

## HISTORICAL AND SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY: DIALOGUE BETWEEN THE SACRED TEXTS AND THE QUESTIONS RAISED IN DESCRIPTIVE THEOLOGY

### 1. INTRODUCTION TO HISTORICAL AND SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

After the completion of the first step of theology, namely descriptive theology, the theological journey now inevitably needs to turn towards the sacred/ normative texts and the monuments of the Christian faith. Browning argues that historical theology becomes the heart of the hermeneutical process, “but it is now understood as putting the questions emerging from theory-laden practices to the central texts and monuments of the Christian faith” (Browning 1991:49). “Historical theology asks, What do the normative texts that are already part of our effective history really imply for our praxis when they are confronted as honestly as possible?” (Browning 1991:49) This dialogue between the questions from the theory-laden practices and the central texts and thoughts of the Christian faith is a process that can be described as systematic theology. Browning sees the process of systematic theology to be guided by two fundamental questions as already referred to in Chapter Two (12.2.2.1 The Four Movements):

1. What new horizon of meaning is fused when questions from the present practices are brought to the central Christian witness?
2. What reason can be advanced to support the validity claims of this new fusion of meaning? (Browning 1991:51-52).

I will seek to be in a critical and honest dialogue with the normative texts as well as the effective history of these texts in the tradition of theology, bringing the questions raised in the previous chapters to these texts. The historical texts will be understood and brought into the dialogue through the hermeneutical and exegetical process.

At the end of Chapter Five the question that summarised all the questions into one was: **“What kind of church, which finds itself within a postmodern, urban global, South African context (*postmodern global village*) and which has the calling to unify all in the body of Christ, could respond to the stories of need both of the villagers and the marginalised, when this ethical and pastoral task is made rather difficult in a postmodern context?”**

It is this question that will guide the historical and systematic theological journey of this chapter.

In the previous chapter I described and reflected on the connection between postmodernity and globalization which together form what I call the *postmodern global village*. In this chapter I will return to the narrative understanding of theology, which I discussed in Chapter Two (10. Narrative theological response to postmodernity), as the proposed theological orientation of this study, as a response to the postmodern

context. I will also be reflecting on the community formed (created) by the Christian narrative (language) as a possible response to the globalization of the global village.

## 1.1 The basic outline of this chapter

The guiding question can be divided into two parts.

The first part seeks to understand what kind of church could adequately respond to the *postmodern global village* from a South African perspective within a narrative theological orientation.

The second part seeks to understand the ethical pastoral action of the church, which is based on truth and authority, within a postmodern context. I will begin this chapter on historical systematic theology by seeking to respond to the second part of the question first. This is the question that concerns itself with the postmodern context which makes ethical and pastoral work difficult.

I would like to address this question first as it is a question that challenges the process of historical theology, because: How can one enter into dialogue with the historical texts and a tradition if the question of relativity and authority has not been clarified? This will form the first part of this chapter: **Historic theology in a *postmodern global village***

I have already partly responded to this question in Chapter Two, where I proposed a narrative theological orientation as an appropriate response to the challenges of postmodernity therefore I will not be repeating what I reflected on and described in Chapter Two, but I will bring into the argument the understanding of the Gospel as a narrative truth.

Truth and authority within a narrative orientation are always embedded in specific communities and therefore once I have clarified the question of the truth of the Gospel I will turn to the church as the community created by the narrative truth of the Gospel. This then leads to the first part of the question regarding the kind of church which could adequately respond to the challenges of the global village. I would like to reformulate this question: Is the community created by the truth of the Gospel an appropriate community equipped to respond to the challenges of the *postmodern global village*?

<b>Question one: How can the church enter into dialogue with the historical texts and a tradition if the question of relativity and authority has not been clarified <i>which would make the ethical and pastoral task of the church rather difficult in a postmodern context?</i></b>	
2.	Historical Theology in a <i>postmodern global village</i>
<b>Question two: What kind of church, which finds itself within the postmodern, urban, South African context and which has the calling to unify all in the body of Christ, could respond to the stories of need of both the villagers and the marginalised?</b>	
3.	Introduction to the question

4.	The context of the Biblical story of God's fellowship in history
5.	Introduction to the journey of describing the church
6.	The dimensions within which the church needs to describe her identity
7.	The relationships which are integral to the church's identity
8.	The story of Christ as the church's narrative
9.	The story of the early church's identity
10.	Fusion of horizons – the questions from the theory-laden practices and historical theology: – a systematic theological journey
11.	Conclusion of the historical and systematic theological story

**QUESTION ONE: HOW CAN THE CHURCH ENTER INTO DIALOGUE WITH THE HISTORICAL TEXTS AND A TRADITION IF THE QUESTION OF RELATIVITY AND AUTHORITY HAS NOT BEEN CLARIFIED?**

## **2. HISTORICAL THEOLOGY IN A *POSTMODERN GLOBAL VILLAGE***

I will now be looking at the church and how the church is equipped to respond to the challenges of the *postmodern global village*. This part of the question is specifically concerned with the postmodern context, "...when this ethical and pastoral task is made rather difficult in a postmodern context?"

In this first section of this chapter I will seek to respond to the following questions mentioned in Chapter Five (3.4: The Core Questions which will guide the rest of the theological journey of this study) which together with the other questions, were part of the formulation of the leading question of this chapter.

9. What does it mean to say that the gospel is true, not just in the private experiences of believers, but for all?

10. How is the truth of God's revelation, known in the response of faith, related to the discernment and validation of truth as it is practiced elsewhere in our culture?

The first question deals with the truth and thus the relevance of the Gospel. The Gospel is central to the church, as the church grows and lives out of the apostolic proclamation of the Gospel. Therefore this question is of vital importance and needs to be dealt with first, before I can reflect upon the church, which is the community created and sustained by the Gospel. This question has however been dealt with in Chapter Two, where a narrative response was seen to adequately respond to the challenges of postmodernity and therefore I would like to return to the summary given in Chapter Two (10.7 Summary: Narrative as an appropriate theological orientation within postmodernity)

### Narrative and Theology

1. Narrative is the dominant genre in Biblical witness
2. The postmodern understanding of self (identity), action, human experience and meaning need to be placed within narrative settings to be

- intelligible.
3. The individual needs the faith narratives to understand and give meaning to his/her personal narratives.
  4. The identity of a faith community is also dependent on the narratives of the community. Therefore to understand a congregation's identity its narratives need to be taken seriously.
  5. Christian soteriology and the structure of Christian faith necessarily take on a narrative form.
  6. The confession of faith also necessarily takes on a narrative form.
  7. The Christian-Jewish faith is rooted in a narrative tradition.

In Chapter Two my purpose was to describe a narrative theological orientation as an appropriate orientation in the postmodern context. In this chapter I will reflect on the Gospel as a narrative truth which is relevant and authoritative within a *postmodern global village*. In Chapter Two (8.5 Narrative and epistemology), I reflected on the idea that truth cannot be found beyond the scope of narrative (metaphor). To use narrative to illuminate the grammar of religious convictions and more specifically the Christian's convictions, is not an apologetic strategy in a postmodern world, but rather I would like to see narrative in line with Hauerwas' argument, that "approaching Christian conviction via their narrative character involves an attempt to do constructive Christian theology and ethics in a non-reductionistic manner, so that questions of truth may be rightly asked" (Hauerwas 1981:94).

As mentioned in the summary above it is clear that the narrative is a necessary category for true understanding of God, scripture, self and soteriology. Yet this does not help me with regards to the question about the truthfulness of the narrative (Gospel) concerned. "The necessary interrelation of narrative and character provides the means to test the truthfulness of narratives" (Hauerwas 1981:95). The truthfulness of a narrative is tested by the character that is formed by the narrative.

Before I turn to the Gospel as a truthful narrative I need to briefly describe my understanding of Gospel and how I understand (interpret) Gospel in this study.

The Gospel and the proclamation of the Gospel does not only involve the public preaching of the minister, but the whole linguistic communication of the church. In a similar sense when I speak about the 'Word of God' I am referring to more than the Bible. Karl Barth understood the Word of God to be three things:

- 1) The revealed Word of God
- 2) The written Word of God
- 3) The proclaimed Word of God (Karl Barth K.D. I 2 1953: 124f).

In a similar way the Word of Christ, the Gospel, can specifically be understood as:

- 1) „das in Jesus Christus >>Geschehene<<
- 2) das in die Bibel >>grundlegend niedergeschriebene<<
- 3) das >>je aktual verkündigte Wort Gottes<<" (Pöhlmann 1990:69).

Yet, when Karl Barth speaks about the revealed Word of God, what is the relationship

between revelation and scripture? The Bible is not the revealed Word of God. The Bible is a testimony to the revelation of God's Word. "But note well: the Scriptures as a tool in *God's* hands. For they are only human testimony of divine revelation"(Barth 1936:30).

Hauerwas argues in a similar line of thought: "The main relation of revelation to the Bible is not that of an antecedent revelation, which generates the Bible as its response, but that of a revelation which follows upon the existent tradition, or, once it has reached the fixed and written stage, the existent scripture. The scripture provides the frames of reference within which new events have meaning and make sense"(Hauerwas 1981:58).

Scripture is a testimonial story which God uses to reveal Himself to us today.

"...the Scriptures from which the word of God strikes us always as a flash of lightning out of dark clouds – but which as a whole demand our constant attention because as a whole their origin and meaning bear witness of divine revelation and for this reason are rightfully called "Holy" Scriptures, canon of the Church, by which the Church is constantly measured and which it is the Church's duty constantly to search and humbly to expound" (Barth 1936:31).

In this study, when I refer to the Gospel or to Scripture, it is in the context of this understanding of the relationship between God's Word and the Bible.

The church lives and grows out of the story of the Gospel. The Gospel is her story as it is the Gospel that gives her her character and identity. The Gospel is the story of promise and the story of liberation which provides the frames of reference within which new events are given meaning and make sense. It is through the Gospel that God's truth is revealed and meaning is found within every new period of history.

The church is founded on the Gospel through the power of the Holy Spirit. Before I enter into dialogue with the historical texts I am still struggling with the question: What authority and relevance do these texts (the Gospel) have in a postmodern global context? They have relevance for the church, as the community which is created through the truth of the Gospel. But does this truth have a wider frame of relevance than the church?

The easy way out of this question is to argue that they have authority for those who have chosen to let their lives be formed by these stories. In other words the ancient texts have a relative authority and it is a matter of choice which would fit in perfectly with the global village idea of individualism, consumerism and materialism. An individual chooses from the multiple religious possibilities that which best suits his/her spiritual needs. This idea would make any form of interreligious dialogue difficult as well as disempower religion completely to speak a critical or prophetic word into this context.

The Church sees herself not only as a community of believers but also as a community that is involved in the history of the world as she is part of the triune redemptive history of God.

How can the church be involved in the universal history of the world if all she has is a relative narrative, which proclaims a relative promise and relative liberation?

## 2.1 The Gospel as narrative truth

In Chapter Two of this study I reflected on narrative truth as a response to the relativity of the postmodern context.<sup>1</sup>

In these two sections of Chapter Two it was shown that truth and knowledge are not to be found beyond the scope of language and more specifically not beyond the scope of metaphorical language. The limits of our language are the limits of our world as there is no truth or knowledge beyond the scope of language, because there is no direct connection between the knower and objective reality besides language and therefore all reality is a subjective interpretation of reality.

Science uses the language of analogy to discover universal truths, but even these truths were found to be embedded within certain stories (paradigms of scientific traditions). Therefore these scientific truths are relative to the paradigms of tradition, in other words, relative to their story.

Does this mean that humans cannot speak about truth at all, as all truth is relative to its specific story/tradition?

In a postmodern world it would thus be better to remain silent about that which cannot be spoken (universal truth)? If everybody remains silent about that which cannot be spoken of then the emptiness and melancholia of the postmodern age rules supreme without a challenge. If the church would resign to this silence she would do this at a very high cost, because then she needs to learn to live with the lie (Harvey 1999:135). Or as Vaclav Havel argues: “live with a lie. They need not accept the lie. It is enough for them to have accepted life with it and in it. For by this very fact, individuals confirm the system, fulfil the system, make the system, are the system” (Havel 1987:45).

The only problem is that silence also tells the lie, because then the dominant narrative of the *postmodern global village* is all-powerful and unchallenged. The lie needs to be all-powerful and its basic principle must permeate everything and therefore it cannot coexist with the truth. This is the story of the *postmodern global village* although it claims that it has no narrative and that it is free from tradition, history or any form of narrative, which has been shown to be impossible. The only way to challenge the lie is to live the truth, because any one who steps out of line denies the lie in principle and threatens it in its entirety (Havel 1987:56).

Just because truth cannot be expressed in universal absolute language of analogy does not mean that there is no truth and just because all understanding of reality is a subjective (narrative) interpretation of reality does not mean that there is no reality. This truth, which cannot be expressed in universal absolute language, can be expressed in metaphoric (narrative) language, but it must never be confused with analytic language.

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter Two: 8.5 Narrative and epistemology and 8.6 Narrative and truths



It is within this context that in a narrative theological orientation the two languages need to complement each other as they enter into a critical dialogue. The language of metaphor (narrative) and the language of description of reality (analogy) are in a critical dialogue with each other as I have discussed in Chapter Two.<sup>2</sup>

The metaphoric language (truth as narrative) gives meaning to experiences and reality and forms the internal history (Aggada, *techné*, metaphor), but this internal history needs to be in critical dialogue with the external history (Halacha, *epistmé*) otherwise the internal story can easily form an ideology, which if left unchallenged becomes all powerful like the ideological story of the *postmodern global village*.<sup>3</sup> The Gospel proclaims a narrative truth, but this truth needs to be in critical dialogue with the external history (systematic theology, philosophy, psychology, sociology) within the process of doing theology to ensure that theology does not create an ideology. This critical dialogue I have understood as *phronesis* and have incorporated it into the narrative orientation of this study. The other critical element that can respond to the lie of the *postmodern global village* comes from the story of the Gospel itself, namely the story of the cross. I will discuss the challenge of the story of the cross at a later stage.

The church needs to respond to this claim of the *postmodern global village*. “It is only the truth of proclamation that makes us free for the proclamation, and it is only the liberation that has been experienced which gives authority for liberating narration” (Moltmann 1992:207).

What Moltmann is saying is that truth is within the proclamation and in the experience of liberation and it is not to be found outside of it.

The church can respond to the *postmodern global village* by not keeping quiet, but by proclaiming the truth. This truth is a narrative truth, it is not an analytic truth that can be proven through scientific theories, but is a truth that is known in the experience of liberation as it gives meaning to that liberation. In other words it is a metaphoric (narrative) truth that gives ‘truthful’/appropriate meaning (interpretation) to experiences and as such is known as truth.

One can test the truthfulness of a narrative by the necessary interrelation of narrative and character. Therefore the truth of the Gospel can only be tested by the character that is created by the truthful response to the Gospel.

“The crucial interaction of story and community for the formation of truthful lives is an indication that there exists no “story of stories” from which the many stories of our existence can be analyzed and evaluated” (Hauerwas 1981:96).

There is no metanarrative on which communities can rely.

Yet the Gospel needs to be true for more than the church if the church is to play a critical and relevant role within the history of the world.

I will look at some of the ways in which the church has understood her proclamation of the Gospel as an authority (*sola Scriptura*) that goes beyond the confines of the church, in other words, the understanding that the Gospel is not only a relative authority for the community of believers, but a ‘truth’ for the history of the world.

<sup>2</sup> Chapter Two: 11.2.1 Phronesis as a critical awareness to ideological distortion and 11.2.3 Ideological critique from within the Christian-Jewish narratives

<sup>3</sup> Chapter Two: 11.2.1 Phronesis as a critical awareness to ideological distortion

I will first reflect on the biblical understanding of narrative truth<sup>4</sup> and then I will reflect on two ways of knowing narrative truth, namely:

- 1) To know the narrative (metaphoric) truth of the Gospel through the story of God's revealed Word which is testified to in the Bible.
- 2) To know the narrative (metaphoric) truth of the Gospel through the story of the individual who has responded in a moment of faith to the story of God's revealed Word – kerygma.

**Conclusion:** The Gospel is a narrative (metaphoric) truth and as such responds to the *postmodern global village*.

### 2.1.1 The Biblical understanding of narrative truth

"I contend that the only reason for being Christian (which may well have results that in a society's terms seem less than "good") is because Christian convictions are true; and the only reason for participation in the church is that it is the community that pledges to form its life by that truth" (Hauerwas 1981:1).

I would like to introduce this section with a text from scripture taken from John 18:37-38a.

"So Pilate said to him, "Then you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say I am king. For this I was born and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." Pilate said to him, "What is truth?" (The African Bible)

Pilate's situation is very similar to the postmodern global context today in one aspect and that is the plurality of religions and beliefs and the multiplicity of claims to truth. In Pilate's question there is a certain scepticism with regards to truth which is very similar to the scepticism of the postmodern towards truth. Pilate did not answer this question for himself, but rather chose to wash his hands in innocence. He avoided this question of truth. The church or even humanity finds itself in a very similar situation in that we are responsible for our neighbours (our fellow humanity) in a world where truth has lost all power. Truth has become so relative that taking up the responsibility for fellow humanity has become problematic, because on what basis or what claim can individuals or communities take up this responsibility? Yet the consequence of this relativism in the global village where the majority of the world's population is suffering and dying and there is no basis or claim to truth which can challenge this situation, as all truth is relative, is catastrophic. Is the church also avoiding this question and washing her hands in innocence? Can the human crisis of the global village afford the relativism of postmodernity? I say this to express the importance of this question in a *postmodern global village*, because just like in Pilate's situation life and death are dependent on the answer of this question.

In the Old Testament understanding of truth in the Hebrew word *emeth*, which comes

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<sup>4</sup> For the rest of this study when I refer to 'truth', or the truth of the Gospel I understand truth as a narrative (metaphoric) truth and not as a universal analytical truth.



from the root that means “to be faithful” or “steadfast” this indicated “a reality that is seen as firm, solid and valid, binding” (Kittel 1932:233). “As such it means both the reality itself and the attitude of mind and heart that acknowledges and lives by that reality”(West 1999:2).

The Greek word for truth, *aletheia*, has a different root and understanding. It is rooted in the understanding of “not hidden,” “open” or “made known” and thus it soon took on the meaning of that which is real in contrast to that which merely seems real (West 1999:3).

This idea was taken up by Plato which then developed into a dualism which influenced not only the ancient world, but influenced the philosophy of truth right into the modern Western time. “Truth is the changeless form of reality. It is discerned by reason (*logos*) freed from the constraints of passion and material limitations” (West 1999:4). Truth was thus something beyond the imperfections of history and this world and thus history was reduced to a meaningless process of creation and decay. The Hebrew understanding of truth which is embodied in the covenant relationship of faithfulness, righteousness, promise, grace, and love were subordinated to the changeless perfection of the Greek understanding of ahistorical universal truth.

Yet the New Testament claims a historical truth in Christ: in the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Truth embodied in a historical person. It is the Gospel of John which takes up this dual understanding of truth (Greek /Platonic and Hebrew).

John 1:14 “And the Word (*logos*) became (*egeneto*) flesh (*sarx*) and made his dwelling among us and we saw his glory, the glory of the Father’s only Son, full of grace and truth (*aletheia*)”

“John uses the ideas of Greek philosophy – *logos*, *egeneto*, *sarx*, and *aletheia* – to tear them out of their timeless, dualistic worldview and make them descriptions of God at work through Christ in creation, history, and promise of this human and material world” (West 1999:4-5).

John continues in this line of thought regarding truth when he says in John 14: 6 “Jesus said to him, “I am the way and the truth and the life.” In other words what John is saying is that if the believers follow the *logos* then they will know the truth (*aletheia*) and this truth will set them free (John 8: 31-32). The believer needs to be in a relationship to Jesus as disciple, to understand the meaning of the truth.

John 8:31-32 “Jesus then said to those Jews who believed in him, “If you remain in my word (*logos*), you will truly be my disciples, and you will know the truth (*aletheia*), and the truth will set you free” (The African Bible).

John 1:1-4 “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came to be through him, and without him nothing came to be. What came to be through him was life, and this life was the light of the human race”

John 16: 13 “But when he comes, the Spirit of truth, he will guide you to all truth” (The African Bible).

It is quite clear that John introduces a new concept of truth into the ancient Hellenistic world, which has elements of both the Hebrew understanding of truth as well as the Greek, but is also totally new as he relates truth completely to Christ in the story of the triune God. This truth is the ultimate reality (West 1999:5). This truth is a narrative truth as it is related and found in the story of the triune God revealed to us in the story of Christ. I have discussed this in Chapter Two (10.2 Narrative as a dominant genre in the Biblical as well as in confessional Christian witness)

## 2.2 The Gospel truth known in the story of the revealed Word of God

Karl Barth, considering the question of truth and how truth can be known, soon realised that the modern idea of human reason discovering truth or God is impossible.<sup>5</sup> “There is no way from us to God, not even *via negativa*, not even a *via dialectica* or *paradoxa*. The god who stood at the end of some human way – even these ways – would not be God” (Barth 1957:177).

Karl Barth discovered that truth is not to be found via analytic inquiry. In this sense Karl Barth can be seen as the first postmodern theologian. Barth argued that the church is “aware the truth of God is not an object – not even a supernatural object – but the eternal subject which makes itself known to us in a mystery only, and only to faith” (Barth 1936:20).

The truth of God can thus only be known in the story of His revelation of Himself to humanity, in other words, in the narrative of His revelation. Barth also argued that humans do not even have access to this story as the Bible is only a testimony which testifies to that story of God’s revelation.

The individual is confronted with this story of the revealed Word of God through the testimony of the Gospel or the preacher, and he/she is confronted with the truth. The revealed truth of God claims the whole human being and not just his/her intellectual faculties.

“Truth, the whole truth that claims the human mind, emotion, and will begins with the revelation of God and the calling of human beings into faith and obedience. It confronts the postmodern world not with another structure of truth but with One who gives and commands here and now” (West 1999:46).

For Karl Barth the proclamation of the Gospel is not the proclamation of the church’s word, but the proclamation of God’s Word. In other words this Word which is proclaimed is not:

- 1) a religious or spiritual interpretation of the world
- 2) nor religious articulation to express an individual’s spiritual feelings.

“The question is not metaphysical, moral, or religious. It is not the goal of human search or the fulfilment of a human experience, as if we could define and use Deity

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<sup>5</sup> Chapter Two: 8.6.2 Internal history (a metaphorical story)

according to our concepts and desires. It can be answered only in response to a self-revealing God. We human beings are not our own creators. We are not the subjects of our knowledge, the authors of our goodness, or the masters of our spirituality. We are not the center of our existence. Our power does not control our destiny. We think, we act, we live in the middle of life, not knowing our beginning or end, but only that we are created and called to be in the middle. We are limited by the other person with whom we are called to live and by the Creator who has made us, whose word gives our life meaning and direction. That this middle and this limit are grace perfected in love, we know from Jesus Christ, who shared them with us and redeemed them with his death and resurrection. That we can live in them with joy and hope, we know from the work of the Holy Spirit among us" (West 1999:xv).

Truth as understood throughout history has always been a human construction, either through myth or through reason. Truth was to be found within the ordered universe, and thus prescribed a certain way of life which would be in harmony with the truth. Therefore truth was seen holistically as it influenced the whole way of living.

"The biblical witness differed not in its view of the wholeness of truth, but in the way in which that wholeness is made known and acknowledged by human beings. Not cosmological order, perceived by myth or by reason, not some human vision that embraced the gods, the powers of nature, and human society, but the revelation of God, made known in word and act toward a particular people, leads them into wholeness of truth" (West 1999:8).

Postmodernity in contrast to modernity is very suspicious of anything that seeks to impose order on the chaos of history. Yet God's Word, as truth, does not attempt to do this. It cannot do this, because it is a narrative truth and not an analytic truth with which order can be imposed.

"Rather it calls us out of ourselves – our subjective experiences and choices, our divided and therefore finally meaningless "language games" - into true, that is, faithful and responsible, action in the midst of it all, toward the humanity revealed in Christ" (West 1999:46).

The Gospel as narrative truth is therefore not known outside of the narrative of God's revelation and therefore it cannot be isolated into a theory of order which is then imposed on the chaos of the world. The individual is exposed to this narrative truth of God's revelation through the testimony of the Bible or the testimony of a preacher and through the power of the Spirit knows and accepts the truth of the narrative. It is God speaking to the individual through the testimony of the Bible or preacher.

The Gospel which is proclaimed is the Word of God.

"As ministers we ought to speak of God. We are human, however, and so cannot speak of God. We ought therefore to recognize our obligation and our inability, and by that very recognition give God the glory"(Barth 1928:186).

The Word of God is not a discourse about the revealed history, nor is it personal talk about individual faith, but God's Word. This Word cannot be uttered in a literal way by

giving to our fellow humanity exact scientific formulations or a moral code, but speaks to us metaphorically in the narrative of a God and His people<sup>6</sup>. In Chapter Two I reflected on Crites' understanding of mundane and sacred stories (8.4 Social setting of narrative).

Between the mundane and sacred stories there is a distinction without there being a total separation. "...all a people's mundane stories are implicit in its sacred story, and every mundane story takes soundings in the sacred story" (Crites 1998:71). It is in our mundane stories that sometimes the sacred story resonates (Chapter two: 8.4.2 Mundane Stories).

The sacred stories cannot be told, but they resonate in our mundane stories and in this sense the preaching and the Gospel testify to the truth of the sacred story of God.

I would also like to refer back to the Jewish understanding of revelation in the context of Karl Barth's understanding of God's word as revelation.

Chapter Two: 10.6.1 Jewish understanding of revelation:  
The actual Word of God nobody would be able to write down or even hear. All that was given, was the first breath of the revelation of God. When God spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai He certainly did not give him the whole Decalogue as humans would not be able to grasp God's word. Tradition believes that all that was given to Moses was the first breath of the first letter of the word "I" which in Hebrew is *Alef* of the word *Anochi*. This first letter, *Alef*, is not pronounced, it is breathed as if to begin to speak. This is how God spoke to Moses, said Rabbi Mendel Torum von Rymanow (Denecke 1996: 89). It is up to the faith community to discover and interpret this *Alef*.

a "It is the Word which God himself utters and in which God corresponds to himself, and that therefore for its part corresponds to God. But this cannot be concept, an image or a symbol; it can only be the name of God himself" (Moltmann 1992:208).

This means that God in His Word cannot be reduced to a symbol, a concept or an absolute. God can only be known in His Name. The only way to judge the truth of this Word is against God Himself. The question that needs to be asked is, Does the Word correspond to God? The church believes that God has revealed Himself to the world through Christ. "Jesus Christ is the name in which God corresponds to himself. In Jesus Christ God's Word is the reconciling event"(Moltmann 1992:208).

When God's Word is proclaimed in preaching it stands in an indirect identity with this self as indication, likeness, echo, testimony and answer to this event of reconciliation. The truth or the authority of the Word of God cannot be verified against anything else. As it verifies itself, it enforces its own claim and illumines through its own being. It

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<sup>6</sup> Chapter Two: 8.6.2 Internal history (a metaphorical story): "Certain things need to be left for inner history or the story of metaphor to say. Metaphor functions in the midst of differences – it says what it says in a metaphorical way in the midst of the ruins of literal sense."

cannot be verified through any external historical events, or internal religious experiences. The question of the authority or truth of the Word of God, by its very nature, is in God's own hands.

In the Old Testament God's name could not be pronounced and any understanding of God would be hidden in a story about Him. In the Old Testament also the Word of God and His name are not identical. God's name denotes His character and His nature, while His Word creates and stamps history (Moltmann 1992:209). God's Word is historical and it creates history as it creates the history of Israel, who is either obedient or disobedient to His Word. Yet it is believed that at the end of history God's name will be glorified.

In the New Testament God's Story is told as a revelation of God's character and nature, through the story of Christ, and this story centres on the Christ event (crucifixion).

The New Testament is essentially the story of Christ, thus the New Testament reveals Christ to us. Luther argued that the verification of the Gospel is in the Gospel itself. "Durch diesen ihren Inhalt verbürgt die Heilige Schrift sich selbst. Das heißt, da Christus ihr Inhalt ist: Christus verbürgt sich im Heiligen Geist dem Menschen als die Wahrheit und verbürgt damit die Heilige Schrift" (Althaus 1983:74).

The Christ event is the event of God's self-revelation and also humanity's reconciliation. This event spans the whole of history from the beginning of God's creation to the end of God's unification with creation.

The verification of truth "takes place between the remembrance of Christ and hope for the kingdom through the presence of the Spirit and the power of the resurrection" (Moltmann 1992:209).

This historical (remembrance of Christ) and eschatological (hope for the kingdom) dimension of the Gospel and its proclamation is, however, sustained by the inner correspondence of God's Word to God himself. So the character of the church and individual members is bound up with the church's ability to remember and to witness to the fact that our understanding of God and our knowledge of God is not inferred from stories, but is the very stories (Kelsey 1975:45).

This idea liberates us from the need to make unsupportable claims about the unity of scripture, or by reducing the idea of God, or the centrality of scripture to some theory or idea. Scripture needs to be seen as a long, 'loosely structured non-fiction novel' that has subplots that at times appear minor and later turn out to be central (Kelsey 1975:48).

Christian proclamation is in essence the proclamation of God's name, God's character and nature as revealed to the world in Christ, made known to us through the Gospels. The nature that is revealed to us is the open, seeking nature of the Trinity that reconciles the godless with God through Christ's suffering on the cross.

This Word of God, so understood in New Testament terms, besets the history of the



world with restless hope as we wait for the consummation and glorification of the whole of creation in God.

“The inner correspondence between the Word of God and God himself leads to contradiction with a God-contradictory world and is directed towards a world corresponding to him. The self-revelation of God in Christ therefore does not end history but opens up the history of the future, because it lets us hope for God’s glorification in the world and lets us fight against man’s humiliation” (Moltmann 1992:210).

Truth is the correspondence of the Word of God to God himself. Yet in history humanity has always again and again tried to capture truth for itself and for the powers humanity serves. If truth is so misappropriated it becomes destructive and leads to conflict as history has shown. “Christian truthfulness lies in continual witness to the One who judges, corrects, and transforms all human claims, even our own, to know and to possess the truth of God” (West 1999:10).

**In conclusion** I can say that the narrative truth of Gospel (sacred story) is not known through any human power of analytic reason, but God reveals Himself to humanity through His story with humanity which is testified to in the scriptures (mundane stories). These mundane stories (the testimony of scripture) resonate with the sacred story of God and through the action of the Holy Spirit can reveal the truth of God to the individual today and in this way the truth of the Gospel is known.

### 2.3 The Gospel truth known in the story of the experience of faith - Kerygma

The second way of knowing the truth is through the story of the experience of faith in response to the story of the revealed Word of God.

“Rudolf Bultmann has interpreted the proclamation of the gospel as kerygma, as an eschatological call to decision and as a summons”(Moltmann 1992:210).

The truth of the Gospel is known in the response, decision or summons of the story of the revealed Word of God.

The Greek word Logos has the meaning of uncovering, revealing or giving meaning to something or to events. It does not refer to a summons, or a calling. But as was said in the previous section, the church (believer) enters into this story of God, the triune history of God as revealed through Christ. The church enters into this truth by remaining in the Word and through remaining in the Word will know the truth and this truth will set the church free (John 8:31-32). By entering into the story of the truth the believer will know the truth. It is only from inside the story, or from the experience of the truth, that the truth will be known.

The New Testament Word of God needs to be understood differently from the traditional Greek understanding of logos. It needs to be understood as the Word of the Creator and the Judge – a Word that is both promise and commandment and therefore

needs to be understood as a creative Word that creates history. It creates life and history and to this history the believer is called and challenged which she or he may accept or reject (John 1:1-4).

In this sense the Word of God is “legitimated and verified in the very event of its being heard and believed” (Moltmann 1992:211). Similar to Karl Barth’s understanding of the Word of God it cannot be verified or legitimated through anything outside of itself in the sphere of objective knowledge.

In Chapter Two I discussed the narrative understanding of revelation (10.5.2 Narrative understanding of revelation) as well as the narrative understanding of the response to revelation namely confession (10.5.3 Narrative, Revelation and Confession).

The sacred story of God which resonates in the mundane story of the testimony reveals to the individual something of the sacred story and the individual responds to this sacred story in the kerygma and becomes part of the story.

him “To be true summons, a word must necessarily reveal man to himself, teach to understand himself – but not as a theoretical instruction about the self. The event of a summons discloses to the man a situation of existential self-understanding, a possibility of self understanding which must be grasped in action. Such a summons...requires decision, it gives me the choice of myself, the choice of who I will be through the summons and my response to it” (Bultmann quoted in Moltmann 1992:211).<sup>7</sup>

The story of God re-authors the individual story as discussed in Chapter Two (10.5.2 Narrative understanding of revelation).

The revealed truth of God’s Word summons and challenges humanity to a new understanding of ourselves. “But there is no “real Jesus” except as he is known through the kind of life he demanded of his disciples; that the gospels display the grammar of such a life should not therefore surprise us” (Hauerwas 1981:41-42).

The truth of Jesus is known in the re-authored life or the experience to which this Word summons the believer to. The believer through the re-authored story gains completely new insight into him/herself and humanity and this new insight has new meaning (interpretation) and therefore is known as truth.

In this sense the truth of Christ (as God’s revealed/incarnate Word) stands in contrast to the truths of society. The truths of society are developed from the centre of our humanity. These are truths of reason, law, and culture and are indeed relative, partial and bias. These truths are also easily corrupted by power motives and certain interest groups within society and then only serve to justify the interest of the powerful. Christ as the truth invites us into a new relationship where we die to ourselves and live in a new reality “whose mystery we explore without ever being ourselves in control” (West 1999:7). The truth of the Gospel cannot be manipulated by self-interest as it calls the

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<sup>7</sup> Chapter Two: 10.3 Narrative and experience, self and meaning where the narrative understanding of self is described and how sacred stories are necessary for this self-understanding.

individual to die to him/herself in following Jesus.

The church has not been spared the trap of too closely associating ‘knowing’ Jesus and following him, as Christology and soteriology become too intertwined. As Panneberg argues, if soteriology becomes primary one needs to ask if one has actually dealt with the story/ the narrative of Jesus/ the truth of Jesus, or has one projected onto Jesus the human desires for salvation, deification and humanity’s striving to be like God? Or projecting onto Jesus human constructions of perfect religiosity, or perfect morality? (Pannenberg 1968:47) If this happens, then the truth of Jesus is no different from the relative truths of society which are human constructions and projections and not the revealed truth of Christ that is known only in the response of the believer and not in some model or theory, “or some universally valid objective model of morality” (Hauerwas 1981:42).

Postmodernity has quite clearly shown that this is an impossible task as there is no universal category or general standard that could possibly bring together the separate fields of discourse and behaviour in a pluralist society. Yet the Christian truth is not to be found in these universals, but in an experience and relationship which God has established with human beings through the work of the Holy Spirit in Jesus Christ.

“That is not to say that Christian convictions are proven meaningful or true by showing their ethical implications; rather they are both true and ethical in that they force us to a true understanding of ourselves and our existence” (Hauerwas 1981:90).

The only way to understand this truth is if humans understand the narrative nature of their lives.

“The objective reality we seek with our reason (modernity) and finally give up on (postmodernity) is replaced by the living Other whom we can never control but to whom we respond by trust and discipleship” (West 1999:47).

“In this sense word and history coincide in the eschatological event of the word”(Moltmann 1992:211). The Word of God calls humanity to a new understanding of him/herself in the light of the new creation. This the believer grasps in faith and in hope and in this sense it corresponds to the Word of God. The believer understands him or herself in the light of the history of the new creation through the Word of God and thus this Word of God corresponds to the experience of the believer.

2 Corinthians 5: 16-18 “Consequently, from now on we regard no one according to the flesh (*human point of view*) even if we once knew Christ according to the flesh (*human point of view*), yet now we know him so no longer. So whoever is in Christ is a new creation: the old things have passed away; behold new things have come. And all this is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ and given us the ministry of reconciliation,” (The African Bible) ‘*Human point of view*’ is an interpretation of ‘*flesh*’ taken from West (West 1999:7).

Truth known in the kerygma and our existence as a new creation, is known in the quality of a living relationship, “not a structure of being, not the text of a statement, whether of doctrine or law. Objectively, it is the self-revelation of the triune God coming to men and women created for one another in God’s image and played

out (1) in the biblical struggle with a believing but disobedient people, and ultimately (2) in Christ's life, crucifixion, and resurrection. Subjectively, it is known by faith responding to God with the whole self and using the mind to explore both creation and human life in light of God's covenant, gift, and promise" (West 1999: 9).

I will seek to combine Barth's objective understanding of knowing the truth in the story of the revealed Word of God with Bultmann's subjective understanding of knowing the truth in the kerygma as experience.

The Story of Christ is more than mere kerygmatic address. It is also storytelling – the telling of a liberating story into which the believer enters so that this story becomes the believer's story. It is within this story that the believer finds his/her new identity and thus realises the non-identity of the world around him. He or she realises the need of redemption of the world around him/her and thus enters into a universal history with the world in solidarity with the unredeemed creation. Thus the Gospel and the truth of the Gospel can be verified not by outside standards, but by the very life that is created and sustained by it. The believer finds the truth in the story of Christ which is the story of a Palestinian Jew. It is not a transcendent truth, but a truth revealed in history in the story of Jesus the Christ. Truth is therefore not to be found outside of history but in it, "in the concrete ways God deals with us in its particular events" (West 1999:11).

To understand truth in this way has certain consequences and that is to surrender the security of absolute knowledge and this truth demands the risk of personal commitment to God "whom one trusts but whose mind one can never fully understand"(West 1999:9).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer once described this relationship to truth as a relationship where one does not ask the question, What? or How?, but Who? It is a question about who calls us and who claims the whole of our lives, the whole of our identity and who leads us through death into a new creation and new life (Bonhoeffer 1978: 30-37). It is God who claims us, summons us and calls us into a new identity. This identity is a narrative identity and thus the God who calls us is a 'storied God' who is known to us through the stories, but only if our character as 'storied people' is formed appropriate to God's character. This cannot happen in isolation, but within a 'storied society' namely the church (Hauerwas 1981:91).

This narrative truth cannot be captured in any human objective or subjective system of thought, reason, or myth. Doctrines are helpful only as they guide believers in their commitment to the One who reveals truth "step-by-step in relation to us." There is no faith without risk of error that responsible witness brings. God alone is the lord of truth. We by faith may be its servants"(West 1999:10).

Faith thus does not have a timeless or universal platform that lifts it out and above the vulnerability of the historical realm.

"It boasts no certainty other than what accrues to be a contingent event from the past, with its promise of claiming the present in the name of a purposive future. The person-event of Christ precedes a purposive future. The person-event of Christ precedes particular responses of faith"(Hauerwas 1981:43).

Today the church stands in the tradition of these responses over generations, from the first witnesses until today. This tradition witnesses that revelation has an ongoing narrative truth and power. “So completely is the truth of faith tied in with what is transmitted historically” (Hauerwas 1981:43). The history of one generation witnessing to another from the very first witnesses who responded to the summons of the Christ event right until today responding to that “alternation of social-personal existence which roots in this Jesus” (Groff 1971:47).

The universality of this truth is manifested only by a people who are willing to take his cross as their story, as the necessary condition for living truthfully in this life. I will come back to the cross of Christ and its relevance and truth in the *postmodern global village*. MacIntyre argued that a living tradition “is an historical extended socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition” (MacIntyre 1984:222).

“Any community and polity is known and should be judged by the kind of people it develops” (Hauerwas 1981:2). This is the only verification that there is for the Gospel. It is verified in God as His revealed Word and it is verified by the community that it creates.

This brings me to the context of the Gospel or proclamation within world history and the relevance of the Gospel to world history. The Gospel is not only relevant to the community that have chosen it as their narrative.

**In conclusion:** God’s Word (sacred story) is revealed to humanity in God’s story with humanity as testified to by the scriptures (mundane stories). Yet these mundane stories resonate with God’s story and through the power of the Holy Spirit the truth is revealed through them. The truth is revealed as God’s story which is revealed through the story of Christ. This story re-authors the individual’s narrative as he/she responds to the truth. This re-authored story forms a certain type of character which corresponds to the character of God. The re-authored story of faith interprets reality and the individual in a new way which makes more sense and as such is known as a truthful interpretation. In this sense the Gospel can be known as the truth.

## 2.4 The Gospel truth as relevant

Pannenberg argues that the kerygma needs to be understood not so much in the light of its content, but in the light of what it reports (Pannenberg 1969:152). In other words the kerygma is a report of the history of Christ.

“The Christian proclamation therefore reports, not a self contained event, but the prolepsis of the end of history in Jesus’ fate – that is, an event which is both open to the future and opens up the future” (Moltmann 1992:213-214).

Therefore the proclamation of this Gospel breaks into every situation and every context as a call into redemptive history and as consolation. It is not a neutral historical chronicle, but the history of salvation which requires a response.



“On the basis of insight into the history of Jesus, which reveals God and anticipates the end of history, it conveys a universal historical view of the world which must prove to be the true understanding of reality.....

But because all historical knowledge is anticipatory knowledge and only grasps the meaning of past and present in the context of the future, the Christian knowledge of history proves itself the true one”(Moltmann 1992:214).

In the world there are numerous narratives and each individual is enmeshed in different stories and histories. Especially in the *postmodern global village* each individual is confronted with a pluralism of stories and histories which make up his/her identity. It is exactly this multiplicity of stories to which the individual needs to respond to that leaves him/her feeling fragmented.<sup>8</sup> The ‘universal’ truthfulness of the Gospel can only be judged by its ability to equip the individual or the church to effectively be able to respond to this plurality and fragmentation.

“The truthfulness of Christian convictions, therefore, is not dependent on being able to generate a theory of truth that a priori renders all other accounts false, or that promises to demonstrate that underlying the differences between people is a deeper and more profound common morality. Rather the truthfulness of Christian convictions resides in their power to form a people sufficient to acknowledge the divided character of the world and thus necessarily to offer hospitality to the stranger” (Hauerwas 1981:93).

It is my claim that the Gospel as truth does just that. It equips individuals as well as the church, which seeks to live faithfully to the Gospel, with the skills to face the world as it is and not to construct it in a manner in which the church would like it to be.

In the previous section I reflected on the truth of the Gospel known in the experience of a re-authored story. This re-authored story of the self gave the individual dramatic resources with which to better understand him/herself as well as the world around him/her. It was in this more meaningful interpretation of self and reality that the individual perceived the truth of the Gospel.

In response to the *postmodern global village*, what is needed is not a universally valid story, but a story that can give a community the skills to live faithfully in a fragmented pluralistic world. I am not looking for an *a priori* defeat of relativism, but a truth that can help the church to live in a world where there is more than one story.

This takes me back to the previous section where the truth of the story people hold to can only be verified in the lives that they live according to that story (Hauerwas 1981: 96). Yet how does one judge this verification if there are no universal narrative, independent values or norms?

The Gospel does not provide these universally valid norms, but it provides a story that allows the church to live faithfully to this story without denying the reality of the world, nor resorting to violence and coercion to change the world in accordance to her

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<sup>8</sup> Chapter Four: 15.3 The disembedded narratives of selves and 16. Globalisation and homelessness

understanding of truth. The story I am referring to is, what Pannenberg has reminded the church of, the story of God revealed in Christ. This story tells the church of the eschatological universal Lordship of Christ.

“Christian confidence in God’s lordship provides the church with the power to exist amid the diversity of this world, trusting that the truth “will out” without resorting to coercion and violence for self-protection or to secure adherents. Therefore the non-resistant character of the Christian community, which is often sadly absent, is a crucial mark of the power of the Christian story to form a people in a manner appropriate to the character of Gods providential rule of the world” (Hauerwas 1981:101).

Thus, the church has a story that proclaims God’s Lordship over the world and every aspect of the believer’s life. It is a story that tells of a God who does not nullify differences but celebrates the diversity and calls/summons this diversity into His story with the world to serve in His kingdom.

The church’s task is not to defeat relativism, but the church’s task is to witness to this God, who reveals Himself within history. The command to witness has nothing to do with a universal truth, but “is based on the presupposition that we only come to the truth through the process of being confronted by the truth” (Hauerwas 1981:105).

This command to witness does not mean to judge what is wrong with the other faiths, but rather we are called to witness to the life that is made possible through the power of the cross of Christ (Gospel).

“The invitation to join such a life is made not on the assumption that there is something wrong with the others’ beliefs, but it is made because we are all sinners and through participation in this community we have the possibility of finding redemption” (Hauerwas 1981:106).

It is specifically humbling to the church to realise that the God they serve exists among all people and that He chooses to speak very often through the stranger. Although this understanding of God does not mean that the church should melt all differences into one through self-deceptive tolerance, “but rather it is the reason why the church must be a universal community capable of showing forth our unity in our diversity” (Hauerwas 1981:107). This unity is not based on the idea that there is a universal concept of human nature that all humanity shares, but is based on God’s Word revealed through the Gospel that tells us of a Lord who is universal.

This does not solve the problem of diversity nor fragmentation, but it does not deny it and in that sense it is a truthful account with which to approach reality. This is a tragic account of reality. “In a divided world tragedy cannot be denied, but we can find the patience to sustain one another through our tragedies and in so doing, provide an alternative to the violence that would force the world into premature unity” (Hauerwas 1981:108).

In this sense the Gospel is universally relevant not because it has a universally valid abstract truth, but because it creates a community that can live truthfully in a divided and fragmented world, acknowledging the tragedy of the world and sustaining her

members to live faithfully in this world.

## 2.5 The Gospel truth as authority

“The authority of scripture derives its intelligibility from the existence of a community that knows its life depends on faithful remembering of God’s care of his creation through the calling of Israel and the life of Jesus” (Hauerwas 1981:53).

The question really is, Is the church prepared to base her existence on this story and take this story as her only authority (*sola scriptura*)?

“The question if and how the Church can exist, depend simply and concretely on the other questions whether the church is capable of putting its confidence in this book, and therefore feels constrained to obey it” (Barth 1936:31-32).

How is authority understood? It is a word that has had rather negative connotations attached to it as it was understood in modernity as universal authority. How can one understand authority in a postmodern context?

Authority can never be seen separate from a community’s self understanding which is embodied in its laws, narratives, customs, traditions and habits, and it is within these that the individual of the community is guided to approach the truth.<sup>9</sup>

“A community is a group of persons who share a history and whose common set of interpretations about that history provide the basis for common actions. The diversity of accounts and interpretations of a community’s experience is exactly the basis of authority”(Hauerwas 1981:60).<sup>10</sup>

The Christian community shares certain decisive events which they regard as important, such as the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. It is these decisive events that unite the various Christian churches and congregations into a Christian community, but how the cross and the resurrection is to be interpreted today will be very diverse. Authority is the very power that allows a community to intelligibly respond to the present time by a reasoned reinterpretation of the cross and the resurrection and what that means for the future. This Christology has not jumped centuries, but it is a living tradition of interpretation and reinterpretation.

“Authority is the means by which the wisdom of the past is critically appropriated by being tested by current realities as well as by challenging the too often self-imposed limits of the present” (Hauerwas 1981:60-61).

Authority thus comes from the ability to justify decisions and direction taken into the future on the basis of the shared tradition of the community.

Authority has been associated with stagnation and holding onto the past, but in the light of this understanding of authority there is a direct connection between authority, tradition and specifically change. It is only in the light of change that authority really begins to play a role. “Reasoning from tradition is the primary form and method of authority”(Hauerwas 1981:61).

<sup>9</sup> Chapter Two: 8.3.2 Narrative understanding of self/personal identity and 8.4 Social setting of narrative.

<sup>10</sup> Refer back to a similar definition of community in Chapter Two: 10.4 Narrative and the identity of community

If a community wants to survive its traditions it needs to change. I have discovered in this study that the church with her traditions is in a crisis and requires change. The question is, On what authority does the church change to be a relevant reality in the *postmodern global village*? In the previous section I have discovered that the Gospel is the narrative truth and therefore it is on the authority of the Gospel that the church needs to change. What is required of the church is a reasoned reinterpretation of scripture. This re-interpretation of scripture is the constant adjustment that is needed for the church to stay in continuity with her tradition.

“Change and continuity are two facets of the same process, the process we call tradition. So much so that continuity can only be maintained by continual development, and development or change is only such (and not simply replacement) because of continuity. Tradition means continuity and change, both together and both equally”(Mackey 1968:42-43).

In the church the Gospel she is working with is a non-repeatable event and it is to this non-repeatable event (Christ event) that the church witnesses to. Hauerwas argues that such events must be fitted within a narrative and this narrative is an interpretation of the non-repeatable event. “But that interpretation must remain open to a new narrative display not only in relation to the future, but also whenever we come to a new understanding of the past” (Hauerwas 1981:61).

When the church is dealing with the Gospel, as the non-repeatable Christ event, the interpretation does not mean discovery of new meaning, but rather the re-appropriation of a tradition with greater depth in understanding (Barr 1966:513-535).

The church, faced with the challenges of the *postmodern global village*, turns to the Gospel as her authority to reinterpret, discover and appropriate the message for this time. This can lead to discontinuity in tradition, but it can also lead to unanticipated relevancy through reinterpretation. On this journey I discovered the unanticipated relevancy of scripture for the church in the *postmodern global village*, but I will come back to this in the next section, when looking at the church (community) which is created through the truthful language of scripture.

It is in the context of the question, What kind of church can respond to the Postmodern Global Village?, that authority of scripture becomes vitally important.

Authority is not necessary because of the deficiencies in humanity, or within the community, so that one needs some form of authority to bind the community together into common action, or common response to a challenge. It is rather that the opposite is true, that as the deficiencies decrease in a community the number of choices increases. In the *postmodern global village* the church is faced with pluralism or fragmentation because individuals are faced with so many choices of what could possibly be the common good of humanity (*telos*). It is within this context that authority plays a vital role to guide a community within its traditions. Judgments of how to respond are always particular and contingent. This means that one could respond in a different way as well. The tradition of the church tells the history of how the church has judged and responded to the world from generation to generation. “Authority is not, therefore, an external force that commands against our will; rather it proceeds

from a common life made possible by tradition” (Hauerwas 1981:62).

Authority has always been seen to be in opposition to freedom. Yet freedom can never be an end in itself, “but is the necessary condition for a community to come to a more truthful understanding of itself and the world” (Hauerwas 1981:62). Thus authority of scripture must always call the church to that which she has not become, as authority continually witnesses to the truth of Gospel.

“Authority, therefore, functions at those points where the tradition of a community engages in the discussions necessary to subject its politics to the search of a judgment by the truth”(Hauerwas 1981: 62).

In the previous section I discovered that the truth of the Gospel is only known as the revealed Word of God which is known from within the experience of faith and the participation in the tradition of faith, in other words, the truth of the Gospel is known in the actions of the church which seeks to live truthfully according to the Gospel.

“And whoever is concerned about what the world thinks of the Church ought to become aware of the fact that the world is interested in only one question about the Church: Does the Church still dare, and dare ever and ever again, to cling simply and concretely to the method of the Holy Spirit and faith?” (Barth 1936:32)

The method of the Holy Spirit and faith is the faith that the Gospel reveals God’s Word to the believer through the power of the Holy Spirit. In this sense the Gospel also becomes an authority for the world, through the church’s faithfulness to the Gospel.

In this sense “truth is like ‘knowing how’ – a skill that can only be passed from master to apprentice” (Hauerwas 1981:62). It is in this context of truth that authority becomes important as authority and tradition will guide the church to that which others before have found to be true, although I must keep in mind that in this process it could happen that the guides of the present or recent past need to be criticized.

If I claim scripture as the authority for the church, I am in no way arguing that scripture is infallible. Nor am I claiming that the Bible contains a unique understanding of God, history and humanity in opposition to some other understandings. Nor do I claim that the Bible contains a unique “Weltanschauung”.

“Rather to claim the Bible as authority is the testimony of the church that this book provides the resources necessary for the church to be a community sufficiently truthful so that our conversations with one another and God can continue across generations” (Hauerwas 1981:64).

Therefore I see in the Bible an authority because by trying to live in accordance to its witness the church can live faithfully to the truth.

## 2.6 The Gospel and the Messianic era

The Gospel is the term used by the New Testament for both the apostolic proclamation of Christ and the story of Christ. Yet I would like to place this understanding of the Gospel into the context of Deutero-Isaiah, because the prophet expects from the future God’s final victory, his enthronement and his rule without any opposition. Jesus himself stood in this tradition and saw His mission to be the proclamation of this kingdom or this era. Like the Word at the beginning of creation, His Word creates this



era of salvation (Moltmann 1992:216). The Gospel reveals the divine secret, not only of God's triune character, but also the eschatological divine secret of world history. In this sense the Gospel has the character of a 'hidden power of revelation already breaking into the present from the end of the world' (Moltmann 1992:217).

2 Corinthians 2:7f "Rather, we speak God's wisdom, mysterious hidden, which God predetermined before the ages for our glory, and which none of the rulers of this age know; for if they had known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory" (The African Bible).

In the Gospel is revealed, in a provisional way, what will finally and visibly be revealed in Christ's parousia.

"The gospel of Christ in the messianic era of Christ is at heart 'the word of the cross' and the contradiction in practice of a world which contradicts its Creator and itself. It is only out of this protest against the contradiction that the correspondence will be created which, as 'signs and wonders', are the proof of the messianic era" (Moltmann 1992:221).

Therefore the Gospel stands in contradiction to the world and thus cannot be supported by analogies in the cosmos or in history, because this history stands in contradiction to the Gospel. Nor can human reason support the Gospel, as it also stands in contradiction to the cross.

"When the power of the resurrection becomes effective in the gospel of Christ, then the gospel belongs to the people who stand in the fellowship of Christ's sufferings, for whom the suffering Christ has become a brother, and for whom the crucified one died" (Moltmann 1992:222).

The hermeneutical circle therefore does not only revolve around Word and faith or Word and reality, but faith and reality belong rather to the life which is stamped by Spirit and suffering.

"Hope in action in the sign of the crucified Jesus is the messianic protest against godlessness and unrighteousness in this period of death; a protest which liberates men for response to and fellowship with God, and for righteousness" (Moltmann 1992:222).

It is here in this protest in the face of resistance that fragments and anticipations of the new creation come into being.

"It is correct to see the celebration of the Lord's supper as the centre of the life of the primitive Christian churches, then the telling of the story of the passion and the proclamation of Jesus' saving death 'until he comes' coincide in this celebration" (Moltmann 1992:220).

## 2.7 The Gospel creates the church as a messianic fellowship

In the previous section the Gospel was understood as a narrative truth, as the revealed Word of God known in the experience of faith and in that the believer becomes part of the story of God which the Gospel reveals. The Gospel is universally

relevant to our world not as an abstract universal and objective truth, but as a narrative that equips the church with the necessary skills to interpret and respond to a fragmented and pluralistic world. The Gospel is a narrative with a self-involving character, through which one discovers its truth and therefore there is no way in which one can speak of the story of Jesus without it forming the believer's own story. "The proclamation of the gospel always belongs within a community, for every language lives in community or creates one"(Moltmann 1992:223).

The task of the church "is to be the kind of community that tells and tells rightly the story of Jesus"(Hauerwas 1981:52). This does not mean that there is one way of telling the story of Jesus, or that one can forget the discrepancies of the Gospels with regards to the story of Jesus, but that understanding Jesus' life is inseparable from learning how to live our own lives.

"The Church is not divine revelation institutionalized"(Barth 1936:20). But the church learns to live its life as the church of Christ through remembering the story of Jesus. "For the narrative requires a corresponding community who are capable of remembering and for whom active reinterpreting remains the key to continuing a distinctive way of life"(Hauerwas 1981:54).

The fellowship which is created by the Gospel is the messianic fellowship. The Word summons a response from the hearer and if the person responds in faith he or she is added to the community. "Wer dem Worte glaubt, der ist durch den Heiligen Geist dem Leibe Christi >>eingeleibet<<" (Althaus 1983:262). The Gospel has authority within this community as it helps to form, nurture and guide the community's self-understanding as well as form the character of the individual members.

The Gospel does not only create a world, but it creates a community which is the bearer of that world, which is the messianic world brought into life through the resurrection of Jesus, and therefore the church which truthfully responds to the Gospel is a messianic fellowship. "For scripture forms a society and sets an agenda for its life that requires nothing less than trusting God found through the stories of Israel and Jesus" (Hauerwas 1981:66).

This messianic fellowship narrates the story of Christ and its own story together with the story of Christ, because its own story is born out of the liberating story of Christ. Therefore this fellowship is a storytelling fellowship (Moltmann 1992:225).

"It is a 'story-telling fellowship', which continually wins its own freedom from the stories and myths of the society in which it lives, from the present realization of this story of Christ. It is a fellowship of hope, which finds freedom from the perspectives of its society through the perspectives of the kingdom of God. Finally, it is a fellowship which, by virtue of its remembrance of the story of Christ and its hope for the kingdom of man, liberates men and women from the compulsive actions of existing society and from the inner attitudes that correspond to them, freeing them for a life which takes on a messianic character" (Moltmann 1992:225).

The church is a story-telling fellowship, which not only tells the stories of the Gospels,

but also remembers the story of Christ. The dominant genre in the Bible is narrative. In this narrative sense the Bible makes sense, as all acts of God are understood within a narrative framework developed from previous acts and these acts are remembered in the tradition. So for example the Old Testament tells the Story of God's relationship with the people of Israel. In this story there are some decisive events, for example the calling of Abraham and the Exodus. These decisive events are remembered in the tradition and from this remembered tradition the new events are interpreted. So these communities live through remembering. In this remembering and retelling of the story of God, God's character is made known.

"Jews and Christians believe this narrative does nothing less than renders the character of God and in so doing renders us to be the kind of people appropriate to that character"(Hauerwas 1981:67).

When Jews and the early Christian remembered the stories it was not about remembering the facts of the events, but more a question of what kind of community should we be to be faithful to this story? "The issue is not just one of interpretation but of what kind of people can remember the past and yet know how to go on in a changed world"(Hauerwas 1981: 67).

The Cannon is not an accomplishment, but a task for the church. The task is to become a church capable of recalling these stories and living in accordance to the narrative truth of scripture. This brings me to the first part of my leading question: what kind of community should the church be?

"...what kind of community the church must be to be able to make the narratives of scripture central for its life"(Hauerwas 1981:68).

**In conclusion:** Referring back to Chapter Two (8.2.2.2 The narrative history of the social setting of an action), the Gospel as authority, interpreted over the centuries of church history, forms the living tradition and thus the narrative setting in which the practices and pastoral actions of the church make sense. This narrative setting provides the framework for the narrative ethics of the church with the Gospel not as an absolute authority, but as a lived tradition.

**Summary:**

- 1) The church in the *postmodern global village* has not abandoned the search for truth, but does not seek this truth in universal, absolute truths, but seeks this truth in narrative and metaphor. Thereby the church avoids being apologetic towards the postmodern world view, but rather earnestly returns to her narrative – the Gospel, as it is in this Gospel that she finds truth and her identity, for it is the story that forms and creates her.
- 2) The truth of the Gospel is a narrative truth, but it is not only relevant for the church, but is also relevant in the church's relationship to the world.
- 3) The Biblical understanding of truth is relational, narrative and historical, in other words embedded in the history of God's covenantal relationship with Israel and in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. This understanding of truth stands in contrast to the Greek and platonic understanding of truth which influenced the modern understanding of

- truth.
- 4) This Biblical truth is the revealed Word of God and comes from Him. There is no way in which humanity can know this truth through any methods of its own. This truth comes to us in the story of the wholly OTHER.
  - 5) The postmodern objection to the modern truth is that it seeks to impose order on the chaos of history. The Biblical narrative truth does not seek to impose order, but seeks a relationship with the believer as the believer enters the narrative.
  - 6) The truth of the Word of God (Gospel) cannot be verified by any external or objective standard, but can only be verified by its correspondence to God himself.
  - 7) This Word of God became incarnate in Christ.
  - 8) This inner correspondence between God and His Word brings this truth into conflict with a world that is contrary to God, thereby exposing the illusions and lies of the world.
  - 9) God's Word which is also the Gospel is true insofar as it corresponds to God. It is a narrative truth that seeks a relationship.
  - 10) Bultmann understands the Gospel as kerygma which is an eschatological call to decision.
  - 11) The truth of the Gospel is known in the individual's story as he/she responds to its summons.
  - 12) This kerygmatic summons reveals humanity to itself. It does this not through some theory of the self, but through the acceptance of the truth in action, in other words in the practices that follow the response to the truth.
  - 13) The truth as kerygma stands in contrast to society because it is not developed from the centre of humanity, but from Christ.
  - 14) The truth of the Gospel in this kerygma is not some universal model of self, but it forces us to a true understanding of ourselves and our existence.
  - 15) This kerygmatic truth is liberating storytelling as it tells the story of Christ, calling the believer to enter this story of liberation. It is in participating in this story that the believer comes to a true understanding of him/herself and thus also to see the world anew realising its non-identity.
  - 16) The history of Christ reports the *prolepsis* of the end of history in Jesus' fate. This event is both open to the future as well as opens the future.
  - 17) It breaks into every situation, not only exposing the non-identity of the world, but also revealing and calling to the redemptive history of God.
  - 18) This is a universal view of history and this universality is grasped in its ability to equip believers with the ability to respond to the pluralism and fragmentation of the postmodern global village.
  - 19) The Gospel has authority for the church which believes that her life depends on its faithful remembering of God's redemptive story.

## **2.8 Fusion of horizons between narrative orientation in a postmodern world and the theological understanding of truth in the Gospel**

In Chapter Two I reflected on a narrative understanding of truth (8.6 Narrative and truth) where I discovered that truth is to be found in metaphor and that narrative truth is found in and creates narrative settings and thus creates narrative communities. The Gospel as a testimony to God's revealed Word (Truth) creates the church. The church therefore is a narrative community or a language community created by this narrative truth. I will now turn to the community created by the Gospel truth, namely the church.

**QUESTION TWO: WHAT KIND OF CHURCH, WHICH FINDS ITSELF WITHIN THE POSTMODERN, URBAN, SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT AND WHICH HAS THE CALLING TO UNIFY ALL IN THE BODY OF CHRIST, COULD RESPOND TO THE STORIES OF NEED OF BOTH THE VILLAGERS AND THE MARGINALISED?**

### **3. INTRODUCTION TO THE QUESTION**

In the previous section 1.1, I tried to answer some of the questions with regards to the postmodern context, which make ethical and pastoral work difficult as these often have to do with truth claims. I have tried to show that the truth of the Gospel is contradictory to the societal truth claims and therefore stands over and against these claims. It is also not a truth that the church can capture in doctrine or in a formulation, but it is a narrative truth that is experienced and lived once the believer has responded to the revealed truth and enters into the narrative of faith in which the truth is revealed.

The believer responds to this truth through his/her life, as he/she enters into the story of the triune God. This story is not lived out as an individual but within the messianic fellowship which is the language community formed by the narrative truth of the Gospel. It is to this fellowship that I now turn. I turn to the community that is created through the narrative truth of the Gospel and it is through this community that the truth of the Gospel will be verified. In the previous section I also discovered that the test for truthfulness of narratives is in the interrelation of narrative and character (Hauerwas 1981:95). I will now turn to the character of the church and her ability to respond to the *postmodern global village* as a 'test' of the truthfulness of her narrative namely the Gospel.

If the church is created by the truth of the Gospel then the theory-laden questions need to be directed to the Gospels as well as the church's tradition. This tradition is formed



by the church's attempt over the centuries to be faithful and obedient to the narrative truth of the Gospel. In this section on the church I will be looking at the Gospels as well as the setting of the Gospels, namely the history of God and His people (Israel) as well as the early church. I will be briefly looking at the setting of the story of God in the history of Israel in the Old Testament as well as looking at the story of the early church, as the early church can be seen as the first communities seeking to live faithfully to the Gospel.

Many of the questions which arose out of the theory-laden practices are questions which are pre-dominantly addressed to the church and her theology. "What kind of **church**, which finds herself within the postmodern, urban, global, South African context and which has the **calling** to unify all in the **body of Christ**, could respond to the stories of need of both the villagers and the marginalised..." (Chapter Five: 3.4 The questions from the practice of the church within the postmodern global village)

The question of the future of the Church is probably one of the greatest challenges facing the church as she enters into this new era. "...for the foreseeable future, the real bone of contention among Christians, theologians and ethicists is going to be what constitutes an appropriate ecclesiology and *modus vivendi* for the churches after Christendom" (Guroian 1994:3).

In the historic and systematic theological journey of this study I will thus be reflecting on the description of the church. Gustavo Gutiérrez said, what this time we are living in calls for, is *intellectus fidei*, in other words a thorough understanding of the Christian faith (Gutiérrez 1993:3f). I will not give a systematic reflection of the historical development of the doctrine of the church from the New Testament and the early church right through to the present, but I will enter into a dialogue with some of the present ecclesiological narratives and in this dialogue reflect on various New Testament texts. The historical development of the doctrine of the church is certainly part of the effective history which is not only part of the theory-laden practices that has led to this study, but is also part of the story of the doctrines with which I will be in dialogue with.

#### 4. THE CONTEXT OF THE BIBLICAL STORY OF GOD'S FELLOWSHIP IN HISTORY

I would like to begin this section, as this is a narrative study, on ecclesiology with a brief biblical look at the adventure story of God's fellowship in the history of this world. God is a God who has chosen to reveal himself within history and this revealed truth is only discovered through participation in His history with the world. God is a 'stories' God in relation with a 'storied' people. This revealed truth has from the very beginning always called a fellowship together and it is to this fellowship and this adventure that I now turn. The church today is part of this adventure, but the adventure began with Israel and thus the church needs to be understood within this historic setting of the adventure narrative.

"We thus forget that the most basic task of any polity is to offer its people a

sense of participation in an adventure. For finally what we seek is not power, or security, or equality, or even dignity, but a sense of worth gained from participation and contribution to a common adventure. Adventure requires courage to keep us faithful to the struggle, since by its very nature adventure means that the future is always in doubt. And just to the extent that the future is in doubt, hope is required, as there can be no adventure if we despair of our goal. Such hope does not necessarily take the form of excessive confidence; rather it involves the simple willingness to take the next step” (Hauerwas 1981:13).

The church is polity that offers her members this sense of adventure. This study is part of this adventure as the church stands before the *postmodern global village* in doubt of her future. The church is asking the question: where will she get the courage and the willingness to take the next step? Maybe the story of the adventure will help me answer this question which will then turn to a reflection on how such a next step could possibly look like.

#### 4.1 The story of God’s fellowship and their adventure

The early church saw herself as “messianic Israel in covenant with the risen Lord, thus continuing the story of Abraham and Sarah’s offspring under very distinct circumstances, namely, as those ‘on whom the ends of the ages have come’ (1 Cor. 19:11)” (Harvey 1999:63). George Lindbeck argues that one needs to return to Israel’s story because this story needs to be the “template for fashioning an adequate ecclesiology in and for a ‘post-Christian’ age” (Lindbeck 1988:190). I believe that we cannot begin the adventure of the church in the New Testament without remembering the history of this adventure as it started with Israel. The reason for this is that redemption and truth are revealed within the public arena of history and therefore this adventure needs to be told, as it needs to be lived and proclaimed in relation to the public arena of world history. It is not a truth for the private sphere, but a truth that is found and lived in relation to history.

The adventure begins with the creation story of Genesis 1-3, but I would like to begin this adventure at a time where there were already many nations on the face of the earth. It was in a time where the earth already experienced plurality and thus also fragmentation. This story of plurality begins with the descendents of Noah in Genesis 10.

Genesis 10:5: “These are the descendants of Japheth, and from them sprang the maritime nations, in their respective lands – each with its own language – by their clans within their nations.”

Genesis 10:20: “These are the descendants of Ham, according to their clans and languages, by their lands and nations.”

Genesis 10:31: “These are the descendants of Shem, according to their clans and language, by their lands and nations” (The African Bible).

This is what happened after the covenant with Noah and God, where God blessed the descendants of Noah so that they can populate the world. Many nations are born from the descendants of Noah and each of these nations had their own language, culture

and tradition. The world for the first time experiences plurality and diversity, but this is experienced as a sign of God's blessing the descendants of Noah. This diversity and plurality is a sign of God blessing upon His people as each develops their own culture, language and tradition. Each family and the nation that arose out of these families bears witness to the covenant with God through their own language and culture (West 1999:52).

In the very next chapter the adventure of blessing and the richness of God's blessing takes a totally different turn in Genesis 11: 1-4.

Genesis 11: 1-4 The whole world spoke the same language, using the same words. While men were migrating in the east, they came upon a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there. They said to one another, "Come, let us mould bricks and harden them with fire." They used bricks for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, "Come let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the sky, and so make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered all over the earth" (The African Bible).

Why did the people turn away from the celebration of God's blessings, which was shown and expressed in the diversity and plurality, and rather build the tower of Babel?

Numerous motives can be discovered:

- 1) Pride, arrogance to reach heaven through their own efforts, to develop truth through their own power of reason, to create monuments in their own image, to create gods in their own image.
- 2) The lust and desire for economic and political power that would impress and thus intimidate others.
- 3) A search for security and a fear of plurality and diversity.

The city of Babel became a city of protection. The city was intended to protect humanity from plurality and diversity by unifying all humanity into one city. The city tried to protect its inhabitants from the blessing of diversity and plurality and thus the city was built against God's blessing. "The fear was self-fulfilling. Tongues that had understood one another when they talked about human relations and response to God became confused languages when human ambition and human fear drove their discourse" (West 1999:53).

The adventure seems to have come to an end. The people God had created in His image, are scattered and confused and there is no longer any sense of togetherness. Is this the end, the final victory of human fear and ambition over the blessings of God?

It is in this context of utter hopelessness where the adventure seems to have come to an abrupt end as there is no hope for the future, that the story of Abram begins. God responds to human crisis and hopelessness and begins the adventure with Abram.

The irony of the adventure is that what the people of Babel had feared most was the task given to Abram. "Go forth from the land of your kinsfolk and form your father's house to a land that I will show you" (Genesis 12:1).

“What for the Babelites was a curse is for Abram the promise of a blessing. He would be father of a great nation; his name would be great. But the greatness of this nation would be not its culture and power, but its faithfulness to the covenant and its witness only to the merciful power of God” (West 1999:55).

The Adventure begins again. The adventure of God’s truth which is in contradiction to the truths of society, of culture and of reason, begins again with the calling of a fellowship. The sacred story is revealed in the mundane story of this one man’s life and his story with God.

It is a truth revealed in history which creates a community or fellowship which seeks to live by this truth.

This time God reveals Himself to Abram. Abram and his wife respond to this revealed truth and form the fellowship based on and created by this revealed truth. This truth is not an abstract universal truth, but the truth that will be known in the experience of history and that reveals itself in history to those who are obedient to its call.

The fellowship on the adventure of truth is faced with the challenge (Genesis 12: 2-3):

Genesis 12:2-3: “I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you. All the communities of the earth shall find blessing in you”(The African Bible).
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This is a calling of a nation, but how can one nation with one culture and language fulfil this challenge of being a blessing to all nations and be a community of reconciliation in which God reconciles the scattered and fragmented universe?

It is within the context of this challenge that the Old Testament story unfolds and tells the story of the adventure of a people who responded not to a universal abstract truth, but a narrative truth revealed in history and known only in them who lived in response to this truth. It was and is a story and a journey which was plagued with many temptations. There was continually the temptation to go beyond the grammar of narrative truth as I reflected on in Chapter Two (8.6.2 Internal history (a metaphorical story)).

For example, there was the temptation of imperialist power, where one language and one culture are united into one nation with political power to coerce other nations into submission. “Such was the pattern of ancient Egypt, of Babylon, of the Chinese Empire and civilizations, of Greek culture in the Hellenic Empires, and of the civilization established and ruled by Rome” (West 1999:56). Israel was tempted into this line of thinking under the rule of David and Solomon.

The other great temptation was of religious nationalism - “one culture that becomes itself sacred sphere where God is known and worshiped and for which other nations are by their existence at best strangers, at worst threats or enemies” (West 1999:56). This was the pattern of the ancient Near East, and the fellowship of Abraham and Moses very often fell for this temptation although the prophets protested against it.

The people of Israel had to withstand these temptations as they were given a different mission – “to find their way between these fatal rocks on one or the other of which so many cultures have foundered, toward a new vision of human community inspired by the promise of God” (West 1999:57).

For this task a chosen fellowship was necessary or a chosen people, the children of Abraham, who would seek to live not by powerful universal truths and ideologies, but would take the risk of living in relationship to a narrative truth which reveals itself within history.

They were chosen not because they were special or because they had special power or for any other reason but for the reason that they were chosen by God, and so they had no power of their own, but were dependent on God.

Deuteronomy 7:7: “It was not because you are the largest of all nations that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you, for you are really the smallest of all nations. It was because the Lord loved you and because of his fidelity to the oath he had sworn to your fathers, that he brought you out with his strong hand from the place of slavery, and ransomed you from the hand of Pharaoh, king of Egypt” (The African Bible).

This fellowship, community, nation owed its existence only to God and His His mercifulness, faithfulness and nothing else. The truth of this fellowship is in God and not in any human creation, be it tradition, culture or reason.

The crux of the development of this story is given in the story of Gideon (Judges 6:11-8:23). Martin Buber describes this story of Gideon as a poetic memory that expresses a will or disposition “of a religious and political kind in one” (Buber 1967:58).

This story of Gideon makes it so clear that God is the all embracing ruler of the world and that He is the beginning and end of the people of Israel. He is their *proton* and *eschaton*.

The people of Israel seek to make the lordship of God a reality in their lives. This places their existence and their history into a dialectic - of a asking divinity and an answer-refusing, but nevertheless answer-attempting humanity (Buber 1967:63-65). Israel’s one desire was the fulfilment of this promise of the Kingship of God, “wresting ever and again from the changing resistance of the times a fragment of realization, however altered,” and this formed the basis of their understanding of God, history the world and politics (Buber 1967:139).

The word consciousness, which comes from the Latin word *con-scio* which means to know with, resides principally in the ability to hear and speak rather than to see.

“This ability to say, and more precisely to signify, emanates from the contingent operation of memory that forms the medium and the means of human knowledge”(Harvey 1999:37).

A thing, a person or an event exists for somebody only when it passes into an incorporeal or intentional state which has the ability to abide in time when it is no longer



present and this is done through memory.

Yet memory in the context of history tells us that the present situation has a context. It is “part of a continuity, it is ‘made’ and so it is not immutable” (Williams 1984:29f).

An adventure, which is based on the revelation of a narrative truth to a people, demands memory because the people will always need to interpret the present in the light of that narrative of revelation.

Abraham Joshua Heschel argues: “much of what the Bible demands can be comprised in one word, remember” (Heschel 1951:161).

To really understand history it needs the context of memory. For the children of Abraham and Sarah to understand their history, their identity and their politics they required a context of understanding, interpreting and describing that only memory could provide.

“The memory of God as king, exemplified in the canonical story of Gideon, is therefore poetic in the basic sense of that term, for it has provided countless generations with their knowledge of how to go on and go further in the use of the expressions of a language” (Harvey 1999:37).

Slowly the community (Israel) learned this language and this made it possible for them to continue as community or as people through history. This narrative of God as king formed the poetizing medium through which reason could become practical as freedom (Metz 1980:195-197).

It is this very fact that they are chosen for no other reason, but that God loved them, that they are a shining light to the nations of the world. This fact has proven itself true in history, that wherever the Jewish people were in the diaspora they witnessed to the fact that those nations, their power and their culture, are not ultimate.

“Another people, chosen by God and formed by God’s covenant, lives among them, challenges them with its culture and its law even without political power of its own, an implicit reminder of God’s commandment, judgment, and mercy on us all” (West 1999:59).

This is also the reason that the Jewish diaspora history is a history of so much violence and oppression, as these other nations did not accept this challenge by a ‘powerless’ people.

At each step of the way of this journey they had to ask themselves what it means to be claimed by God as a chosen people. It is in this process of an asking God and an answer-attempting humanity that their identity needed to be established.

“The key feature of this dialectic is its interlocutory character. Over and over again the word of the Lord comes to claim this people in the entirety of their existence, and their world is turned upside down” (Harvey 1999:38).

It is in response to this claim that they had to establish and understand their identity as a people within the nations.

As the story of Israel suggests, “for a person (or group) to be initiated into personhood (or peoplehood) as a character in an ongoing drama does not necessarily condemn anyone to a fixed place or role within the story. It is of course the case that at any given moment in this narrative a person could be asked to provide an account”(Harvey 1999:40).

It is this dialectic of memory and identity which gives a community the ability to respond to certain set of questions, such as: Who are we, and what kind of world do we inhabit? What sort of people are we to become, and what role do we play in this world? What goods should we pursue as a people? What means should we use to achieve these goods? (Harvey 1999:41). These questions are never asked in isolation, but always in the context of various relations with other nations or peoples. The logical consequence of the question: what is good and best for one group of people, will lead to the question of what is good for all people. The prophets of Israel were at the forefront of this question, reminding the people of Israel that they were called to be a light to the nations.

As was stated earlier, Israel was an odd people, yet with a subversive voice challenging the truth of nations and the societies with which they came into contact. For a small group of wandering nomads, or refugees, or exiles this is an audacious claim. Yet it was the claim of God’s divine rule to which they tried to respond to and live faithfully to. Through their very existence as God’s chosen people, they called into question any other claim about the meaning and purpose of life. The other claims to reality and truth needed to be “judged by reference to one seemingly insignificant group of people who have laboured through the centuries as the (often reluctant) bearers of this poetizing memory” (Harvey 1999:42-43).

Israel’s relationship to other nations is to allow the historicity and strangeness of its poetizing memory to challenge prevailing assumptions about how people should live and relate to each other. This poeticising memory does not only claim Israel on the boundaries of life, but in the middle of life, or as Dietrich Bonhoeffer says “not at the boundaries where human powers give out, but in the middle of the village” (Bonhoeffer 1971:281f).

The narrative truth of Israel’s story challenges and questions the analytic and philosophical theories of truth of the societies around them.<sup>11</sup>

The reign of God shapes the course of history. It does this in a method that at first appears like a paradox (Harvey 1999:44). The paradox is the paradox of narrative truth in the context of universal absolute truths. Israel responded to this paradox, as they refused to accept the limits of language to a truth that could not be defined nor named. It was not because they wanted their individual autonomy, but on the contrary their response was carried out for the sake of the highest bondage to the ruler of the world – their God. Yet the paradox once more is that this highest bondage knows no

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<sup>11</sup> Chapter Two: 8.6.2 Internal history (a metaphorical story), where I reflected on metaphor’s (narrative truths) ability to challenge the analytic assumptions.

compulsion.

“The paradox of God’s sovereign rule finds its historical expression as a *politeia* in the covenant concluded at Sinai between Israel and the God of their ancestors, who would forever be their king” (Harvey 1999:45).

This was the first step of the journey that unfolded in the history of “a world which does not want to be God’s and to a God who does not want to compel the world to become his” (Buber 1967:139).

It is within this context that Israel understood history as “an interpellative dialogue between God (whose covenant faithfulness, *tsedaqah*, or ‘righteousness,’ is perpetually at stake) and humankind (whose resistance to the divine rule) forms an essential component of the engine that drives history towards its true end” (Harvey 1999:48).

I would like to jump from the people of Israel and the Old Testament fellowship of truth to the New Testament and the fellowship of truth which was created through Christ.

The new fellowship was the fellowship around Jesus namely his disciples, but it was only after His resurrection and with the coming of the Spirit that this fellowship began to understand the truth of their fellowship. I would like to argue that this fellowship was born through the power of the Spirit in Jerusalem at Pentecost.

It is no coincidence that the beginning of this fellowship was in Jerusalem and that the disciples spoke in all the languages so that each could hear the Gospel in their mother tongue. The Spirit had to address all these people in their different languages, as languages were no longer God’s blessing, but had become the curse of division and fragmentation. Yet all these people had come to Jerusalem, because they were searching for a community that was more comprehensive than the individual nations, languages and cultures. They were in search of a community that could unite in the midst of fragmentation and division.

The message was proclaimed in that the story of Jesus was told. The story of Jesus which was told was the fulfilment of the adventure of Israel. This message had two results:

- 1) “the household of God, of which Christ is the head, grows out of the Jewish nation, Its mission to all peoples is a new direction in the history of God with the covenant people that began with the calling of Abraham.”
- 2) “in Christ the desire of all nations (Hag. 2:7), including the Jews, has indeed been fulfilled and at the same time transformed (West 1999:61).

So the adventure of truth is taken up and is transformed by the fellowship of Christ. I will now turn to the doctrine of the church as I take up this adventure of truth.

## **4.2 The summary of the context of the biblical story of God’s fellowship in history**

The adventure of the church does not begin in the New Testament but already in the Old Testament with the revelation of God’s truth to the people of Israel. This is a paradoxical truth, that ‘spoke’ against the ‘truths’ of society and thus countered

the humanly created idols, monuments and gods (Babel) as it came from the living God. This **narrative truth** was bound within in the limits of language, such as the theories and ideologies of the ancient world, but revealed itself within the story of a people and in their history. This history is characterised by a people's response to the narrative truth of God.

This truth, as kerygma, called a fellowship into being which lived in a relationship with it and thus formed a history. The truth was known only in the history that is created. This is the history of the children of Abraham and Sarah. This truth of God is known in relationship and in the subsequent history that develops out of this relationship. The truth is that these obscure nomadic people are the bearers of the true meaning of history as they are responding to the Lord of history. It was this story that they remembered and thus this story, of the kingship of God, formed their poetizing memory by which they defined themselves, understood and interpreted history and ventured into the future. This is the context into which the Son of God became incarnate and then became universal at Pentecost and thus became the story of the Church.

## 5. INTRODUCTION TO THE JOURNEY OF DESCRIBING THE CHURCH

One of the characteristics of life in the *postmodern global village* is a sense of insecurity. There is the nagging feeling of insecurity and instability both outward and inward, as the ethical, political, economic and spiritual systems of our world seem more vulnerable than what was expected. Within this context humans long and seek for spaces of security and stability. The church is no exception to this process of insecurity and instability and her members are certainly longing for stability and security. The church can very easily be tempted to respond to this longing and offer humanity a space of stability and security, as was described in Chapter Five, that the church responds to the therapeutic culture (Chapter Five: 2.6 The church and postmodernity/ the church within the global village).

The church's task is to respond to the needs of humanity in the sense of supply and demand. Or has the church a greater calling to which she needs to respond to? I will return to this question in the next section. The church is tempted to create a secure and stable environment in an unstable and insecure world, but the church is also criticized by the many sceptical voices questioning the relevance of her tradition, theology and liturgical forms.

The church of the *postmodern global village* is in a crisis. The church in crisis seeks new bearings and maybe a new or a rediscovered or a reinterpreted understanding of the meaning of being church.

This crisis I have partly described in the previous chapters where I described the crisis of the *postmodern global village* which has influenced the church to such an extent that

the theory-laden practices are raising numerous questions. Questions such as:<sup>12</sup>

- 1) Where do we come from? This is a historical question as it looks back at the story of the church.
- 2) Where are we going? This question is born out of the crisis and it questions the future. The question is: does the church have a future or has she come to her end? The church can only understand its future in the context of her commission and the hope that she bears for and with other people, or for and with the world (Moltmann 1992: xii).
- 3) Who are we? This is a question of identity. As was discovered in Chapter Two, identity is necessarily narrative identity and if the story of the past does not flow into a story of the future because of a crisis (a problem story), then the identity is questioned. I believe this is where we are at the moment in the journey of this study. “The Christian life of theologians, churches and human beings is faced more than ever today with a double crisis: the crisis of relevance and the crisis of identity” (Moltmann 1974:7). The identity of the church is being questioned and a new (reinterpreted, rediscovered) identity needs to be found which can only be done by reinterpreting/rediscovering/reauthoring the story of the past so that new light and hope is born for the future. Yet, because we are dealing with the church, this journey is also a spiritual journey guided by the trinitarian story of God.

In this chapter, being a historical chapter, I will begin with the historical question: Where do we come from? But I will ask this question from the perspective of the future, guided by the question: What is the next step/s for the church in the future? I believe that the church has a significant future, that the church can take the next step and that this step will be a step of hope within the story of the adventure. But this future might be completely different to the past, although the church can only understand herself in the light of her past story. “But to have that future, we Christians must stop trying to have the kind of future that nearly sixteen centuries of official Christianity in the Western world have conditioned us to covet” (Hall 1997:ix).

“For every crisis calls the traditional and familiar answers into questions. Anyone who only talks about the ‘crises’ without recognizing this implicit opportunity is talking because he is afraid and without hope. Anyone who only wants to have new opportunities without accepting the crisis of previous answers is living in illusion” (Moltmann 1992:xi).

In this theological journey I need to critically reflect on the crisis of previous answers. In section (2.2 The Gospel truth known in the story of the revealed Word of God) I discovered that the truth of God and the Gospel are historical and that they are revealed within history. Therefore the truth of the past will not necessarily be the truth of the present or the future. If the church holds onto the past she will not have the hope to enter the future, but her future will be darkened and filled with crisis and doubt.

“I believe that commitment to the established model of the church – to Christendom in its various institutional forms – is the single most important

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<sup>12</sup> These questions are very similar to the questions asked by Israel as discussed in Chapter Six: 2.1 The story of God’s fellowship and their adventure.



cause of inertia and the retardation of intentional and creative response to this great transition” (Hall 1997:7).

When faced with the challenge and the crisis of the church today it is very tempting to return to older forms of being church. But as Moltmann and Hall have argued this is not the way to go, as it robs the church of her historical truth and stifles her in her development. Yet the church has done exactly that as she has tried to recapture something of her past. The church has tried to go back “to the style of the *ancien regime*... to a society in which the churches regarded themselves as the spiritual form of a material community” (Kent 1982:viii).

This nostalgic return to the old forms takes on two different forms, as was discussed in Chapter Five (2.6 The church and postmodernity/ the church *with* the global village).

“Some long to recover something of the institutional or cultural synthesis between Christianity and society that once distinguished the age of Christendom. Others cede the day to the forces of secularization and so relinquish much of the specificity of the gospel” (Harvey 1999:14).

In a post-Christian world the church can no longer expect to be this large institutional organisation that she once was in the past. Within the *postmodern global village* the idea of imposed affiliations are loosing their power to shape people’s lives and lend them meaning, purpose and significance and therefore the church does not need to be this large organisation within society.

New forms need to be found, but these new forms are not found in a vacuum, but within the history of God. The church cannot just look for new forms anywhere, because her history (her present and future) needs to be understood in the light of the memory of her story. It is in the memory of the story that the church finds the hope to take the next bold step because this step is taken within the Story and the providence of God. It is not humans who are the makers of history, as the story of the fellowship of God tells us that there is a covenantal relationship between humanity and God in the unfolding of history.

“Christians understand themselves to be stewards of the mysteries of God (1 Corinthians 4:1). Accordingly, we are called to participate in the judgment that begins at the household of faith (1 Peter 4: 17), and to participate also in re-forming of that household” (Hall 1997:41-42).

The reformers taught us that the disciple community is called to continuous reformation (*semper reformanda*). This tells us that God wills the church to be critical, self-reflective and seek new ways in which to be obedient to the calling of God’s Word.

The question the church needs to ask herself is: How can we (the church) be more faithful to our memory (poetizing memory) and obedient to our story?

If the previous institutional form of church is no longer appropriate in a *postmodern global village*, what new form can be rediscovered from scripture?

“Forms of community that are personally accepted and entered into voluntarily are becoming more important” (Moltmann 1992:xvi).

The idea of community is not only becoming more important within the *postmodern global village*, but it is also an integral part of the Biblical understanding as well as the narrative theological orientation (language communities).

Communities that are born out of the Biblical narratives, such as: the community of Abraham who hears the call and embarks on a journey of promise and hope, the community of Israel liberated from bondage and slavery and called to live as a free community and as such be a light to the nations, and the community of Christ born out of His redeeming story. It seems as if the way forward is in the form of new communities, but the question that still needs to be asked is: What form will these new communities take? Before I will come to this question I believe it to be important to take up Gutiérrez's challenge and engage in a thorough theological understanding of the church and reflect on tradition in which this theology of the church (ecclesiology) has developed.

I will be reflecting on the doctrine of the church under four headings, namely:

- 1) The dimensions within which the church needs to describe her identity
- 2) The relationships which are integral to the church's identity
- 3) The story of Christ as the church's narrative
- 4) The story of the early church's identity

### **5.1 Summary of introduction to the journey of describing the church**

It is clear that the church in the *postmodern global village* is in a crisis. This is an identity crisis as the church is not sure where she is going, because she does not know who she is in the *postmodern global village*. In this study I would like to reflect on the church's identity and specifically in this chapter return to the question: Where does the church come from? In other words I will be returning to her foundation and there seek a way forward, as it is clear that the church needs to find new ways to respond to the *postmodern global village*.

## **6. THE DIMENSIONS WITHIN WHICH THE CHURCH NEEDS TO DESCRIBE HER IDENTITY<sup>13</sup>**

Before I can embark on this historical and systematic journey I need to be clear about the dimension or the parameters of this journey. In this journey of discovering and describing the church I will be reflecting mainly on the work of Jürgen Moltmann.<sup>14</sup> Moltmann argues that the church at every period of her journey needs to be very clear about her commission, her situation and her goal.

<sup>13</sup> In this section on the description of the church I will be reflecting on the work of Jürgen Moltmann and also following the basic structure of his argument in his book, *The church in the Power of the Spirit*.

<sup>14</sup> Moltmann, J 1992 *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* Second Edition London: SCM Press Ltd.

“The church is the people of God and will give an account of itself at all times to the God who has called it into being, liberated it and gathered it. It is therefore before the divine forum that it will reflect upon its life and the forms that life takes, what it says and what it does not say, what it does and what it neglects to do” (Moltmann 1992:1).

Yet on the other hand the church also has a responsibility towards humanity.

Romans 1: 14: “To the Greeks and non-Greeks alike, to the wise and the ignorant, I am under obligation” (The African Bible 1999).

Paul saw himself to be under the obligation to fulfil the commission with regards to the whole world. Karl Barth’s explanation of this text: “Landesgrenzen und Kulturschranken werden ihn sicher nicht zurückhalten und, wenn es denn sein soll, wird er auf dem Geistes - und Religionsjahrmarkt in Rom ebenso ungescheut seines Amtes walten...”(Barth: 1922:12).

The church therefore has this double obligation, namely to the triune God and toward humanity (the world).

“In the community of the incarnate God and the exalted man Jesus Christ there can be no division here. The church will always have to present itself both in the forum of God and in the forum of the world. For it stands for God to the world and its stands for the world before God. It confronts the world in critical liberty and is bound to give it the authentic revelation of the new life. At the same time it stands before God in fellowship and solidarity with all men and is bound to send up to him out of the depth the common cry for life and liberty” (Moltmann 1992:1).

It is exactly in this double obligation that the church finds herself that the crisis of identity comes up in our present time. It is in this double relationship that the church in the *postmodern global village* experiences an identity and relevance crisis.

Somehow the church will need to find a way to be true to her obligation towards God, which is found in her tradition, without becoming a theocracy, but on the other hand she cannot become so part of the postmodern world that she is stuck with unproductive tolerance and relativism that can only be seen as psychological effectiveness, as discussed in Chapter Five (2.6 The church and postmodernity / the church *with* the global village).

Therefore the journey of the church can be seen as a journey of free solidarity and critical fellowship with the world. The church in the *postmodern global village* is called to free solidarity with the villagers and marginalised yet the relationship is also characterised by a critical fellowship. Stanley Hauerwas understands the challenge for the church today to be:

“...to reassert the social significance of the church as a distinct society with an integrity peculiar to itself. ....Christians rediscover that their most important social task is nothing less than to be a community capable of hearing the story of God we find in the scripture and living in a manner that is faithful to that story” (Hauerwas 1981:1).

In the journey of this study it has become clear to me that if the church wants to serve and be faithful to her commission in the *postmodern global village* she will need to understand her identity as separate from this global village. This sense of separateness does not deny that the church has a social responsibility and that her commission is directed towards the world, but to be faithful to that commission she needs to seek her identity as separate or should I rather say as an alternative to the *postmodern global village*. I will seek to describe and reflect on why I say this.

Hall describes the relationship between the church and the world as intentional *disengagement* from the dominant culture (Hall 1997:43). This is specifically true for the church from the protestant tradition within the Western countries. The Western church needs to disengage from the dominant culture of the West, as for too long the church has been bound up in this culture. The church in the West can be to a large extent described as the pastoral church of Western culture. (I have discussed especially the Western church's relationship to modernity and postmodernity in the previous chapter, Chapter Five) As the dominant culture of the global village has arisen mainly out of the Western world it is important for the church in the *postmodern global village* to disengage from this culture. This disengagement is only the precondition for a meaningful engagement with this world and society. It must not be understood as a flight from the world.

The church is a community that is faithful to a story and is faithful by being called into the history (story) of the triune God. Therefore the church can never be static, but is continuously on a journey – a journey that is understood in the context of the commission, inspired by the hope of the promise and is in critical fellowship with the world where she can judge the suffering by the standard of the kingdom to come. To be able to judge the suffering by the standard of the kingdom to come the church needs to disengage from the world so as to be able to critically engage herself with the world.

In this disengagement and identification with the suffering there lie certain dangers that the church needs to be aware of.

“...sensitivity to injustice and suffering often becomes a new dualism that categorizes human beings according to membership in the group of the oppressed or the oppressor... I am not convinced that this objectification of humanity into victim and executioner does justice to the complexity of the human individual or to the dynamic of evil...the web that unites victim and tyrant in the same person is more complex...” (Farley 1990:51-52).

This is the one extreme of disengagement and identification which the church in the *postmodern global village* needs to be aware of. There is another danger with regards to the relationship of the church to the world and that is the idea that ‘true Christians’ are those that take a certain radical stand on various contemporary issues. The disengagement – engagement dialectic needs to be a lot more holistic and comprehensive to do justice to the story of Christ, which is also the story of the church.

The church needs to understand her role towards the world from the perspective of God's history with the world.

“It will comprehend the meaning of its divine commission in world history and at the same time will understand the world in the context of God’s history” (Moltmann 1992:2).

The parameters of the doctrine (description) of the church needs to be understood within these three dimensions:

- 1) Before the triune God
- 2) Before humanity and the world
- 3) Before the future of God’s promise

A church that seeks to understand herself within these three dimension is an open church as she needs to be open to God, to humanity and to God’s future with the world.

These are the dimensions in which this journey needs to take place. Yet if the church calls herself the community of Christ, in other words the community that is born from the story of Christ, then the story of Christ becomes her story. This story of Christ is a messianic story of liberation and of eschatological renewal of the world (Moltmann 1992:2). It is from this Story that the church gets her calling to be “the cruciform body of Jesus Christ, a priestly and prophetic community of “the Way” (Hall 1997:49).

This is a dynamic story that calls to repentance and rebirth. So whoever enters this community, thereby entering this story, becomes part of a story which is the movement of Christ’s Spirit which liberates, calls to repentance and tirelessly works for the coming kingdom (eschatological renewal of the world).

If this is the story of the church then the restlessness of the church is not the result of the present insecurity and instability of our times, but the very nature of the church, because how else could she fulfil her charge before God, humanity and God’s future for the world. “But basically its ‘unrest’ is implicit in itself, in the crucified Christ to whom it appeals and in the Spirit of which is its driving power” (Moltmann 1992:3).

**The dimensions of the description of the church, as community of Christ**

- 1. Before God**
- 2. Before humanity and the world**
- 3. Before God’s future with the world**

**These three dimensions of the church are only truly understood as meaningful if they are seen in the context of the church’s story – the story of the triune God with the history of the world as revealed to us in Christ.**

In this chapter of the study I will be guided by these three dimensions within the context of the story of Christ.

## **6.1 The church before God/ the church of Jesus Christ**

The church can be understood and described from numerous different perspectives and each of these perspectives would be historically and contextually conditioned.

The church needs to be understood theologically within the context and dimension of the One to whom she appeals. Theologically the church has always been, and will



always have to understand herself, as the church of Christ.

“Therefore there can be no separation of christology from ecclesiology, that is, Jesus from the church. The truthfulness of Jesus creates and is known by the kind of community his story should form” (Hauerwas 1981:37).

According to the New Testament there is no other way to understand the church as the church of Christ that lives through him and His proclamation (1 Corinthians 3:11 “for no one can lay a foundation other than the one what is there, namely, Jesus Christ” (The African Bible)). The church is seen to be His body (1 Corinthians 12:27 “Now you are Christ’s body, and individually part of it” (The African Bible)).

The word church comes from the Greek word *ecclesia* and the profane Hellenistic understanding of *ecclesia* is a political gathering of people, who constitute themselves. The church however is not just a gathering of people which is constituted by humans, but is a community called by God and constituted by God (Pöhlmann 1990:315).

Christ is the subject and the author of the church and therefore the church is tasked with the concern and that is to discern her subject and author as clearly as possible and then to seek to live accordingly as church. If the church lives before God, “then theological doctrine will see the church in the trinitarian history of God’s dealing with the world”(Moltmann 1992: 5).

The church is understood within the trinitarian history of God’s dealing with the world, which is revealed in the story of Christ.

Christ thus becomes the church’s foundation, her power and her hope. For the church to be truthful she needs to listen only to Christ, be alone formed and shaped by the story of Christ and be there where Christ is. Then the church will be a truthful community, created by the truthful narrative of Christ and thus be a liberating and redeeming power within the world.

The theological understanding of the church is embedded in this tradition, this story of Christ and His liberating power. The church, as the church of Christ, can only appeal and understand herself before her Lord – Jesus, the Christ. The Lordship of Christ is the church’s sole and all-embracing and determining factor (Moltmann 1992: 5). Likewise the members of the church, the believers, are also called to this total obedience to the Lordship of Christ which is all-embracing and undivided.

In this sense Christology and ecclesiology become totally intertwined.

“Every statement about the church will be a statement about Christ. Every statement about Christ also implies a statement about the church; yet the statement about Christ is not exhausted by the statement about the church because it also goes further, being directed toward the messianic kingdom which the church serves” (Moltmann 1992:6).

2 Corinthians 5: 15: “He indeed died for all, so that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised” (The African Bible).

The church is called to subordinate all her interests and the interests of her members

under the interest of Christ, which means that the story of Christ crucified becomes the dominant determining story for the church and her members.

The church is called to stand before God, to give account before the triune God and the story of the triune God, which is her story. This is the task of theology and it is a critical task. It is the task of this chapter to reflect on the theory-laden practices of the church in the *postmodern global village* in the light of this task of theology. This task is therefore critical as it challenges the church with the story of her subject. Yet this task also needs to be done before humanity and the world, in other words it needs to be relevant to the context and the times in which the church lives. The Church's dimension before God/the story of Christ is not in contrast to her obligation towards humanity, because her relationship to Christ makes her involved in the world. The church's faithfulness to Christ forces her to turn to the world.

“...a Christology which is not a social ethic is deficient. From this perspective the most “orthodox” Christologies are inadequate when they fail to suggest how being a believer in Jesus provides and requires that we have the skills to describe and negotiate our social existence” (Hauerwas 1981:37).

I will now reflect on this dimension of the church, her skill in negotiating her social existence in the world and her obligation towards the world.

## **6.2 The church's relevance and obligation towards humanity and the world**

The church as was discovered in 4. *The Dimensions within which the church needs to describe her identity* has an obligation towards the history of the world. This obligation, as understood by Paul in the letter to the Romans, is a missionary charge. The church, especially in the protestant tradition, has neglected this missionary charge as the theology of the reformation focussed its attention of the justification of the sinner through grace, unlike Paul who focussed on the commission to proclaim the Gospel to all the nations both Jews and Gentiles.

“Since there was at that time no proclamation of the Word outside the church, the call is no doubt seen as something that has already happened, something accomplished by the apostles, from which we still profit today; it is no longer a divine action in the present which we experience too” (Schlatter 1897:7).

This idea is still very prominent in Christian societies where the church is seen as the guardian of the national religion and although this view changed in later years with the discovery of new lands and people, there are still remnants of this understanding of mission in the church today – the idea that mission is something for certain individuals in the church at large, but certainly not the task of the church as a whole.

Yet the church stands before humanity and the world as it stands before God. The church does not have a mission, but the very reverse is true “that the mission of Christ creates its own church. Mission does not come from the church; it is from mission and in the light of mission that the church has to be understood” (Moltmann 1992:10).

The church stands in the story of the triune God, which is the story of God with the

world. Therefore the church stands within the *missio Dei*. If the church is the church of Christ then the church stands in the mission of Christ (*missio dei*) which is described in Luke 4.

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.” Luke 4:18-19 (The African Bible).

The church is called to proclaim the Gospel of the coming kingdom which as Jesus says: “Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing” Luke 4:21 (The African Bible). The most primitive Christology argues that the Gospel is the story of the man who had the authority to preach that the kingdom of God is at hand. Jesus, through the story of his life, proclaimed the dawn of the kingdom of God. His story forms the ethos of the kingdom.

“By recovering the narrative dimension of Christology we will be able to see that Jesus did not have a social ethic, but his story is a social ethic”(Hauerwas 1981: 37).

If Jesus’ story is a social ethic then the church, which is created by His story, needs to exemplify that ethic.

The proclamation of the kingdom of God is the most important element in the mission of Jesus and therefore also is the most important element in the mission of the Spirit through the church. The church needs to understand herself within this dimension before humanity and the world, and that is to be sent like the Father sent the Son and the Holy Spirit, because then the church will understand herself within the history of the triune God and within the *missio dei*.

This *missio dei* is not the expansion of the church, but the proclamation of the kingdom and it is the glorification not of the church, but the glorification of the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit (Moltmann 1992:11). How does the church engage with the world in this *missio dei*?

I have said earlier that the church needs to disengage in order to engage and this is a continuous process and not a once and for all event. I would like to briefly reflect on this idea of disengagement in order to engage with the world. The disengagement cannot be complete, because if one is completely distinct from a given entity then you cannot communicate with it. “Genuine engagement of anything or anyone presupposes a dynamic of difference and sameness, distinction and participation, transcendence and mutuality”(Hall 1997:52).

Romans 12:2: “Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect.”  
Matthew 28:19: “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit”(The African Bible).

It seems as if the *missio dei* needs just such a disciple community which distinguishes

itself from the world yet enters into the world. The church needs to become an alien in her own land. This can very often lead to an awkwardness but this is the church's calling to be fools for Christ.

“If we are faithful and imaginative enough to disentangle our authentic tradition or tradition of belief from its cultural wrapping, we will have something to bring to our world that it does not have – a perspective on itself, a judgment of its pretensions and injustices, an offer of renewal and hope. Only as community that does not find its sources of identity and vocation within its cultural milieu can the church acquire any intimations of “gospel” for its cultural milieu”(Hall 1997:55-56).

### 6.3 The church before God's future with the world

The third dimension of the identity of the church is within the context of God's future with the world. It is the future and the hope of the kingdom of God and the consummation of all creation in God that leads the church into a critical fellowship with the world. It is a critical and liberating fellowship that seeks holistic liberation for a new fellowship with God, humanity and creation. The church in her dimension before God's future places her on the side of the oppressed and humiliated and there she is sustained by hope.

“For the adventure in which the church plays a part is sustained only through hope, a hope disciplined by patience, since we recognize that our hope is eschatological – that is, that we live in a time when that for which we hope is not soon to become a full reality”(Hauerwas 1981:5).

From the three dimensions of the doctrine of the church it is clear that the church finds herself within the story of the triune God and that Christ is her author and subject. These three dimensions together form a narrative unity, which is the story of God with the world.

I have discussed the dimensions in which the church needs to understand and describe herself. I will now turn to the church's relationship within these dimensions and describe how these relationships are guided by the Gospel truth.

#### 6.4 Summary of the dimensions within which the church needs to describe her identity

The church is a narrative community, which is created by the truth of the Gospel. The Gospel and the interpretation of the Gospel over the centuries forms her living tradition. Yet the members of the church are also exposed to other traditions and narratives and therefore the church needs to understand and describe herself within these other traditions as well. There are three dimensions within which the church needs to describe her identity, namely before God, before humanity and before God's future with the world. The church, with her living narrative tradition, is in a critical hermeneutical dialogue with these other narratives. To be in critical hermeneutical dialogue with these other traditions the church needs to disengage (be separated that is to be defined by God's Story) to be able to critically engage these other narratives. These three dimensions only have meaning and make

sense if they are understood within the narrative of the triune God as revealed to the church through the story of Christ. Christ is the church's author and her subject, therefore the church's task is to discern this subject and author as clearly and comprehensively as possible and then seek to live by that. She is called to respond to Christ alone and in this faithful response she arrives at her truth (her true identity) and becomes free and a liberating power in the world. It is her relationship to Christ that also determines her relationship with and dimension to the world. This dimension to the world is a messianic and missionary dimension as the church becomes part of the mission of God. The Father who sent the Son and the Spirit also sends the Church in the power of the Spirit into the world and so the Church becomes part of the Story and the *Missio Dei*. This mission becomes meaningful only if understood in the eschatological history of Christ, in other words in the story of God's future with the world. Thus the church needs to describe her identity within these three dimensions as understood as the history of the triune God revealed in Christ.

## 7. THE RELATIONSHIPS WHICH ARE INTEGRAL TO THE CHURCH'S IDENTITY

The question that I am struggling with in this chapter is the identity of the church. This identity, as I have discovered in this study, is necessarily a narrative identity. Therefore the church will discover her identity within her story, which is the story of the triune God as revealed in the story of Christ. The church is born in Christ and is incorporated in a story that culminates in the glorification of the Father, through the Son by the power of the Holy Spirit. The church's identity is set within the dimensions of this story, but identity also has to do with relationships with others.

The church finds herself in numerous relationships. The first relationship in which will be discussed is the relationship between the church and her members. This is a complex relationship as the church is experienced in this relationship in two very different ways. Firstly, the church is experienced as the local community/ congregation with all its struggles and problems. Secondly, the church is also experienced by each believer as a statement of faith (*credo ecclesiam*). These two experiences of the church can very often be very contradictory. The second relationship is the relationship between the church and the story of Christ. The third relationship is the relationship between the church and the historical situation in the world. The fourth relationship is between the church and the trinitarian history of God. I will briefly touch on these four relationships in which the church finds herself.

### 7.1 The relationship between the church as a social reality of experience and the church of faith (*credo ecclesiam*)

Many of the frustrations with regards to the church arise out of this relationship, which can be seen as a relationship between ideal and real. Yet, if we want to describe the church and more specifically the story of the church, all that we have at our disposal is a historical and social institution (Moltmann 1992:20). This social and historical does not really do justice to the identity and character of the church, because an important



part, probably the most important part of the church, namely what is believed and stated in the confession of faith, is not taken into consideration. Paul Tillich describes the relationship in the following way: “What can we make of the ‘paradox’ that the churches participate, on the one hand, in the ambiguities of life in general and of the religious life in particular and on the other hand, in the unambiguous life of the Spiritual Community?” (Tillich 1963:165)

The question is: how can one identify the church or understand her character when one is dealing with the essence of her being, but at the same time her form, (Ebeling 1966:94) which seems to be at times contradictory?

“The church never existed in a historically demonstrable ideal form, a form in which faith and experience coincided”(Moltmann 1992:21). Luther already struggled with this question. He formulated it with the idea of the invisible church - “*abscondita est ecclesia, latent sancti*”= Verborgen is die Kirche, die Heiligen sind unbekannt” (Pöhlmann 1990:317).

Moltmann offers three possibilities of how this relationship can be understood.

### 7.1.1 Paradoxical identity

“The church is ‘at the same time’ the object of faith and the object of empiricism. By the way of this paradoxical ‘at the same time’ it partakes of the paradox of Christ’s proclamation, which preaches the historical cross of Christ as being at the same time an eschatological saving event. Its paradoxical ‘at the same time’ corresponds to Christian existence, which is at once eschatological and historical” (Moltmann 1992:22).

These two, namely eschatology and history, come together in the instant when this concept is grasped in faith (Bultmann 1957:154).

The paradoxical identity brings with it tension and conflict between sin and righteousness, spirit and flesh and thus presses forward towards redemption by virtue of its hope (Moltmann 1992:23). This paradoxical identity does not really solve the problem because sinful humanity does not necessarily correspond to empirical humanity and secondly the creative righteousness of God corresponds ultimately only to a new creation which is understood eschatologically and not as that which already exists in the here and now. This paradoxical understanding is not very useful in the description and understanding of the church.

### 7.1.2 The anticipation of hope

“Basically speaking, this picks up the ancient doctrine of sanctification, which has justification as its premise and existence in this world as its condition. Here the church is ‘at the same time’ the object of hope and the object of experience” (Moltmann 1992:24).

The church being part of the history of Christ has a promise and a hope implanted into her very being. This promise and hope she continually realizes and then also compromises, testifies to and betrays through the forms she assumes in history and

society. It is this anticipated hope which drives the church and inspires her. The church's identity needs to be understood in the sense of transition and of continual conversion from sin to holiness, from division to unity and from particularity to universality (Moltmann 1992:25).

This understanding of the church's identity could easily fall for the temptation to think that there is a continuous progress in the church's history. Therefore this understanding needs to be very conscious of the freedom that is created through grace. "Only by virtue of its remembrance of the one who was crucified can the church live in the presence of the one who is risen – that is to say, can live realistically in hope" (Moltmann 1992:26).

The danger of this way of thinking is to see the church as an ideal that will never be reached. "Die Kirche is nicht ein Ideal, nicht ein Stern, den man nie einholen kann, sondern greifbare Wirklichkeit; sie ist nicht Idee Christi, sondern Leib Christi" (Pöhlmann 1990:324).

### 7.1.3 Sacramental identification

"Das Eigentliche der Kirche liegt hiernach nicht...neben oder hinter ihrer äußeren Gestalt, sondern es liegt in ihr" (E. Kinder quoted in Pöhlmann 1990:324-325).

The essence of the church cannot be seen as separate from the empirical reality of the church so that there are two churches namely one empirical social reality and the other the essential invisible church.

"Eben darum sind die sichtbare und unsichtbare Kirche nicht zwei Kirchen: eine irdisch-geschichtliche Gemeinschaft und über oder hinter dieser eine supranatural geistige, sondern, wie wir schon sahen: die eine die Gestalt, die andere das in dieser verborgene, aber auch sich darstellende, in ihr zu erfragene Geheimnis einer, derselben Kirche: die sichtbaren sich darstellend und zu erfragen, beide nicht in ihrer Sonderung, sondern in ihrer Einheit der Leib, die irdisch-geschichtliche Existenzform des einen lebendigen Herrn Jesus Christus" (Barth KD IV,1 1953: 747).

A sacramental understanding offers a way out of this 'dualism'.

"Here the whole church is orientated towards the sacramental representation of the history of Christ and the eschatological future in, with and beneath the word, the bread and the wine. Sacramental thinking links together the remembrance of Christ with the hope of glory in the present tokens of liberating and uniting grace" (Moltmann 1992:26).

It all comes together in the Gospel and the Eucharist. In other words the eschatological and the historical, the experienced and the hope for are united in the sacrament of the church, the Word and the Eucharist. In the eschatological is already present the historical church, the essential nature of the church is present in the social church and the coming kingdom of God is already real and present in the community of believers. The point of departure for this understanding must be a definite event. "This definite

event which ‘makes the church the church’ is the sacramental event”(Moltmann 1992:27). This sacramental event is the Word of God which is proclaimed in the human words during preaching, the coming of Christ in the bread and wine of the Eucharist and the coming of the Spirit in baptism (Moltmann 1992:27).

Bonhoeffer says the following about the invisibility and visibility of the church:

“The followers are a visible community; their discipleship visible in action which lifts them out of the world – otherwise it would not be discipleship. ....Flight into the invisible is a denial of the call” (Bonhoeffer1959:106).

“Anything that claims space is visible. Hence the Body of Christ can only be a visible Body, or else it is not a Body at all.”....”A truth, a doctrine, or a religion need no space for themselves. They are disembodied entities. They are heard, learnt and apprehended, and that is all. But the incarnate Son of God needs not only ears or hearts, but living men who will follow him. That is why he called his disciples into a literal, bodily following, and thus made his fellowship with them a visible reality”(Bonhoeffer 1959:223).

One cannot really distinguish between visible and invisible church, because the church as body of Christ must be visible as His body. Therefore I would like to return to the differentiation between experience and faith rather than visible and invisible. Here Moltmann offers the sacramental understanding.

“Because this sacramental happening cannot be ‘created’ and cannot be calculated, the solution of the problem of faith and experience, hope and reality, the nature and form of the church, has to be looked for in pneumatology. It is only in the history of the Spirit, which unites us with the history of Christ and is itself the history of the new creation, that all the definitions that have been given of faith and experience, paradox and dialectic, nature and form acquire the theological function and lose their partial character” (Moltmann 1992:27-28).

**In conclusion:** I would like to support the sacramental understanding of the church’s identity as I find in this understanding a strong narrative element. The sacred story of the church’s truth resonates in the mundane empirical story of the church.<sup>15</sup>

This takes us to the second relationship of the church namely the church as she is related to the story of Christ, which is the history of the Holy Spirit.

## 7.2 The church and her relationship to Christ in the history of the Spirit

The church needs to understand herself within the story of Christ. This story has a historical component and an eschatological component which both need to be taken into consideration. The historical component of the story deals with the incarnation of Christ, His birth in a stable in Bethlehem, His journey through the Roman occupied land of Israel and finally his entry into Jerusalem and His crucifixion. The eschatological character has to do with His resurrection, His transfiguration, exaltation, ascension and finally glorification with the Father at the end of history.

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<sup>15</sup> Chapter Two: 8.4.2 Mundane stories

These two, the historical and the eschatological, need to be seen and understood as a unity.

“And here the eschatological interpretation of his history must correspond to his historical embodiment of the eschatology. Hope must return to remembrance if it is not to lose its real foundation” (Moltmann 1992:28-29).

### 7.2.1 The church and the history of Christ

“The mere *notitia* of the history of Christ is not enough for faith. Only when we lay hold on the *promissio* which speaks to us out of that history, because it is inherent in it and because history is its experienceable sign, do we arrive at its application (*usus*) and an understanding of its meaning for us” (Moltmann 1992:29).

The promise of the history of Christ, for the reformers, was the forgiveness of sin through grace. For Luther the church was mainly to be understood as the *congregatio sanctorum*, the congregation of the sanctified (Article seven of the Augsburg Confession in *Unsere Glaube*). The congregation is seen as a community of justified sinners who partake in the means of grace, which is justification from sin through grace (Althaus 1983: 254-257).

If we understand the promise which is in the history of Christ, then the very history of Christ also becomes the very foundation of the promise.

Galatians 2: 16: “who know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.”;

Romans 4: 16: “For this reason, it depends on faith, so that it may be a gift and the promise may be guaranteed to all his descendants, not to those who only adhere to the law but to those who follow the faith of Abraham, who is the father of all of us,”; Ephesians 2:9 “...it is not from works, so no one may boast” (The African Bible).

The story of Christ is summed up in the two statements made by traditional Christology namely the meaning of the death on the cross is the *remissio peccatorum* and the meaning of his resurrection on the third day is *acceptatio personae ad vitam aeternam* (Moltmann 1992:30). The church is founded on the justification of the sinner through grace, which is founded on the story of Christ crucified. Yet the sinners are justified and liberated for a new life and the history of Christ is then unfolded in a new obedience.

Luther understood this dual meaning in the church as gift and duty. “Diese Gemeinschaft bedeutet Gabe und Aufgabe, Gnade und Beruf zugleich, für jedes Glied der Kirche“ (Althaus 1983:263).

Romans 6: 8f “If, then, we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him. We know that Christ, raised from the dead, dies no more; death no longer has power over him as to his death, he died to sin once and for all; as to his life, he lives for God. Consequently, you too must think of yourselves as (being)

dead to sin and living for God in Christ Jesus” (The African Bible).

This new life is unfolded not only in new obedience but also in a new fellowship namely the body of Christ according to Romans 12:4ff to each member of this body is given the manifestation of the Spirit which are the charismatic powers of the new creation (1 Corinthians 12:7ff).

“If, therefore, the justification of sinners is the meaning of the history of Christ, then the meaning of the justification of sinners is the liberating lordship of Christ over the dead and the living, i.e., the new creation in him” (Moltmann 1992:31).

So what is the meaning of the story of Christ for the church taking all the above into consideration? It is that Christ is the Lord over past, present and future? Christ becomes the Lord over the story of the Church. This is the final goal of the story of Christ as expressed in 1 Corinthians 15 and specifically in verse 25.

1 Corinthians 15: 25: “For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death, for “he subjected everything under his feet. But when it says that everything has been subjected, it is clear that it excludes the one who subjected everything to him. When everything is subjected to the one who subjected everything to him, so that God may be all in all” (The African Bible).

This is the final purpose of the story of Christ – the glorification of God in all of creation. Thus the teleological question about the meaning of the story of Christ leads us “beyond every purpose that can be comprehended in any present and particular sense. It leads us into universal eschatology”(Moltmann 1992:32).

This is the story of Christ and therefore also the story of the church, being the community of justified sinners, who are a new creation, living in a new obedience and empowered by the Spirit to fulfill this story of Christ. Therefore the Church exists in the power of the Holy Spirit and is formed by the story of Christ.

### 7.2.2 The church exists in the power of the Holy Spirit

The church is created as a language community by the narrative truth of the story of Christ. This narrative truth is revealed to the church through the power of the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who reveals God’s narrative truth in the mundane stories of the biblical witness and the preaching of the minister.

It is the Holy Spirit who proclaims Christ alone.

“It proclaims Christ alone; but the fact that it proclaims him is already the advent of the future of God in the world. It believes Christ alone; but the fact that it believes is already a sign of hope. In its liberation it follows Christ alone; but this is already the bodily anticipation of the redemption of the body. In the Lord’s Supper it remembers and makes present the death of Christ, which leads to life; but the fact that this happens is a foretaste of the peace to come. It only confesses Jesus, the crucified, as Lord; but the kingdom of God is anticipated in this confession. This relationship between what happens and the fact that it happens can only be understood pneumatologically“ (Moltmann 1992:33).



The church is part of the triune story of God and thus the church is part of the messianic kingdom through the power of the Holy Spirit who finds in the church its home (Harvey 1999:25). The church is the Spirit's agency for the world mission of the Gospel (McCledon 1994:433).

**In conclusion:** The truth of Christ creates a historical community through the power of the Spirit. This community is part of the messianic project of the triune God and in this sense the church is the eschatological creation of the Holy Spirit. It is in this sense "that history passes into eschatology and eschatology into history" all through the work of the Holy Spirit (Moltmann 1992:33).

### 7.3 The relationship between the church and the history of the world

How does the church understand her relationship with regards to the history of the world?

The church has a history and a tradition which separates her from the world. "Such separation is required by the very fact that the world knows not the God we find in the scripture"(Hauerwas 1981:68). I have also tried to show in this study that the church has a certain obligation to the world in the sense of her *missio dei*. But how does the church understand the history of the world?

This relationship and understanding has changed within every period of history alternating between end time pessimism to kingdom optimism. It was only with the dawn of dialectical theology that her relationship to the history of the world could be seen differently than these two options. The signs of the times are no longer interpreted either optimistically or pessimistically, but there is seen to be only one sign of the time and that is Christ and as Paul would say Christ crucified. This Christological concentration determines the church's relationship to the history of the world. If the church proclaims salvation it simultaneously proclaims disaster, as salvation is proclaimed and not consummated (Moltmann 1992:48). Thus the relationship between the church and the history of the world needs to be understood within the context of the history of God. It is within this context that her relationship with the world is defined.

"The world is sometimes enemy, sometimes partner of Church, often antagonist, always one to be befriended; now it is the co-knower, now the one that does not know what the Church knows, now the knower of what the church does not know" (Hauerwas 1981:91).

The Gospel calls for a decision of faith and therefore divides the world into believers and non-believers. The church which stands in the creative power of the Spirit of Christ within a story that culminates in the glorification of God in His all-embracing kingdom will necessarily be like the yeast that infiltrates world history and produces discord (Moltmann 1992:49). In this sense the church, as the proclaimer of the Gospel, has this dual effect that it proclaims Christ crucified and with that comes the experience of liberation and the signs and wonders of the kingdom, but at the same time it also

brings forth the signs of crisis, because of a world estranged from God in need of redemption. It is like the dual function of the Gospel, which proclaims liberation and freedom from sin and death through grace, but at the same time also functions as a law which condemns.

The world is the community to which Christ comes (Niebuhr 1956:26) and thus to which the church addresses itself. It is through the church that the world is given a history. "Indeed the term "world" derives its intelligibility from there being a people who can supply a history for the world" (Hauerwas 1981:91).

This does not mean that the church denies the multiplicity of narratives in the world or that she tries to force them into an artificial harmony. But she is called to witness to God and God's story with the world in which this diversity has meaning and the divided nature of the world is made intelligible.

"The church, which is too often unfaithful to its task, at the very least must lay claim to being the earnest of God's Kingdom and thus able to provide the institutional space for us to rightly understand the disobedient, sinful, but still God-created character of the world" (Hauerwas 1981:92).

#### **7.4 The relationship between the church and the trinitarian history of God**

In the previous section (5.3) I reflected upon the church's relationship to the history of the world. This relationship to world history would be rather arbitrary if one did not also understand the world history to be the trinitarian history of God. The church is part of this history and she needs to understand herself as part of this universal history of God with the world.

"If a single and special phenomenon like the church wants to understand itself in the history of God's dealings with the world, then it has to conceive itself in the movement of history not above it and not at its end" (Moltmann 1992:52).

God has chosen the church to be part of His trinitarian story with the world. The messianic community, though frail and fallible, shared in the life and activity of the triune God through its participation in the faithfulness of Christ (Harvey 1999:25).

How does the church conceive the movement of history while she herself is involved in the movement of history?

"If we talk about the 'trinitarian history of God', this then means the livingness of God which has moved out of itself, which cannot be fixed by any definition, but can only be understood through participating and engage knowledge" (Moltmann 1992:52).

The church participates in this movement of God in the trinitarian history of the world as one element. Therefore the church's attempts to understand her own identity must necessarily include attempts to understand the movement of God in the universal triune history of God.

The church needs to understand the triune history of God with the world.

“The determining outlook of seeing oneself in the movement of the world through the history of God, starts from the perception of the history of Christ and from the experience of the Spirit in the light of its sending” (Moltmann 1992:53).

The history of Christ needs to be understood in the light of his origin in the sending of the Father. The Gospels tell the story of the sending of Jesus from the Father for the salvation of the world. The concept of sending is intended so that the whole appearance, history and meaning of Christ’s history can be understood in the light of God, the Father, who sent him.

Therefore the history of Jesus is also the revelation of the Father. In a similar way the sending of the Spirit can be understood. The Trinity is revealed through the sending of the Son and the Spirit.

“The Trinity in the origin is the foundation of the Trinity in the sending and hence the Trinity in the sending reveals the Trinity in the origin as being from eternity an open Trinity” (Moltmann 1992:55).

The story of the sending of Christ and the Spirit makes it impossible to understand the Trinity as a closed perfect entity that is self-sufficient, because this story of Christ reveals to us that the Trinity in its origin is open to the sending of the Son and the Spirit. Therefore it is open to the history of humanity and the experience of history. This openness of the divine Trinity is not out of ‘deficiency of being’, but on the basis of “divine fullness of being and superabundance of life which desires to communicate itself” (Moltmann 1992:56).

The divine history of the triune God is revealed in the history of Christ and this history of Christ can be understood from two sides: from the origin and from the future. If one looks at the history of Christ from the past then one understands this story in the light of the sending and mission of Christ which was his messianic mission. If one looks at it from the perspective of the future, then one understands it from the perspective of its goal, the resurrection from the dead. These two perspectives are not alternatives, but only together give the full description of the story of Christ. The same can once more be said about the story of the Holy Spirit. From the side of its sending the history of the Spirit links up with the history of Christ, but from the side of the goal, it brings about a new creation (Moltmann 1992:57). The eschatological goal of Christ’s story is the glorification of God and the lordship of God. Looking at the history of the triune God from the perspective of the goal of Christ’s history it is the glorification of the Trinity that is its goal.

“The eschatological meaning of the messianic mission of Christ and the Spirit lies in the glorifying of God and the liberation of the world, in the sense that God is glorified through the liberation and healing of creation, and that he does not desire to be glorified without his liberated creation” (Moltmann 1992:60).

If one looks at these two perspectives in which one can understand the history of Christ and the spirit within the context of God’s history with the world then one comes to the realization that there is one distinct direction.

“The Trinity in the sending is, from its eternal origin, open to the world and to men. For with this the history of God’s seeking love is begun. The Trinity in the

glorification is, from its eschatological goal, open for the gathering and uniting of men and the whole creation with God and in God. In it the history of the gathering love of God is completed. Through the sending of the Son and the Spirit the history of the Trinity is opened for the history of the gathering, uniting and glorifying of the world in God and of God in the world. The opening and the completing correspond to one another in the openness of the triune God”(Moltmann 1992:60).

The Holy Spirit is not only viewed as the force of glorification, but also as the force of unification. The Trinity is viewed as an ontological unity in the origin in its sending of the Son and the Spirit. In the eschatological anticipation of history, the unity of the triune God is more than the unity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but includes the unity with the whole of creation as well as being linked to the salvation of the whole of creation (Moltmann 1992:61).

Franz Rosenzweig understands the Shema Israel as follows: “To acknowledge God’s unity – the Jew calls it uniting God. For this unity is, in that it becomes; it is a Becoming unity. And this Becoming is laid on the soul of man and in his hands”(Rosenzweig 1954:192).

This is suggested in the Shekina: “God himself cuts himself off from himself, he gives himself away to his people he suffers with their suffering, he goes with them into the misery of the foreign land, he wanders with their wanderings....God himself, in that he ‘sells himself to Israel – and what should be more natural for ‘God our Father!’ – and suffers its fate with it, makes himself in need of redemption. In this way, in this suffering, the relationship between God and the remnant points beyond itself” (Rosenzweig 1954:192-194).

The church today finds itself in this period between the ontological unity of the Trinity in its origin and the eschatological Becoming unity of the triune God with all of creation. This period is the time of God’s dealings with the world through His Son and the Spirit. God, as a loving and seeking God, enters history through the incarnation of the Son and the Spirit and thus experiences history in its fullest breadth and depth. If God thus opens Himself to history and to the experience of history he cannot be unchangeable, nor is He immune to suffering if He experiences history through the incarnation. This changes some of the traditional views of God. God in His triune story is experienced as a God who is changeable, open to suffering and vulnerable.

“The Father has become ‘another’ through the Son’s self-giving, and the Son too has become ‘another’ through his experience of suffering in the world. Through his love for the Son, who experiences sin of the world in his death on the cross, God experiences something which belongs essentially to the redemption of the world: he experiences pain. In the night when the Son dies on the cross, God himself experiences abandonment in the form of this death and this ejection”(Moltmann 1992: 62).

Although this is a new experience for God, He was open to this experience from the very beginning as he opened Himself to be a God of love and seeking the redemption of the world. “God experiences the cross, but this also means that he has absorbed

this death into eternal life, that he suffers it in order to give the forsaken world his life. Because of that he does not want to be glorified in any other way than through the glorification of the one who was crucified, ‘the lamb that was slain’”(Moltmann 1992:63).

In a very similar way, Moltmann argues that God does not seek His glorification without the glorification of the Spirit, which includes the glorification of humanity and all of creation (Moltmann 1992:63).

In these two directions of understanding the story of Christ is also the understanding of the triune history of God. In the story of Christ suffering under Pontius Pilate, crucifixion, death, descending into hell, is all part of God’s experience of the suffering of history. It is all God’s suffering of the unredeemed world. As God becomes vulnerable (in the crib of Bethlehem) God suffers under Pilate, God is crucified and buried and descends into hell. Yet if one looks at the story of Christ in the other direction in the view of the resurrection, exaltation and perfection and ascension then we can also talk of God’s joy. “In this way God creates history. God experiences history in order to effects history. He goes out of himself in order to gather to himself”(Moltmann 1992:64).

It is clear from this Story of the triune God in relation to the history of the world, that the history of the world is the Story of the triune God. It is a story that takes place within the Trinity. What is the church’s role and function within this story? It is not the church’s task to bring about salvation of the world, but salvation comes through the sending of the Son and the gathering of the Father, through the Spirit, which includes the church. Thus the church “participates in Christ’s messianic mission and in the creative mission of the Spirit” (Moltmann 1992:65).

In conclusion we can say that the church of Christ is as the Augsburg confession states it in article VII:

*“congregatio sanctorum, in qua evangelium pure docetur et recte administrantur sacramenta, Es wird auch gelehrt, daß allezeit eine heilige, christliche Kirche sein und bleiben muß, die die Versammlung aller Gläubigen ist, bei denen das Evangelium rein gepredigt und die heiligen Sakramente laut dem Evangelium gereicht werden“ (Das Augsburger Bekenntnis in Unser Glaube 1991:64).*

This understanding of the church is also found in the Barmen Declaration article 3. Yet maybe in the light of the above, the church in her relationship to the triune History of God with the world, more needs to be said about the church.

1 Corinthians 12:7: “To each individual the manifestation of the Spirit is given for some benefit.”

The church could be seen as that community, that place within the history of the world, where the creative Spirit manifests itself in the creative workings of the triune history of God. The true church is the church that participates in the divine triune history of God with the world.

This means that the true identity of the church is there where the church shares in the love and openness of the sending God, who has opened himself for the suffering of the



world history. So the true church is there where there is a fellowship of love, a love that participates in the suffering of history, a fellowship that takes up its cross, where the Spirit's sighings are heard in the cry for liberation. The true church is the church that is defined by the story of Christ, in other words a church under the cross, open to the struggle of history. But this is only the one side of the divine story to be open to the suffering of love in world history. There is also the participation in the joy of God. There where the church celebrates the small signs of hope and joy of the kingdom, the kingdom is already sacramentally present in this history.

The true church is the church that through the power of the Spirit participates in the triune history of God with the world. The early church tried to live this, as they believed that the wisdom of God would be made known to the world through their way of life (Harvey 1999:25). The body of Christ is the primary bearer of the meaning of history.

The church is thus neither simply the carrier of a message about the work of the triune God in the world, nor the result of that message, but it is that message. The community was the mission (Yoder 1994b: 91).

In this study I have tried to place the church within her dimensions and her context within the divine triune story of God. Before I go on to describe her identity in more detail as the church of Christ, I would like to summarise the description thus far.

### **7.5 Summary of the relationships which are integral to the church's identity**

The church is embedded in the triune history of God as revealed in Christ and she understands herself within these narrative dimensions, but she does not live in isolation or as an abstract concept but in relationships to others. The church needs to understand herself within these relationships. Four fundamental relationships were identified:

- 1) The relationship between the church as experienced and as believed
- 2) The relationship between the church and the story of Christ in the history of the Spirit
- 3) The relationship between the church and the history of the world
- 4) The relationship between the church and the trinitarian history of God.

The first relationship needs to be understood as a sacramental narrative relationship, that the *credo ecclesiam* is present in the historical empirical church, just as Christ is present in the Word and the sacraments. This can only be understood within the story of the Spirit which leads us to the second relationship. This is the relationship between the church and the story of Christ through the power of the Spirit. The church is related to the story of Christ in a dual manner. Firstly she remembers the history and incarnation of Jesus and secondly she lives in the hope of His eschatological story. These two stories are not separate, but need to be seen as a unity. In the church's relationship to this unified story she understands herself as the community of justified sinners, who have been liberated from the power of sin and death and thus became part of a new creation which lives in obedience and in the anticipated hope of the Lordship of Christ, which is

already realised in the faithfulness of the church. This anticipated hope brings the church into the third relationship with the world, as this anticipated hope is universal and not just confined to the church herself.

The third relationship is the relationship between the church and the history of the world. This is a paradoxical relationship of the church being separated from a world that does not know God and at the same time because she knows God she is involved with the world in the *Missio dei*. It is within this context that the church interprets and understands the history of the world. In the past she either understood the world as kingdom come or as the disaster of the end time. But there is also a third option and that is to understand the history of the world through the perspective of Christ's story. It is in this relationship to the story of Christ that the church's relationship to the history of the world is defined. It is only with regards to the world's relationship to Christ that the history of the world can be understood and interpreted by the church within the context of the *missio dei*, which brings us to the last relationship. The last relationship is the relationship between the church and the trinitarian history of God. If the church really wants to understand history and her relationship in history as part of history she needs to understand the *missio dei*, the history of the triune God. The history of the triune God is characterised by the sending of the Son and the Spirit by the Father. The Father sends the Son and the Spirit to reveal Himself to the world, thus the Trinity in its origin needs to be open to history because it has the desire to send and reveal itself to the world. The Trinity is open to history and the suffering of history. The identity of the Father (Trinity) is revealed in Christ in both His incarnation and His exaltation and glorification in the end. It is thus in this context that the Trinity also needs to be understood. The Trinity responds to history by sending, by opening itself to the suffering of history and culminates in the glorification and unification of all of creation in the end. This is the story of the Trinity and it is within this story that the church needs to understand herself as well as the history of the world, because it is this trinitarian story that creates history. The church cannot only be understood as the gathering of the justified sinners around the Word and the correct administration of the sacraments, but she needs to be understood within this trinitarian history.

I have now described the dimensions and the context of the church in her relationships and discovered that she participates in world history through the power of the Spirit in obedience to Christ.

In the next section of this chapter I would like to look at this obedience to the story of Christ. If this is how the church is involved in world history then one needs to take a closer look at the story of Christ and critically reflect whether the church is obedient to this story, which is also the subject of her story.

## 8. THE STORY OF CHRIST AS THE CHURCH'S NARRATIVE

I have already mentioned the unity of ecclesiology with Christology.

“In this way modern Christology and ecclesiology ‘from below’ come close in structure to the idea of the extended incarnation, which bring Christology and ecclesiology into an organic connection with one another” (Moltmann 1992:73).

In the previous sections I tried to show that the only way to get to know Jesus as Christ is firstly through His story as believers find it in the Gospels, and secondly through the life of those who follow Christ, namely the church of Christ. This is the extended incarnation, in the sense that the truth of Christ and His Spirit lives in the narrative of church.