the argument. The ideal is neither timidity nor grandiosity. Honest and rational truth seeking should set the agenda…Certainty is no vice, as long as it is grounded in clear and cogent arguments, is held with grace, and is willing to entertain counterarguments sincerely

Evangelicals would be wiser and have more humility if they accepted that the doubt and disagreement birthed in situatedness are normal and something to be expected. Disagreement may cause conflict and rifts in the Church, but it can also be a powerful spur to reflection and the foundation of growth. Christians have moved out of the premodern world of control by the Church where all disagreement is settled by the one ‘superior’ voice of control and authority.

The final counsel from Freire concerns the content of dialogue as it relates to situatedness and the need to include into the dialogue those to who one wishes to proclaim. This single quote underscores what this essay has found in the work of Gregersen (1998; 2008) and Taylor (2003) and the critical concern with situatedness as proposed by this essay.

The content of that dialogue can and should vary in accordance with historical conditions and the level at which the oppressed perceive reality. But to substitute monologue, slogans, and communiqués for dialogue is to attempt to liberate the oppressed with the instruments of domestication. Attempting to liberate the oppressed without their reflective participation in the act of liberation is to treat them as objects which must be saved from a burning building; it is to lead them into the populist pitfall and transform them into masses which can be manipulated (1993:65).

Cragun and Kesler (2018: 265) say that Freire’s methodology comes close to Jesus's model of leadership, ‘the leader helps the group to discern their concerns and then helps them to find the resources to deal with those concerns and allows them to come to their own conclusions’. In the admonitory words of Freire, we see the situatedness criterion as being essential. The history of Christian proclamation is full of those who believed ‘our way of being is not only good but better than that of others who are different from us’. Colonialism and mission work often worked hand in hand and reflected this embedded cultural bias. Any Christian proclamation that comes from the position of ‘I have the truth and you must listen’ is arrogant and elitist and utterly insensitive to the situatedness of the audience. In the 21C it will not be heard if proclaimed as a monologue. It fails to involve the ‘reflective participation’ and the situatedness of the audience. If we want God to be heard, then the model to follow is one of servanthood as Jesus taught in Matt. 20:25-28:

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

## Concluding reflections

The apostle Paul demonstrated to us that we are able to take the primary meanings and messages of Scripture and allow them to morph and be transferred to new social and cultural contexts. Paul warned of the danger of compromise and wanted everything to be done acknowledging that ‘I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law’. Paul is under the law of Christ – an interesting terminology that perhaps deserves more development than I give in this essay. If Christians heed Paul’s Christocentric advice, then one might avoid one of the major perils of contextualization - of going too far in accommodating the Bible and the Gospel to the culture. Here the advice from

Fraser and Campolo (1992:202) is pertinent. ‘God’s people are to dwell within both the plausibility structures and symbolic universe of their culture and of the Christian faith of tradition.’ Postmodernism detests all metanarratives and thus it is feasible that the truth claims of Christians might be understood as a kind of intellectual fascism. The challenge is to proclaim the Gospel faithfully and without any culturally prompted misleading parodies or misunderstandings. Kantzer (1990:522) deals with this concern. He writes:

We are certainly not interested in shaping Evangelical Christianity and certainly not Biblical Christianity, into a form that will prove palatable to the sinful hearts and minds of all humans. We are not trying to remove the offense of the cross. That offence is an inherent part of Biblical and Evangelical identity. It would be an irresponsible denial of our deepest faith to remove it. Yet we are deeply concerned also to remove false obstacles to the Gospel. We do not want anyone to reject a perversion or misunderstanding of the Gospel.

Foshaugen (1997:164) wrote that ‘practical theology must discover what God has said in and through Scripture and then clothe that in a conceptuality that is native to the postmodern age.’ He then quotes David Wells (in Johnston 1985:177) who said: ‘Scripture, at its *terminus a quo*, needs to be de-contextualized in order to grasp its transcultural content, and it needs to be recontextualized in order that its content may be meshed with the cognitive assumptions and social patterns of our own time.’ Foshaugen (1997:189). appealed that the Church understand that the central reason for the existence of the Church lies in its calling to continue God’s effort and desire for reconciliation through Jesus Christ. He comments:

‘It exists to serve God and to serve the world. Just as Jesus acted out God’s love (Luke 4:18) so the Church is to do likewise. As the body of the living Christ, it speaks and acts. It must recognize that it is a living organism, not a static institution perpetuating its traditions’. There is a clear calling for the Church to always be adaptable to its situatedness, location and the culture that it finds itself in and always act in a unity of love.

# THE DENOUEMENT

Heidegger (1993:262) wrote: *‘*Language is the house of Being. In its home man dwells. Those who think and those who create with words are the guardians of this home.’ Any living language is situated and will have variations in meaning and interpretation according to the historical time in which it occurs, and English dictionaries are continually being updated. When my daughter says something is ‘wicked’ (good or cool) it means something very different to my understanding (evil). Thus, even the concept of ‘truth’ is relative to the historical situation in which it occurs and the theory of truth one is using (correspondence, coherence, pragmatism etc.). Truth is then a communal truth and the knowledge that we all share via a language in our specific situatedness. It is my opinion that Christianity requires the acknowledgement and acceptance of a wider and more reflective understanding of the methodology underlying all Christian doctrinal assertions and truth claims, and that proclamation and truth claims are linked to situatedness. Evangelicals hold that a follower of Christ should disclose the life and teachings of Jesus and convey and enact the message and love of God to the focused explicit needs of the community and era they live in. Christians premise their proclamation on the fact that God speaks and can be heard. The primary source for hearing God is the Bible. However, it is sometimes experienced as nothing more than an ideology being forced on another – a metanarrative attempting to overpower a micronarrative.

The original texts of the Bible (the autographs) no longer exist and the earlier dated texts that we have are copies of copies (how many times the texts were copied - we do not know with any certainty). Most scholars agree that there was no divine supervision that has ensured no mistakes in the process of copying the surviving copied text of the originals or been present in translating or interpreting the ancient copies we have today. These copied texts must be collated and translated and then as they come together in a book called a Bible, they must be read and interpreted to hear God. Critical scholarship has provided Christians with a modern reliable text with a high degree of accuracy in terms of the original – that admittedly has numerous disagreement and discrepancies in what is the best or most accurate depiction of the autographs. Herein we see the issues of the crucial concept of situatedness. God gave His revelation over 1900 years ago – in a particular cultural context. The authors of each book wrote from their own situatedness, and the audience the text was directed at had their own situatedness. This then provides indications to the genre, language, intentions, details etc of the original text. God had to make sure that He could be heard - in the situatedness of the original texts. Since the birth of the Church, the texts of the Bible have gone through an ongoing process of copying and translation, and a continuing development of interpretation and morphing to formulate doctrine - each time done in and influenced by a particular situatedness. Today in the 21C we have numerous editions of the Bible in many languages – each will reflect the situatedness of the translators. When a Bible is read, considered, and declared today – it is all done in a particular definitive situatedness. Thus, I concluded that when it is to be proclaimed, it must always be done with the heart of a servant in the audience’s situatedness – for the most basic of reasons – the original text was given in a vastly different situatedness that needs translation and interpretation to be understandable, contextual and relevant to the situatedness of the new audience. It thus seems to be prudent to be wary and carefully consider the validity of taking a highly conservative and narrow prescriptive view of the inspiration and inerrancy of the whole Bible and then link it to authority and infallibility in one’s doctrine and proclamation.

The reasons for this were elucidated early on in the essay, which plainly revealed the situatedness of the Bible in terms of its first reception. It was also noted that there is much contemporary debate over the inspiration and inerrancy of the text and much of that debate itself has its own situatedness in the move from a premodern to a modern world and now into the 21C where we find the complexity of postmodern epistemology. Cragun (1996:xviii) claimed that inerrancy is the worst heresy that has ever afflicted the Church and is an evil from which the Church needs to repent. He links belief in inerrancy to the practice of citing a few verses in the Bible and then calling them the ‘Word of God’ and then justifying war, slavery, burning witches, murdering alleged heretics, annihilating native populations, forcing people to accept western culture, oppressing women, and amassing enormous wealth (the example of television evangelists and the prosperity gospel). I am well aware of how ‘proof texting’ was done in South Africa to legitimise racism and apartheid. Whilst his conclusions are sometimes intensely worded, he does wisely acknowledge that those who hold to inerrancy are not necessarily heretics. Cragun’s research contended that inerrancy issues were the cause of most of the splits and many rifts in the Protestant Church (:26). What I found particularly persuasive was his general argument that inerrancy undermines the central teachings of Jesus Christ and how his views in a manner corresponds with what I argued earlier in my proposal for a unity of love and a Christocentric hermeneutics.

The core critical questions remain and will always be debated. What is the Bible and how does God communicate to us through it? The Evangelical answer is that the Bible is God’s word - His message to humanity. It is the narrative of the loving Father and His interaction with His creation, but this essay has demonstrated that it is also very much a human book as much as it is divinely inspired. It is fraught with danger to read a verse from the Bible and then say, ‘these are literally the Words of God’. One could argue that if it was easy to confirm the exact meanings of divine inspiration, inerrancy and authority of the Bible I would not be writing this essay. Perhaps the process of hermeneutics would be easier if the Bible had been revealed in an ahistorical (history, historical development, or tradition) and systematic format. But, it was not. If hearing God was not a complex question involving situatedness, then maybe we could say with certainty in a single voice with clarity ‘God has spoken, and we heard’. It would be straightforward as God would just tell us what to do, and we would do it. However, this essay has shown that this is not plausible for God to do for one simple reason - the situatedness of language itself.

Even if I wish to assume that the original text of the Bible is a divine communication and revelation, my own intellectual integrity must recognise that it is not only God’s word; it is also very human words written in a specific human situatedness. The text of the Bible is both historically positioned and culturally conditioned - well over 1900 years ago. The ancient, situated characteristic implies that every word of the original text was authored by a historical person at a particular geographical and historical setting and time in history. Thus, in many ways what was written, records the author's understanding and purposes of God.[[29]](#footnote-29) This point I find so evident in that the situatedness and humanness of the words had to be the case if it was to be heard and understood by those the authors wrote to. It is this element that then greatly complicates the second question of God’s communication. We noted that the Bible is not a book of systematically written doctrine, and many Christian doctrines are inferred rather than directly taken from proof texts (the Trinity being one such example). The text of the Bible is always to be read in the situatedness of the transmission, of the writers to specific individuals or groups. Even in the case of seemingly direct propositional statements such as the 10 commandments – they are still in the situatedness and language of the author and readers/hearers of the time.

We have considered if the writers were aware or believed that they were writing ‘for God’ and noted that there is some evidence that at least on some occasions this was the case. However, I concluded that it is a problematic question as if writers such as Paul did put this claim in some of his writings and speech, it then seems to imply then that not all his writing must be considered in the same light. If Paul considered all his writing as ‘speaking for God’ or has Scripture equivalent to his views of the OT – then we have all these laws concerning women in the Church, remarriage, and the length of hair of a man – are all to be seen as God speaking eternal truths? Paul did seem to raise some of his proclamation to a higher level of inspiration and authority. We noted that Demarest (1984:283) believed that Paul and the other writers of the Bible would say they are less concerned with what the Scriptures are and more concerned with what they can do. Thus, it is feasible that the Biblical writers had no awareness that they were writing inspired Scripture or that they intended their message to be only for their original hearers/readers. What we have ascertained

in this essay is that the text has its own situatedness with both the authors and readers or hearing communities embedded in their own situatedness. We do not find a single author who claims his writings are all God’s word for all time. Even if this claim is contested, it is irrefutable that the speech acts of the authors are always first in the situatedness – the language and cultural setting of the listeners.

Despite this, Evangelicals will maintain their belief that God has spoken, and we can ascertain Biblical truths. It is now that a requirement arises for a hermeneutics of interpretation to move from one situatedness to another. Why? All Biblical truth is initially situated in the text, language and culture of over 1900 years ago. Thus, embedded Biblical truth needs to be extracted from its situatedness. We have no choice but to acknowledge that even if we hold God as the inspirer of the Bible and He wants to also speak to us, He has initially spoken in a clear and definable situatedness.

Furthermore, as each person or community in the history of the Church approach the task of hearing God, they all come to it from their own situatedness. The challenge and situatedness of hermeneutics revealed that we need translations and interpretations of the original situatedness of the text. However, whenever we translate the Bible – this is also ‘infected’ by the situatedness of the translators. We Evangelicals all agree that God still desires to speak to us today, but we must acknowledge our situatedness in hearing - the limitations of language and situatedness in the whole process of hearing God. It is like the sailor seeking to pass over the horizon – he never arrives. I then contended a guiding principle was urgently required. The cruciform hermeneutic or Christocentric hermeneutic may better guide the process as Christians deliberate the implications of the many concerns over discrepancies and errors and even lack of coherency in some doctrines. A basic hermeneutical principle is that if one interpretation conflicts or does not cohere with another – then more reflection is demanded on both. However, if one doctrine plainly is in opposition to how Jesus Christ has revealed who God is and God’s nature of compassion, love, mercy and grace for all – then I would suggest we have some sound guidance on which doctrine needs to be refined or even rejected. Thus, as one moves to understand that God is speaking, and He can be heard – one should judge what is contentious with what one knows is certain in what Jesus both demonstrated and declared concerning the compassionate merciful gracious God who speaks, and we want to hear Him and have Him heard. Cragun (1996:144) offers a thoughtful conclusion in *The Ultimate Heresy* when he writes:

The scriptures are the witness to Jesus who is the living word of God, the proper focus of the church. Whenever the church becomes the Church of the Book, the Church of the Bible, it becomes a static rigid and dogmatic church that is devoid of the living and loving Lord Jesus Christ. When the Scriptures act as the witness to the Lord Jesus they will serve as a tool to help mend the Church and bring her back to her proper perspective.

One might accept the validity of this Christocentric guiding principle but their remains the issue of the Bible and its teaching being heard in different contexts and cultures. The suggested solution was the proposal that theology in a sense must be transformed or morph to be understood. Something that is morphous has the ability to change. If it changes it has morphed and if a morphous object is capable of more than one change – it is then polymorphic. Yet, it always maintains its link to its origins. The caterpillar sure does not look like the butterfly, but they are essentially linked – the one is inherently birthed from the other. The theological application of the term polymorphic is a concept that is suggestive of the capability of a Biblical text and in particular the teaching, to be represented in more than one form – it can and must sometimes morph depending on situatedness. Polymorphic theology acknowledges the core of truth derivative from Christian Scripture and then has several situated drivers – from hermeneutics, custom and historical theology to essential attributes of accommodation, language, social imaginaries, bridge building and relevance to culture - that will synergistically influence what it morphs into whilst always striving to conserve faithfulness to Scripture. Thus, idea that theology can be polymorphic does not claim or conclude that all theology morphs but argues that it could be useful to understand that when dealing with the Scriptures, there are many different contexts, genres and metaphors used and there is possibly more than one way of understanding the text. Furthermore, certain doctrinal claims can be uncomplicatedly stated. The example given came from Atonement theology. Evangelicals can all agree that God has done something very special for humans through the teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus – without getting tied down with specifics such as substitutionary death, or God’s wrath satisfied in views such as PSA.

There are so many books offering 4 or 5 Christian views on a doctrine – some of them are nothing more than a selection of certain texts and language from the Bible – others show clear morphing. What the doctrinal variances have in common is they all seem to be openly presented and argued for in Scripture. Only the concept of situatedness offers a reasonable justification for doctrinal variance – unless one is right and the rest are wrong – but finding a methodology for consensus escapes us – unless we resort to some of the old ways of using force, and physically and psychologically coercing agreement. This paper argues that there is a more Biblical, sensible and reasonable way forward. The work of Taylor (2003) provided the foundation to understand the need to always consider the social imaginaries of communities as their situatedness may differ vastly from the Christian views. If Christianity fail to understand the situatedness of a culture and the way that they imagine their collective social life, then it fails to allow the Gospel a reasonable opportunity to be heard. The social imageries of the Bible mediate knowledge of God and these social imaginaries of the Bible are morphed by the Church to provide new social imaginaries that can be faithful to the Biblical teaching yet are contextualized to be meaningful and perform their intended purpose of allowing the Church to proclaim its message. Thus, it is imperative that the Church constantly renews its image and circulates its doctrinal beliefs and praxis in imageries and narratives that can be heard.

The evaluation of Gregersen's (1988; 2008) work showed that it is advisable, and I suggest best practice to consider and study all the major theologians and doctrines to validate how theological proposals of the past may continue to enlighten and kindle contemporary theology in different contexts. We observed that the study of theology is dynamic, the search for truth is enduring and must be relevant to the situatedness of the new context. It is furthermore advocated that the understanding and definition of the function of theology is a contemplation of the possibilities or opportunities for the future development of Christianity in the current cultural context. It became clear that whilst the primary sources of our theology are the historical text of the Bible and the many classical commentaries reflecting the past, there is much theology can still learn from its contemporary experiences and present situatedness. Finally, we ascertained that theology is a living activity. It is the ongoing comprehension of all the many sources and their situatedness. Theology is always proclaimed in a particular context and the dogma is considered in the situatedness of and by both the members of the Christian community as well as those outside the Christian faith community that Christians wish to engage with a proclamation that might be heard.

Section 7 led to the introduction of what could be called my practical theologian and pastoral plea when considering all theology and proclamation in cross-cultural or new contexts in a manner that God might be heard. Jesus Christ and the apostle Paul taught and revealed that a heart of a servant was far more essential than what I will call 100% conformity to correct doctrine. This is not decrying the importance of the ongoing project of developing and understanding the content of Christian faith and doctrine. However, the increasing conviction and growing supposition in this essay is that there never has been or ever will be a person or community that is so free of their situatedness that they might procure a 100% precise theology with certainty. The best we can do is be deferential as we recognise the situatedness of our understanding of God and that God always has spoken, does speak, and will speak in humanities embedded situatedness. The Church is the body of Christ and is called to proclaim Christ in a unity of love. Jesus's call for a unity in love allows the world to judge the proclamation by the unity of love that it saw and experienced in the Church.

The warnings we received from Friere (1993) are very applicable to Christian proclamation in the 21C ethos when faced with some of the issues relating to the tenuous theological structure of correctly interpreting and communicating the Bible in the 21C. It is plausible that some of the doctrinal beliefs and claims of Evangelicals may act as a hindrance to the contextualising of the message of the Bible today. I would go as far as saying that maybe considerable impairment is done to the church and her message and witness when we perpetuate the errors of biblicism. My work and experiences with both believers and non-believers have led me to deduce that the message of the Bible could be more relevant and ‘alive’ and we Evangelicals can and should experience more unity of love in the church. Whilst maintaining our innate belief that the Bible is inspired, we need to be more honest and humbler about what is the doctrine of Scripture and what it is that God seems most concerned to reveal and communicate to His creation – and then ensure we make it relevant to the world in the 21C. Regrettably, the claim of ‘Biblical teaching’ has often become a measurement tool and a test for Christian fellowship in the body of Christ - and one many believed I failed. However, I am now perhaps a little wiser and more persuaded of the value of doubt in strengthening faith. Doubt leads to questions and might lead me closer to truth rather than away from it. Over time, I have cultivated a more modest but hopefully a sager grasp of how Christian doctrine is birthed and disseminated. Thus, I am comfortable in asking if there exists a hermeneutical and systematic justification for alternative understandings of inerrancy and inspiration of Scripture. I am more comfortable with the results of my research as I considered the character and functionality of situatedness in elucidating the variance in Evangelical doctrine and noting how situatedness is the primary criterion for contextual cross-cultural proclamation.

Most Christians would agree that God is in one way revealed and mediated through the teaching (doctrine) and actions (praxis) of Christians. In my PhD (Foshaugen 1997) I found that Gerkin (1986:12) argued for a useful point to apprehend in proclamation. He argued for a practical theology that will incessantly have to be mindful and open to the variations that take place in the ways persons experience their challenges, problems and needs of living. This requires doctrine to be responsive and open to considering the streams of change in approaches to understanding and reading human needs. As we noted in section 6 - social imaginaries change. Theological convictions must always motivate theology in praxis and if today, we are facing concerns and disputes in Christian doctrine and praxis, then conceivably we need to reassess our persuasions or doctrines. It becomes imperative that theologians must make every effort to demarcate the narrative, images and metaphors in Scripture that portray the reality of the core of our proclamation in the 21C. The results of the process will be social imageries, conjectures and models corresponding to those Biblical images or metaphors yet morphed and relatable to the social imaginaries held by our target audience to clarify and advance specific teaching on the Gospel message of love and forgiveness. This then leads me to two convictions in a world of uncertainty that I have become more intensely and passionately aware of over the last decades and in particular as I read widely and reflected on the scholarly writings pertaining to the research question.

As I asked, what influence and bearing will situatedness have for Evangelicals on hearing God and the proclamations of the message of the Bibl**e** I realised the answer this essay has revealed is a oneword answer. Substantial! Thus, this essay submits the conclusion that Christians must always be willing to honestly reassess their beliefs and praxis as Christians. To do this requires that they must unassumingly listen to others whilst they read and try to understand the Scriptures to hear God. Theology is and must always be done in a context and within a community of unity in love - a very specific situatedness. My second conviction is that this process never ceases and if one becomes convinced that one now hears God speak with total clarity and has arrived at all truth and knowledge of God and His ways - then one has completely deluded oneself. Whatever position or praxis one has, it must be held with faith yet always recognising that just possibly, it is not the other Christian’s view that is wrong. Furthermore, and controversially (this sounds like Quantum physics), one should consider the feasibility and possibility that maybe both positions are right - in their own situatedness. The variance may have at its core the same key Biblical belief that has morphed out due to the situatedness of one's own hermeneutics or even as basic as what edition or version of the Bible one is using. Christians need humility in recognising situatedness and the primary focus on Jesus' prayer and command for a loving unity opens one up to the possibility ‘I have missed the target, I heard wrong, or I have failed to proclaim in a relevant manner’. Thus, it seems that as I write this essay after so much reading and analysing - I already know a truism for my own life. If I consider these two certainties, then despite my situatedness and so very obvious finite fallible humanity, I might have an improved prospect of securing some confidence that I might persist in my journey to move closer to hearing God and His truth. Then, I might be more modest in claims yet reflect God in proclamation in a manner that remains faithful to God yet fully pertinent and applicable in my community and to those I minister to. Then, they might hear God.

At this moment in history, there is no universally acknowledged and recognized orthodox theology on all doctrines in the broader Church family. However, there are a few Biblical truths that in general most Evangelicals believe hold them. In uncomplicated language what I mean by this is that there are many truths (another word might be doctrines) that Evangelical Christians hold (in the sense of belief and they might vary) and then there are a few truths that hold Christians (in a sense more universally held and almost seen as essentials). Admittedly, many Christians will not agree with me as some beliefs such as complete inerrancy of Scripture are seen as non-negotiables. I disagree with this dogmatic position and in one sense see this as a possible form of dishonesty, blindness or simply a lack of willingness to recognize or consider incoherency in beliefs that can be resolved with a different approach - without completely precluding the doctrines of inspiration and authority of Scripture. It is hypothetically conceivable for some Christians that one day there might rise a harmony for a lone orthodox dogma on all matters concerning the Church, but I think that is a totally unrealistic expectation. The very situatedness of every Christian believer throughout the history of the Church and the critical nature of the Bible and its message being relevant and contextual will always lead to differences in beliefs and understandings. One must recognise the situatedness of the Bible, the situatedness and legitimate freedom and conscious participation of the authors of each book. It is possible that redaction did occur, and that authorship and intention will always be contested. These all will factor into what we hear and what will be heard. This is both a serious contention and an urgent appeal that might prove to be painful to acknowledge and even more difficult to implement. Yet, it is a calling and a task that might facilitate the ability of God to be heard. Ultimately, we proclaim the authority of God and not the authority of the text. Whilst we might have some clearly agreed texts for some doctrines other doctrines are theologically reasoned and inferred – such as the Trinitarian formula to explain God’s existence. It is accepted by Evangelicals as true yet there are no indisputable ‘proof texts’ for this doctrine. However, I contend that it is a serious blunder and perhaps a sign of ignorance to presume that because someone disagrees over what the Bible teaches or what the right doctrinal position on an issue is, they have a lesser view of the inspiration or authority of Scripture. Wright (2011:21) said that it is not ‘the authority of Scripture” but ‘the authority of God exercised through Scripture’ that is the way to go forward. The hermeneutical question of when the Bible is to be understood as making a universal normative truth for all time, and when is it to be read as making a culturally focused claim, is always going to be a contentious issue.

Evangelicals can agree that God has presented Christians with a unique book – the Bible. This Bible is God-breathed and that within it we can hear God speak. What is the purpose of giving us this book? I suggested the answer lies in the Bible itself when in 2 Timothy 3:17 we read its rationale and intent was to equip Christians - training, teaching instructing or coaching Christians for good works. However, we need to state with absolute conviction that whilst God has given Christians an inspirational script to help us fulfil our fellowship with God and our calling to be His instruments in the world – the speech and writings of Christians since the birth of Christianity are not of the same calibre as the original text. The answers we get to questions, the sermons we hear, the Bible studies we attend, and the books we read - theological or devotional books written by sincere well-trained scholars, none of them stand as inerrant inspired or authoritative words or works. Furthermore, there is an sound warning from Cragun (1996:xx) who warned that we should not elevate the Bible itself ‘to equality with God’. We do not worship the Bible!

Recently, I was talking with a young atheist who was seeking to find some existential truth he could hold to as a life philosophy. In his own words, he said ‘I am desperately seeking a meaning for my existence’. He had been in conversation with Christians who had attempted to provide him with an overview of God's plan for humanity and creation and suggested he read the Bible. This he did. His response to them (and to me is) provocative, illuminating and questioning of Christian proclamation. I cannot recall the exact words but in essence, he said: ‘I have been told that God created humans in God’s image, but sin caused the break in relationship with God. However, God is a God of love and wanted to have a relationship with His creation, so God chose the Jewish people to be His representatives in the world. They also failed so God made a new plan and sent His son Jesus Christ to die on the cross for all people so that they might be saved and come into a relationship with God. I read the Bible and the first plan is a shit disgusting sadistic plan’ (that was the exact term used).[[30]](#footnote-30) He explained that ‘if the God of the Bible was a loving merciful forgiving God, then the first plan was a barbaric and shit sadistic plan as it involved so many cruel, evil and disgusting actions commanded by God to ensure a relationship between God and those chosen to represent Him.’ He referred to many of the concerns raised by Boyd (2017; 2018) in section 5.5. Furthermore, when he asked these Christians how they knew the Bible was the word of God – they used the Bible to offer evidence. This circular argument made no sense to him, and I wholeheartedly agreed with him. For me, his reaction to what he read in the Bible and the explanations given to him by sincere Christians are part of the reason why I undertook to research the issues in this essay.

How do we hear God? What do we hear as God speaking to us? How must we proclaim God to people like this young man and to others in different cultures whose social imaginaries are so different to the Evangelical understanding (of course there is not one singular universal understanding)? What is required for the proclamation to be faithful to the text of the Bible and yet comprehensible in the 21C? I trust this essay has proffered a road forward to begin to answer at least some of them in a reasoned and sensitive manner. I hope that comprehending thecharacter and functionality of situatedness offer some elucidation of the mosaic and variance in Evangelical doctrine and may also be seen as one of the primary criteria for contextual cross-cultural proclamation**.** What influence and bearing will situatedness have for Evangelicals on hearing God and the proclamations of the message of the Bible? The answer explicated in this essay is - ‘substantial’ – perhaps far more than one can know if one is trapped in their own situatedness in answering it.

Johnson (1996:70) writes that the Princeton theologian BB Warfield once commented that Christians must proclaim their Christian views in terminologies of contemporary thought because every age ‘has a language of its own and can speak no other’. Warfield would disagree with many of the conclusions this essay has arrived at, yet this statement of his is a truism that I will contend remains so vital and is a fully reflective aspect of the critical insight of situatedness. ’God speaks’ is a universal assumption for Evangelicals. I suggest so to should this statement. ‘The character, functionality and importance of situatedness are indisputably significant in maintaining that God can be heard and also explains why people believe what they think they heard.’ This essay has contended that one may uphold the claim that God speaks, that the Bible is God-breathed and that we can hear God – all important Evangelical distinctives. However, it has also revealed the ongoing reasons for a montage and variance in doctrine as an inevitable consequence of the situatedness of the Bible text, its authors, the original hearers, the new interpreters and those to whom proclamation is made. This then implies that the oft dichotomy of views on doctrine is not an either-or issue. I recognise that many Christians will say that the Gospel is in peril with my conclusions but perhaps it is more accurate to say that the ramification of the answer to the RQ offers more opportunities for the spread of the Gospel.

Variance in doctrine is more of a problem if one maintains the premodern or modern understanding of epistemology. The concept of truth remains a concern, thus the three different era’s understanding of knowledge and truth (section 3) offer some significant lessons to deliberate on relating to the emergence of discrepancy in Evangelical doctrine and praxis. The concept of truth has its own situatedness in each of the premodern, modern and postmodern situatedness (there are of course many further subsections of situatedness in the eras selected). I suggest Evangelical Christians would reject the modern concept of truth being fully known by the autonomous self without revelation. Yet, the church has believed that truth exists and is discovered together in community as was the case in the premodern time. Modernism did give Christians the opportunity to discard Church tradition and authority as the determining factors of truth. The postmodern world warns Christians that proclamation based on dogmatic metanarratives of the Christian worldview is perceived as nothing more than one language of perception attempting to dominate other understandings of the world. Furthermore, it is also not understood due to the language and cultural context not having the referent language and situatedness of the Christian proclamation. The concept of situatedness and discernments from all three eras the Church has operated in might provide insight for a road forward.

Wolterstorff who said that the discourse of the Bible authors is the instrument of divine discourse

(1995:281-284). This definition allows for some variance in the how questions of inspiration and if the authors communicate what God said to them or if they were inspired in some sense to write what they did. I find myself now being less inclined to only use the word revelation as I concur with Wolterstorff (:36) who pointed out that most systematic theologians (and I add Christians), ‘in their answer, that much of what they were going to say about God was based on God’s having revealed it! Some have gone so far as to claim that everything they were going to say about God was based on God’s having revealed it.’ Wolterstorff explains this distinction between’ divine discourse’ and ‘divine revelation’ in chapters 2 and 5 of his book. It is a distinction that deserves more attention as it would possibly help avoid some of the arrogance of claims where Christians commit bibliolatry and read the Bible (actually they read into the Bible) and dogmatically claim that God has revealed His view on any number of topics – from doctrinal positions to moral concerns such as homosexuality, abortion etc. Furthermore, I think linking divine discourse to situatedness would maintain many Evangelical distinctives yet allow for a more nuanced and appropriate proclamation. It would be a message that could be heard yet remain faithful to Evangelical belief as to the nature and broader teaching of the Bible as it concerns Jesus Christ.

What influence and bearing will accepting situatedness have for Evangelicals? In one sense I have asked ‘how did I arrive at my theological positions?’ I realized I am considering and reconsidering the nature, process and factors that affect and lead to a statement of doctrinal belief. Undoubtedly,

a doctrine of Scripture is influenced by one’s doctrine of God and it is as if inerrancy has become a non-negotiable axiom for many Evangelicals. Since the apostle Paul, the goal of theologians has been to illuminate in a manner that is comprehensible and then articulate the content of the Christian faith to those who are perhaps in a very different context with very different social imaginaries. Situatedness is in one sense a *zeitgeist*, a cognitive interpretation principle that needs to be located on the map of all Christians so that it can shed light on proclamation. The need is to identify with the community. Foshaugen (1997:231) said:

The incarnation of Jesus is the most spectacular instance of cultural identification in the history of humanity. Jesus, the Son of God entered humanity’s world, emptied Himself of His glory, took on human nature, lived human life, endured human temptations, experienced human sorrows, bore humanity’s sins, and died their death. He made friends with social outcasts and penetrated humankind’s humanness. He humbled himself to serve. Jesus’ worship and spirituality reflects an incarnational engaged approach. This cultural identification is the Christians example of perfect bridge building.

I will conclude this essay with well-known Evangelical scholars offering a final caution and word of encouragement concerning the RQ, situatedness and the Bible. Thiselton (1980:445) had a basic hermeneutic proposal that links so well with the RQ and hypothesis of situatedness. He said:

The hermeneutical goal is that of a steady progress towards a fusion of horizons. But this is to be achieved in such a way that the particularity of each horizon is fully taken into account and respected. This means *both* respecting the rights of the text *and* allowing it to speak.

Wolterstorff (1995:285-286) is wary of Christianity being turned into a ‘religion of the book’. He says that the ‘focus of the Christian scripture is of course on Jesus Christ’ and it is Jesus and not the Bible that is the centre and focus of Christianity. He goes on to ask:

Why is it that if we interpret God as telling us, by the way of the scriptures, about God’s entrance into our history centrally and decisively in Jesus Christ, we have turned the Christian religion into a ’religion of the book’- worst yet, into *bibliolatry*.

Wolterstorff (:286) ends his book by saying that ‘by authorised interpretation of the sacred text, God speaks anew: the line between the divine discourse an interpretation is breached’. Herein is my practical theological plea based on the findings of the essay’s research. With this endless contemporizing and contextualizing, the proclamation of the Church must ensure its proclamation and citing from the Bible must be as if the Bible was written for humanity in its present situatedness and social imaginaries. We must be wary that the scaffoldingof our thoughts and doctrines hinders rather than promote the proclamation of the Gospel. Despite the complexity and challenges of doing this, the seriousness of the task lies in the fact that the Christian Church is God’s chosen instrument for the transformation of humanity. Thus, as it seeks to hear God, and have God heard. it always acts in a unity of love. This essay concludes that ‘I think God said’ and ‘I think God is saying’ are the most sagacious, precise, truthful and appropriate manner of responding to the conviction that God speaks and for shared engaging enriched discourse on what God says to ensure He is heard. The Bible must never be seen and interpreted only as a handbook, instruction or rules book of propositional information, doctrine and description. Rather it is an astonishing and amazing book full of God’s wisdom for all people in all their situatedness. Enns (2019:17) contended that the Bible must be seen as a source of godly wisdom to be explored, pondered, deliberated, and put into action. It is not a book about a God ‘mainly interested in whether we’ve read and understood the fine print; if not, God has no recourse but to punish us’. Rather, I would beseech all Christians of all epochs to see it as a book full of wisdom relevant for each situatedness and ‘allows us to see God as a good parent, full of grace, love, and patience - the very character traits we value in earthly parents and that the people of God are to exemplify. Wisdom heals us to see God as God is.’ If there is any merit in this essay and conclusion of mine, then perhaps God can strike a straight blow with a very crooked stick.

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1. The term proclamation includes communication – from speech, written words to praxis of the Church and all activities or actions from seeking justice for the oppressed, soup kitchens to building a hospital or school. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I affirmed the Chicago Statements on Biblical Inerrancy and Hermeneutics accessed from https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/the-chicago-statement-on-biblical-inerrancy/ on 15 May 2022. 3 NIV as found a[t https://www.biblegateway.com/](https://www.biblegateway.com/) is used for Bible references unless otherwise stated. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The list of leading Evangelical scholars who have commented on these two phrases is endless but would include

   A.C. Thiselton, John Stott, Alister McGrath, F.F. Bruce, Don Carson, N.T Wright, Nicholas Wolterstorff, Cornelius

   Van Til, Kevin Vanhoozer, John Walvoord, Stanley Grenz, Wayne Grudem, M. Erickson, Michael Horton and George E. LaddOne list of top Evangelical scholars can be found at https://alastairadversaria.com/2014/02/15/thetop-sixty-evangelical-theologians/. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In the Old Testament the Hebrew root, *hātā*, generally refers to the idea of erring, doing wrong, missing the mark, or going astray. The word is the most common for sin in the Old Testament. In the New Testament *Amartia*

   (αμαρτία) is the Greek word translated as sin. The Hebrew (chatá) and its Greek equivalent (àµaρtίa/hamartia) both mean ‘missing the mark’ or ‘off the mark’. To sin literally means to ‘miss the mark’. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. I recognise that in the modern world many people have a foot in more than one context but the reality and implications of situatedness remain in terms that they are situated in those contexts they find themselves in. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This is not an exhaustive list and clearly these terms can have a variety of different meanings and also depend on the context they are used in. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. I do not define a Christian as one who holds a specific belief system on all matters. Paul said we are made righteous by faith – not in perfect belief in an agreed systematic doctrinal system, or because we have a Biblical belief system for all questions or uphold all classical theological ethics. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. In baseball a player from one team called the ‘pitcher’ throws the ball (the ‘pitch’) towards an area called the ‘strike zone’. A player from the opposing team called the batter attempts to hit the ‘pitch’. If the batter misses and the ball passes through the strike zone then the umpire (referee) will call it a’ strike’. If it is not hit and does not pass through the strike zone it is called a ‘ball’ by the umpire. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The dating of the books in the Bible is contentious and without any universal agreement. However, scholars will agree that all 66 books were composed over 1900 years ago. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. He was the father of the Reformed tradition which spread out in many directions—across Switzerland and southern

    Germany, to France among the Huguenots, Holland, England and Scotland among the Congregationalists and Presbyterians, across to the New World among the Congregationalists of New England and the Presbyterian, Dutch and German Reformed Churches of the Middle Colonies. Payne, J.B. *Zwingli and Luther.* Christianity Today The Giant vs. Hercules <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-4/zwingli-and-luther-giant-vs-hercules.html>accessed 10 June 2022.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. I have the consent of the person here to share their story. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For a short version of his reasoning one can read Ehrman on his own blog. https://ehrmanblog.org/why-i-am-not-achristian/ [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Many years ago, I was arrested and imprisoned in Polsmoor – a notorious gang filled prison in Cape Town that once held Nelson Mandela. This was for a crime I did not commit - well they all say that but it is true in my case. There I found that Bibles were in very high demand – not for its spiritual value but because cigarettes were not easy acquire and the thin paper of the Bible made excellent rolling paper for the tobacco that was smuggled in. We were not smoking the Word of God – well that is what I believe with Barth. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Amongst the long list of scholarly works are excellent books by Norman Geisler, John Shelby Spong, John Stott

    Bart Ehrman, Kevin Diller, Nicholas Wolterstorff to Gary Habermas, Roger Olsen, Peter Enns, Donald Boesch, Thomas Finger, Stephen Evans, Craig Bartholomew, DA Carson, GK Beale, John Caputo, Kevin Vanhoozer, Marcus Borg and NT Wright. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The Bible is around 800 000 to 1.2 million words – depending on which edition and translation is being read. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Borg writing shortly before he died. Borg, M. (2014, July 17). *Further Thoughts on a Letter about Jesus.* The Marcus Borg Foundation*.*  <https://marcusjborg.org/posts-by-marcus/further-thoughts-on-a-letter-about-jesus/> [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. This term ‘hermeneutics’ itself needs some clarification. Should it be seen as theory of understanding or more as a method (with specific questions guiding the interpretation of texts, in this case ancient texts, which have become the sacred texts of Christianity)? Thiselton (1992) explored the discipline of hermeneutics and the comprehensive range of theoretical models of reading and interpretation. For this essay it is more the theoretical – the discussion of the conditions of understanding signs/texts. This then gives birth to the particular concern of this essay – situatedness. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Wood, B. (2017, January 5). *Who Divided The Bible Into Chapters And Verses?* Christianity Today. <https://www.christiantoday.com/article/who-divided-the-bible-into-chapters-and-verses/103616.htm> [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Here are two sentences where words manipulate. Putin provided Russia TV with reporting guidelines and said he wants to undertake a limited military operation to neutralise the Nazi’s in Ukraine by liberating the land. Or Putin censored Russian TV and said he wants to go to war to kill those who disagree with him by invading the land. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. The concerns around violence extends to the NT and can be reflected in the way Atonement theories of the Crucifixion attempt to solve them. Some of them have a God demanding justice to appease His wrath towards sin as the motif and therein is this inherent problem for many of the social imaginaries of the 21C. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. <https://www.definitions.net/definition/morphism>viewed on 12 December 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. *Morphism*. nLAB <https://ncatlab.org/nlab/show/morphism> [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Richard Feynman*.* Wikiquote <https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Talk:Richard_Feynman> [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. http:/www.nyu.edu/classes/calhoun/Theory/Taylor-on-si.ht accessed on 1 June 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. To be clear, I am not referring to the absence of physical listeners being present but the lack of sensitivity to the social imaginaries, language, context etc. of the targeted audience.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. This section is indebted to Niels Gregersen’s writings that are mostly written in Danish. I trust that I have been faithful to his reasoning and intentions whilst recognising my utter fallibility in Danish. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. All of section 7 was not initially part of my research but after consultation with peers I deemed it to be significant to proffer a biblical-based, reasoned, and pragmatic way forward considering situatedness and the title and research question. It thus results in an essay slightly longer than the suggested 100-120 pages but I trust it proves to be pertinent. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. I have unsuccessfully tried to find this source but it is factual that the Fore people did eat their dead in a ritual showing their respect for the deceased person. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. That was why a cruciform hermeneutic (Boyd 2018:53) or what I call a Christocentric lens was proposed to understand the text and thus avoid the conflict of the more violent portrayal of God in the Bible with the revelation and teaching of Jesus.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. His choice of words that are very good descriptors - even if not an academic or theological terms. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)