

**The relevance and suitability of Tim Keller's
contextualization for Reformed evangelical
ministry in urban South Africa**

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DEDICATION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This PhD is dedicated to my family with immense love and gratitude. I remember my parents, John and Alice, with much affection. They never gave up on the prodigal. Mom prayed; dad paid for my initial Bible training. To my lovely wife, Moekie: your patience, prayers and encouragement helped me stay the course. Thanks for bearing with me and humouring me when at times I was horribly preoccupied, discouraged and excitable. You are a gem! To our beloved children: Nick, our new daughter Sarah, and Mike – what a joy and privilege it is to be your parents. We thank God for you.

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This thesis is submitted in prayerful hope that it will in some measure stimulate and contribute to faithful gospel ministry in the desperately needy urban centres of South Africa. *Nkosi sikelel' iAfrika*

*“Oh give thanks to the LORD; call upon his name;
make known his deeds among the peoples!
Sing to him, sing praises to him;
tell of all his wondrous works!”* Psalm 105:1-2

ABSTRACT

Rapid urbanization, postmodernity and African Traditional Religion (ATR) pose significant challenges and opportunities for gospel ministry in South Africa. Reformed churches appear to be struggling to come to terms with these realities. The causes of declining impact and faltering witness could be several; but a sub-biblical, inadequate and superficial understanding of contextualization could be one among them.

Contextualization is a vital and essential component of authentic Christian ministry, yet it is fraught with dangers. The issue is how to engage faithfully and meaningfully with contemporary culture while remaining faithful to historic, orthodox Christianity in the Reformed tradition. Conservative pastors and missionaries tend to ignore the inevitability of contextualization, and under-contextualize, which results in a superficial engagement with culture, and thus irrelevance. On the other end of the spectrum are those who over-contextualize in the desire to be relevant, and who employ questionable methods and gimmickry. In this manner the central tenets of the gospel are jeopardized, and this results in syncretism that incorporates elements from other religions into Christian religious faith and practice, resulting in a loss of integrity and ultimately in assimilation to the surrounding culture.

Missiologists have long argued that the West should be considered a mission field and that Christian pastors should take the stance of cross-cultural missionaries. Keller's model of contextualization is worthy of careful consideration in urban South Africa. Keller has the appropriate theological convictions, and he is a practitioner with a proven track record. His value lies not only in his solid biblical-theological basis for his model of contextualization, but also in the fact that he posits a comprehensive, holistic model of contextualization in the Reformed tradition. While many conservative pastors tend to limit contextualization to the verbal proclamation of the gospel, Keller contends that all of ministry should be contextualized. His emphasis on holistic contextualization may dovetail well with the urban South African context, where socioeconomic issues, like the poor, unemployed, immigration, and health and education needs, and growing trends of agnosticism create significant opportunities for ministry.

The specifics of Keller's methodology cannot simply be translocated from New York to urban South Africa – this would represent a colossal failure in terms of contextualization. But in terms of principles, his model of deliberate, biblical, comprehensive contextualization could be utilized with great benefit in the burgeoning cities of South Africa.

Key terms:

Contextualization

Timothy Keller

Reformed evangelical

Urban South Africa

Postmodernism

Syncretism

African Traditional Religion (ATR)

OPSOMMING

Toenemende verstedeliking, postmodernisme en Tradisionele Afrika-Godsdiens bied besondere uitdagings en geleentheid vir die bediening van die evangelie in Suid Afrika. Dit wil voorkom asof gereformeerde kerke sukkel om met hierdie realiteit tred te hou. Daar mag baie redes vir die dalende impak en wankelende getuigenis van reformatoriese kerke in Suid-Afrika wees, maar 'n sub-Bybelse, onvoldoende en oppervlakkige begrip van kontekstualisering mag een so 'n rede wees.

Kontekstualisering is 'n kritiese en noodsaaklike komponent van ware Christelike bediening van die evangelie. Tog is dit met noemenswaardige gevare belaa. Die uitdaging is hoe om sinvol met die hedendaagse kultuur om te gaan, maar tegelykertyd getrou te bly aan die historiese, ortodokse Christelike geloof van die gereformeerde tradisie. Behoudende leraars en sendelinge is geneig om die onvermydelikheid van kontekstualisering te ignoreer. Die gevolg hiervan is dat hulle onderkontekstualiseer en dus onsensitief met die kultuur van die ontvangers omgaan, wat tot irrelevantheid lei. Aan die ander kant van die spektrum is daar diegene wat in hulle ywer om relevant te wees oor-kontekstualiseer en dus metodiek en slimmighede aanwend wat bevreemding kan word. Dan word die sentrale leerstellings van die evangelie op die spel geplaas, wat lei tot sinkretisme wat elemente van ander godsdienste tot die Christelike geloof en praktyk toevoeg. Die uiteinde hiervan is 'n verlies van integriteit en die uniekheid van die evangelie kompromitteer deur assimilering met die omliggende kultuur.

Missioloë voer al lank aan dat die Weste as 'n sendingveld beskou moet word en dat Christen-leraars die gesindheid van transkulturele sendelinge behoort in te neem. Met betrekking tot stedelike Suid-Afrika, verdien Keller se model van kontekstualisering deeglike oorweging deur reformatoriese kerke. Keller handhaaf duidelike gereformeerde teologiese oortuigings en het homself oor die jare as 'n praktisyn hiervan bewys. Sy waarde lê nie net in die Bybels-teologiese basis van sy model van kontekstualisering nie, maar ook in die feit dat hy 'n omvattende, holistiese model vir kontekstualisering binne die gereformeerde tradisie nastreef. Alhoewel baie behoudende leraars geneig is om kontekstualisering te beperk tot die verbale verkondiging van die evangelie, voer Keller aan dat alle aspekte van bediening gekontekstualiseer behoort te word. Sy beklemtoning van holistiese kontekstualisering mag goed inpas in die stedelike Suid Afrikaanse konteks, waar sosio-ekonomiese kwessies soos armoede, werkloosheid, interaksie met buitelanders, gesondheids- en opvoedkundige behoeftes, asook die toenemende postmoderne neiging tot agnostisisme, beduidende geleentheid vir bediening van die evangelie bied.

Die spesifieke inslag van Keller se metodiek kan nie bloot eenvoudig vanaf New York na stedelike Suid Afrika oorgedra word nie – dit sou ’n massiewe fout in terme van kontekstualisering wees. Maar wat beginsels betref, kan Keller se model van berekende, Bybelse, holistiese kontekstualisering tot groot voordeel in die ontluikende stede van Suid Afrika aangevul en aangewend word.

Sleutel terme:

Kontekstualisering

Timothy Keller

Hervormd Evangelies

Stedelike Suid Afrika

Postmodernisme

Sinkretisme

Afrika Tradisionele-Geloof/Godsdiens

ABBREVIATIONS

AIC	African Instituted/Independent Churches
ANE	Ancient Near East
ATR	African Traditional Religion
BMR	Bureau of Market Research
CSIR	Council for Scientific and Industrial Research
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GKSA	Gereformeerde Kerke in Suid-Afrika
GVA	Gross Value Added
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament
PCA	Presbyterian Church of America
REACH-SA	Reformed Evangelical Anglican Church of South Africa
TGC	The Gospel Coalition
WCC	World Council of Churches
WTS	Westminster Theological Seminary
ZCC	Zion Christian Church

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the *English Standard Version*, 2011. Quotations marked “NIV” are from the *New International Version*, 1984.

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CHAPTER 1 BACKGROUND PROBLEM AND INTRODUCTION

Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.” (Luke 24:45–47)

In his important work *The Mission of God* (2006), C.J.H. Wright contends that the Bible does not merely contain prooftexts that support mission, but that the Bible itself is a “missional” phenomenon. He argues that, rather than talk of the biblical basis of mission, we should consider the missional basis of the Bible. In exegeting the above text, Wright (2006:30–32) asserts that the correct way for disciples of the risen Christ to read their Scriptures is to do so both messianically *and* missionally. He argues that “the full meaning of recognizing Jesus as Messiah... lies in recognizing also his role in relation to God’s mission for Israel for the blessing of the nations” (2006:31). Wright also cites the declaration of the apostle Paul in Acts 26:22–23, “To this day I have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: that the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles.” His central thesis (2006:531–532) is that all mission that we may initiate or be involved in flows from the prior and larger reality of the mission of God – to reconcile all of creation through the death of Christ at the cross (Col 1:20).

Similarly, Goheen (2011:191–193) affirms that God’s people are chosen by him for the sake of the world. The church is called to be an instrument in the world, and for the sake of the world. The Lausanne Covenant articulates this dynamic in the following way: “The one eternal God, Creator and Lord of the world, Father, Son and Holy Spirit... has been calling *out from the world* a people for himself, and *sending his people back into the world* to be his servants, for the extension of his kingdom, the building up of Christ’s body, and the glory of his name” (in Stott, 2009:12; emphasis mine).

Through sovereign grace, Reformed evangelical churches in South Africa share this calling and responsibility to proclaim the risen Christ to all peoples. It appears that Reformed evangelicals are battling to fulfil this mandate. The Reformed evangelical constituency in South Africa appears to be very small, at best maintaining its numbers, with ageing congregations, parochial mindsets and spiritual stagnation. While many Reformed evangelical churches show a healthy commitment to

contending for the faith (Jude 3), there seems to be a shortcoming in evangelistic fervour and in meaningfully engaging new generations with the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ. There are many possible reasons for the apparent faltering witness of Reformed evangelicals in South Africa, but this writer believes one relates to the critical subject of faithful and valid contextualization.

Reformed evangelicals need to understand that contextualization is imperative to faithful gospel ministry. Furthermore, they would be significantly helped if they had a faithful model and methodology to follow. This research identifies, analyses, critiques and evaluates one such theology and model: the model of Dr Tim Keller, a Presbyterian pastor-theologian from New York, USA.

In some respects, this research is a continuation and completion of the student's Master's dissertation (Koning, 2016), titled "A missiological study into the need and importance for Reformed Baptists to engage in deliberate Biblical contextualization in urban, post-modern South Africa".¹ Among the key findings of this research were the following (Koning, 2016:103–104):

- Qualitative and quantitative research indicates that Reformed evangelicals are struggling to reach new generations of South Africans with the good news of Jesus Christ.
- There is a substantial biblical-theological basis for careful, intentional contextualization. One cannot take the Scriptures seriously and yet be dismissive of contextualization.
- Deliberate biblical contextualization is always a vital component of authentic gospel ministry.
- While contextualization demands an appropriate stress on understanding contexts, worldviews and cultures, the authority and sufficiency of Scripture must always be clearly maintained.
- The context of ministry in South Africa is increasingly urban. In terms of its religious complexion, it could be best defined as nominal and postmodern.

1 Though this previous research focused on Reformed Baptists, it also presented research done among REACH-SA (Reformed Evangelical Anglican Church of South Africa), the Acts 29 network and GKSA (Gereformeerde Kerke in Suid-Afrika) for the sake of comparison. There was a substantial degree of overlap between the different groups in terms of their understanding and praxis of contextualization, as well as the challenges and opportunities facing them in their ministry.

- Just as cross-cultural missionaries have to learn a new language and become conversant with a new worldview and culture, so Reformed pastors in South Africa will need to connect with and communicate effectively with nominal, postmodern urbanites.

Having made a case for Reformed pastors to consider robust, deliberate contextualization, this writer then posed this question (2016:104–105): “Is there a credible model from the Reformed evangelical world to follow?” Such a model would have to be clearly Reformed and evangelical and have a sound methodology. He stated: “It is this researcher’s view that the theology and contextualization model of Dr Tim Keller and its applicability for South African urban contexts should be considered in further research.” This thesis explores that assertion. However, the scope of the study is expanded to incorporate the broader Reformed evangelical constituency in urban South Africa. There are two reasons for this:

- Though there are differences on secondary issues, Reformed evangelicals² share substantially the same theological convictions and concerns, embrace the same methodology, are united in their goals, and in South Africa share the same context.
- It is hoped that this research will prove to be helpful and constructive to a number of denominations and groups and serve the broader Reformed evangelical constituency in South Africa, and so extend the fame of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the glory of God.

The scope of this thesis involves the convergence and inter-relationship of the following key themes:

- Urban South Africa: its demographics, problems, prevalent worldviews and the present state of Reformed evangelical witness within it.
- Biblical contextualization: its importance, definition, dangers and complexities.
- Keller’s theology and praxis of deliberate contextualization: features, comparisons with other evangelical approaches, and suitability in the South African urban context.

The aim of this introductory chapter is to set the scene and articulate the problem by considering the most salient points of each of these themes.

2 A definition and discussion of the term “Reformed evangelical” will be considered in chapter 2. These shared convictions will be discussed in chapter 2.

1.1 Reformed evangelical ministry in urban South Africa

1.1.1 The strategic importance of urban centres in mission

Greenway (2009:559) contends that cities are the new frontiers of Christian missions. Many evangelical scholars, for example, Bakke (2002), Mohler (2010), Ott and Strauss (2010), Keller (2012a:135–180) and Goheen (2014:370–400), have pointed out the reality of global urbanization and the strategic importance of the city in contemporary mission. Consequently, they argue that ministry models must become increasingly urbanized. The United Nations (2014:1) anticipates that by 2050 the world will be 90 per cent urbanized. We are rapidly becoming a city-planet. Consequently, Goheen (2014:371) has written that “we have an urban future – and that future is rapidly becoming the present – whether we like it or not.” Mohler (2010) has warned: “If the Christian church does not learn new models of urban ministry, we will find ourselves on the outside looking in.”

South Africa currently has a population of marginally over 55 million, with a 63,9 per cent urbanization level. The median age of the population is 25,9 years. This country’s population is young and urban.³ This represents a considerable challenge, for a biblical, urban gospel ministry must be a contextualized ministry. Keller (2012a:90–91) has argued that churches in urban centres must be extremely sensitive to issues of contextualization, “because it is largely there that a society’s culture is being forged and is taking new directions.” Goheen (2014:392) highlights the need for urban studies, calling for research that is shaped by the gospel, and emphasizes the need for authentic contextualization.

In an online article in the *Mail & Guardian* (15 July 2014), Presence reported that the then Human Settlements minister, Lindiwe Sisulu, had told Parliament that housing delivery had fallen by 25 per cent over the previous five years. The country’s backlog stands at 2,3 million units – markedly more than the estimated deficit of 1,5 million in 1994. Sisulu indicated that the government is ill equipped to deal with the rate of urbanization and lamented the drastic drop in the delivery of houses.

3 According to Worldometers: <http://www.worldometers.info/world-population/southern-africa-population/> Date of access: 22 July 2016.

A very recent *Business Tech* article⁴ (26 August 2018) reported that the South African government is planning to create South Africa's first "mega city". Plans are under way to turn Gauteng's three core metro areas, Johannesburg, Ekurhuleni and Tshwane, into a "megatropolis" by 2030. The next phase will include the establishment of 12 new Gautrain stations, the establishment of "mega human settlements" instead of RDP housing, and a new regional airport. South African pastors will need to come to terms with the reality of rapid urbanization and the opportunities and challenges this presents to faithful gospel ministry.

1.1.2 The impacts of globalization and postmodernism

Generic features that have impacted cities globally have certainly impacted South African cities. Globalization is a term that has become popular in describing the new global reality. Goheen (2014:21) describes it as "the spread of the modern Western story of economic progress around the world, especially with the use of new information technology." He goes on to affirm that it is the single most adequate way of describing the context in which we live and work today. Ott and Strauss (2010:xvi) define globalization as the "phenomenon whereby the world is becoming economically, culturally, intellectually and technologically interconnected through travel, communication, immigration, commerce and education. Local life is increasingly influenced by and interdependent with events, people and powers around the globe." Keller (2005:1) illustrates this by asserting that New York and Los Angeles have been far more influential in forming the culture of teenagers in rural India or rural Mexico than their national or local governments have been. Bauckham (2005:83–112) deems globalization the greatest challenge to mission, devoting the last chapter of his book *The Bible and Mission* to this subject.

Flemming (2006:315), a contemporary missiologist, writes of postmodernity: "The context for articulating and embodying the gospel, particularly in Western societies, is in the throes of a seismic shift. It is not only more global; it is also increasingly postmodern." Hastings (2012:47) affirms that Western culture is marked by consumerism, materialism, hedonism, technocracy, cynicism and individualism. These realities are part and parcel of urban life in South Africa. There appears to be little doubt that South Africa is becoming increasingly post-Christian and postmodern. Keller (2005:2) argues that in academic circles postmodernism is considered a spent force. He argues that global city centres are a complex "salad bowl" of all worldviews – traditional, modern, postmodern and post-postmodern. While South African urban cultures are not

4 Available online at <https://businesstech.co.za/news/business/267311/government-is-planning-to-create-south-africas-first-mega-city-report/> Date of access: 26 Aug. 2018.

monochrome and identical, there seems every indication that the prevailing worldviews have been deeply influenced by postmodernity. Previous research (Koning, 2016:49–50) shows that many Reformed South African pastors consider their own urban contexts to be fundamentally postmodern and nominally Christian.

Additional evidence presented in chapter 5 will show that nominal Christianity is a very pressing problem facing the evangelical church in South Africa. The 2018 Lausanne (Rome) statement on nominal Christianity is pertinent here. The statement (Lausanne Movement, 2018) defines nominal Christians as “People who identify with a Christian church or the Christian faith, but are in contradiction with basic Christian principles with respect to becoming a Christian, faith, beliefs, church involvement and daily life.” It points out that nominal Christianity is a significant challenge where Christianity finds itself in a dominant situation, or where Christianity is a significant presence in society. The statement recognizes that nominal Christianity may take different shapes in different contexts and is shaped by culture, race and generation. South African pastors should heed the urgent call issued by the Lausanne (Lausanne Movement, 2018) delegation: “Therefore, the task of ‘bearing witness to Jesus Christ and all his teaching, in every nation, in every sphere of society, and in the realm of ideas’ is no less urgent in nominal Christian contexts. The first point of the Lausanne fourfold vision – ‘the gospel for every person’ – applies equally to those who carry the name ‘Christian’ but have never truly understood or welcomed ‘the gospel of God’s grace’ (Acts 20:24).”

1.1.3 The church scene in South Africa

Roy (2017:217) and Mandryk (2010:759–761) both point out the complex and diverse nature of the church scene in South Africa. Roy (2017:218) points out that charismatic churches have seen significant growth over the last two decades, but points out (2017:214) the steady decline in the membership of mainline evangelical churches over the same period. Apart from a bewildering array of broadly Protestant denominations and groupings that have historical origins in the West, South Africa has seen massive growth in African Instituted (or Independent) Churches (AICs), with an estimated 33 per cent of the black African population belonging to this group. Mandryk (2010:760), Roy (2017:219) and Nyirongo (1997:1–15) show that this group is itself incredibly diverse, ranging from Pentecostal to highly syncretistic and barely Christian at all. This, coupled with the influence of African Traditional Religion (ATR), adds to the diversity and complexity of the South African religious landscape.

Research presented in chapter 5 will indicate that Reformed evangelical groupings account for only a very small fraction of what is broadly considered “Christian” in South Africa. Roy (2017:214–217) suggests that the Reformed groupings are at best maintaining their numbers. In view of the steep population growth and rapid urbanization in South Africa, this is cause for concern and part of the motivation for this research. Koning (2016:50–52) has shown that some Reformed groups (including Reformed Baptists, REACH-SA and GKSA⁵) appear to be battling with these similar problems: dwindling numbers, ageing memberships, an ingrown and parochial mentality, nominalism, spiritual inertia, lack of new church-planting initiatives and limited fruit in reaching new generations. One GKSA pastor has written of “an almost unmovable nominal Christianity” (quoted in Koning, 2016:49–50).

1.1.4 Challenges and opportunities facing the church in South Africa

The aim here is to posit an accurate picture of South African urban realities that offer both great challenges and significant opportunities to the Reformed pastor or missionary. While there are grave challenges, there are also tremendous opportunities for gospel outreach. Mandryk (2010:757–763) cites the following factors as challenges facing the church in South Africa.

Government and leadership: “Corruption, cronyism and demagoguery are widespread...” (Mandryk, 2010:759) The legacy of apartheid continues to impact the nation. Inequalities and injustices of the past continue to shape the future. Though there is a level of toleration among the different South African races, meaningful reconciliation still eludes the nation as a whole. Xenophobic outbreaks of violence still plague the nation.

Poverty and unemployment: Land redistribution and affirmative action have been contentious. While there is a growing black middle class, extremes of wealth and poverty exist. According to a recent report⁶ issued by the World Bank, South Africa is the most unequal country in the world. The report analysed the country’s post-apartheid progress, focusing on 2006 to 2015. The report found that the top 1% of South Africans own 70,9% of the wealth, while the bottom 60% control only 7% of the country’s assets. More than half of South Africans (55,5%, or 30 million people) live below the national poverty level of R992 per month. The official unemployment rate

5 REACH-SA is the Reformed Evangelical Anglican Church of South Africa (formerly the Church of England in South Africa, or CESA). GKSA is an Afrikaans Reformed denomination, the Gereformeerde Kerke in Suid-Afrika.

6 According to a *Times Live* online article (4 April 2018) written by Nico Gouws. Available at: <http://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2018-04-04-poverty-shows-how-apartheid-legacy-endures-in-south-africa/> Date of access: 4 Apr. 2018.

was 27,7% in the third quarter of 2017, while youth unemployment was 38,6%. The report indicated that poverty has a “strong spatial dimension”, which demonstrates the enduring legacy of apartheid.

Health care: The public sector suffers poor management, underfunding and deteriorating infrastructure. Diseases such as HIV and tuberculosis, and a shortage of key personnel, compound the difficulties. Hundreds of NGOs make an essential contribution to addressing HIV/AIDS, TB, mental health, cancer and the development of public health systems. Though the HIV occurrence rate is dropping, the impact of AIDS is devastating and continues to be felt. According to Mandryk (2010:760), there are two million AIDS orphans in South Africa.

Crime and safety: Rape and violent crime rates are alarmingly high. “The proliferation of illegal firearms, poverty, desperation and lack of justice fuels hopelessness and anarchy” (Mandryk, 2010:759). General theft, violent robbery and drug-related crimes remain hugely problematic.

Urban dwellers: The enforced rural poverty among Africans in the apartheid era transformed into continued poverty in shantytowns, squatter camps, slums and townships. Conditions range from poor to terrible (Mandryk, 2010:760).

Young people and children: One third of the population are under 15, and 70% are under 35. The great challenge is meeting the needs of the poor who are without education and opportunities and become a fertile recruiting area for crime (Mandryk, 2010:761). In a *BBC News* article⁷ (29 January 2016), Nkosi reported that the then Minister of Education had likened the state of education to a national crisis. Out of nearly 800 000 grade 12 learners in 2015, 213 000 failed. The reality is far worse than that, for there is a massive dropout rate before matric. Out of 1,2 million seven-year-olds who started school in 2002, just under half went on to pass their school-leaving exams. Contributing factors are high numbers of learners in classrooms, inadequate teacher training and teaching methods, and lack of mother-tongue education.

Immigrants, both legal and illegal, have been streaming over South Africa’s borders, especially from Zimbabwe, Congo (DRC), Mozambique, Angola, Malawi, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal and Burundi. It is conservatively thought that there are at least one million Zimbabweans in the country. Anti-immigration sentiment has arisen, with dozens of riots and violence against those

7 Available online at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-35427853> Date of access: 4 Nov. 2017.

seeking refuge. This adds to the challenge of urban ministry, for it is believed that some inner-city churches minister to people of up to 30 different language groups.

In a Gospel Coalition (TGC) blogpost, “Prosperity teaching has replaced true gospel in Africa”⁸ (25 June 2015), Conrad Mbewe highlights the prevalence of the “prosperity gospel” as a major challenge facing the church in Africa. He states: “This erroneous teaching is filling churches across the continent with people who have no desire for true biblical salvation or godliness. Sadly, it’s spreading like an uncontrollable bushfire.” He proceeds to say that this false gospel inoculates people against the true gospel.

When considering the list of challenges and difficulties facing South Africans, it seems clear that they can be addressed only by a holistic, robust and comprehensive ministry. Word and deed ministries are essential; evangelism and social concern are vital. Mandryk (2010:760) states:

South Africa needs the Church to step even further into radical engagement with all the ills besetting society. The life-changing power of the Gospel can bring about change that no government policy ever will, but Christians must make the sacrifices, take the risks and live out Christ’s love in hard places. The temptation to withdraw to a safe, comfortable, but unengaged existence is ever present.

It calls for clear-cut gospel-focused teaching and preaching, *and* sacrificial social engagement. A fully orbbed, comprehensive gospel ministry is essential.

1.2 The vital importance and centrality of intentional, biblical contextualization

1.2.1 The importance and inevitability of contextualization

Contextualization is a growing global concern in missiology and church planting. The Lausanne Covenant (in Stott, 2009), Hiebert (1983), Hesselgrave and Rommen (1989), Gilliland (1989), Flemming (2006), Ott and Strauss (2010:265–292), Hastings (2012), Keller (2012a:89–134) and Goheen (2014:264–295) all attest to the vital importance of contextualization. The Willowbank Report (Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, 1980:23) concludes with these words: “It is essential, therefore, that all churches contextualise the gospel in order to share it effectively in their own culture.” Flemming (2006:25) puts it forthrightly: “The contextualization of the Gospel

⁸ Available online at: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/prosperity-teaching-has-replaced-true-gospel-in-africa/> Date of access: 14 May 2018.

is inherent to the mission of the church.” Goheen (2014:267) states that it is a critical, urgent issue for every church in every cultural setting. He affirms that it is essential to gospel ministry today.

These writers affirm that Christian pastors are called to a dual fidelity. They are called to be faithful to the unchanging, objective message of the gospel, once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3). Pastors and Bible teachers are also called to be faithful to the particular people and context in which the gospel is communicated, so that the gospel may be faithfully communicated in that culture. The message of the Bible is fixed, unchanging, complete. Context is a dynamic and ever-changing reality.

There is no way contextualization can ever be avoided, for there is no universal presentation of the gospel for all people in all contexts. Goheen (2014:265) writes that it is not a “matter of whether the gospel is shaped by the culture; the only question is whether the contextualization of the gospel is faithful or unfaithful.” Contextualization is always a given; therefore, it is best done intentionally and carefully, argues Keller (2012a:93–97).

In his article “There is a Great Need for Contextualisation in Southern Africa”, Simango laments (but concurs with) the oft-noted observation that African Christianity is extremely expansive but very shallow. He argues (2018:1) that it is only when “... the gospel is fully incarnated or contextualised” that the church in Africa will grow spiritually. He mentions the failings of the early European missionaries in the area of contextualization and contends that the church in Southern Africa has three very serious problems, which are all related to inadequate or superficial contextualization: an inferiority complex, a dependency syndrome and religious syncretism (2018:4–7). In making a case for contextualization, Simango (2018:9) insists on all contextualization being governed by the Scriptures.

1.2.2 The difficulties and complexities of contextualization

It must be stressed that contextualization is a very challenging and demanding undertaking. Gilliland (1989:12) cautions: “Contextualization is a delicate enterprise if ever there was one. The evangelist stands on a razor’s edge. Fall to the right and you will end up in rigid obscurantism. Slip to the left and you will end up in rudderless syncretism. No word in the Christian lexicon is as fraught with difficulty, danger and opportunity as contextualization”. Hastings (2012:15–21), Keller (2012a:89–100) and Goheen (2014:268–270) issue warnings along similar lines. Hastings (2012:17) contends that the two primary ways that the church has been rendered ineffective are through cultural disconnection (failure of churches to connect with people in context) and

indiscriminate enculturation (when the church fails to challenge the culture and becomes like the culture). This is a very serious charge: he is saying that the church's witness is undermined by contextualization going wrong. Keller (2012a:87) affirms the same point, calling the two errors under- and over-contextualization. This researcher contends that the South African church scene is replete with both errors.

Contextualization is something of a controversial and emotive term in some Reformed circles. Because the term is relatively novel, and because it has historic links with the liberal inclinations of the World Council of Churches (WCC) (as shown by Moreau, 2012:122–131), some Reformed evangelicals – including Piper (2007) and MacArthur (2014) – are suspicious and cautious. This researcher concurs with D.A. Carson (1996:97), who asserts that, while we need to be aware of the abuses of certain forms of contextualization, “we cannot reasonably doubt the importance of the phenomenon.”

1.2.3 A call for comprehensive, holistic contextualization

Goheen (2014:227–254) calls for a holistic ministry. He argues for witness in life, word and deed. Following Bosch (1985:39–40), he traces the two dominant missiological approaches of the past several decades. The ecumenical approach has stressed the horizontal dimension (emphasizing justice and social concern); the evangelical approach has stressed the vertical dimension (emphasizing proclamation). This has created a legacy where there is a split between word and deed. Conn (1984:41–108), Chester (2004:13–99), Wright (2006:299–301, 437–439) and Keller (2012a:291–296) similarly call for a holistic approach to ministry and contextualization. They affirm that contextualization is a process that is concerned with every part of life.

Keller (2010a:258) calls for a “counter-intuitive holistic” ministry. Speaking about his own church in Manhattan, New York, he recalls how people would typically want to place the church somewhere on the political spectrum. Are they liberal/left wing or conservative/right wing? Or tepidly middle-of-the-road? He argues that a faithfully contextualized gospel church should be impossible to place on such a spectrum. He argues that a gospel-centred church should have a social justice emphasis and effectiveness that exceeds that of the liberal church; and it should be marked by an evangelistic fervour that greatly exceeds that of the regular fundamentalist church. A faithfully contextualized gospel-centred church should combine zeals that are not normally evidenced together in the same church. It is this researcher's conviction that this is the type of ministry that is required in the South African urban context.

1.2.4 Keller's definition of orthodox contextualization

For Keller, the deliberate contextualization of the gospel is essential to Christian ministry. His theology and praxis of contextualization can be found in his important work *Center Church* (2012a:89–134) and in hundreds of sermons and addresses. Keller's (2012a:90) definition of contextualization will be used as an accurate, biblically faithful and helpful representation of the subject in this research:

Sound contextualization means translating and adapting the communication and ministry of the gospel to a particular culture without compromising the essence and particulars of the gospel itself. The great missionary task is to express the gospel message to a new culture in a way that avoids making the message unnecessarily alien to that culture, yet without removing or obscuring the scandal and offense of biblical truth.

This writer notes that Keller's definition affirms five critical points:

- The objectivity and supremacy of the biblical revelation
- The priority of the gospel
- The necessity of being receptor sensitive
- The importance of both affirming and being prophetic
- A comprehensive approach: Contextualization should not be limited to proclamation, but should impact the whole ministry.

1.3 Introducing Keller's impact, theology and ministry

1.3.1 The global impact of Keller's theology and ministry

The growing global impact of Tim Keller must be noted.⁹ Keller planted Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, New York, 25 years ago, with only a small core. Today it has a thriving membership of over five thousand people, with satellite churches planted around the city. He is a best-selling and prolific author. His *Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (a presuppositional apologetic work aimed at postmoderns) was a *New York Times* bestseller. This book and his *Prodigal God* have sold over a million copies each. His *Center Church* has made a significant impact in missiological circles across the globe. Stephen Paas, a missiology professor

⁹ See Keller's brief biography at <http://www.timothykeller.com/author/> Date of access: 21 Nov. 2016.

of the Free University of Amsterdam, initiated the publication of an edition of Keller's *Center Church* with application to the Netherlands. His books have been translated into 15 languages. Keller is in huge demand as a conference speaker and serves as president of the Gospel Coalition.

Keller serves as chairman for the church-planting network Redeemer City to City, which grew out of the Manhattan ministry.¹⁰ The Redeemer City to City outreach has given birth to urban church-planting coalitions and conferences in several cities in Europe, Asia, Australia and Africa. To date, this church-planting network has been instrumental in launching over 250 churches in 48 cities globally. Furthermore, Keller is establishing a new seminary in New York in partnership with Reformed Theological Seminary (Jackson, Mississippi) to train students specifically for urban, contextualized ministry.

1.3.2 Keller's theological credentials

This researcher will endeavour to answer the question of why Keller's model of contextualization merits careful consideration by South African churches in the Reformed mould. The following factors must be noted:

- He has the appropriate, acceptable theological credentials, being clearly and unashamedly evangelical and Reformed in his convictions. He is also confessional, holding to the Westminster standards. He has recently produced the New City Catechism,¹¹ based on the Westminster and Heidelberg catechisms. He holds to a *missio Dei* understanding of mission and enjoys a prominent, global profile. Previous research undertaken indicates that Keller enjoys acceptance among a significant number of evangelical pastors in South Africa (Koning, 2016:106).
- Keller presents a model (2012a:119–134) of contextualization, which he calls “Active Contextualization”. It will be argued that this model is theologically sound in the Reformed tradition and biblically robust, and that it can be applied to all contexts, including the incredibly diverse and challenging South African urban contexts.
- His value lies in his ability and commitment to engage postmodern urban people faithfully without sacrificing biblical truth and robust Reformed theology. Keller argues

10 See online at: <http://www.redeemercitytocity.com/> Date of access: 19 Nov. 2016.

11 Available online at: <http://newcitycatechism.com/> Date of access: 7 Oct. 2017.

that we do not contextualize because of a commitment to an agenda of pragmatic expediency. Rather, we contextualize because of our commitment to God and his truth.

- Keller is strongly urban focused. In *Center Church* he devotes four chapters to a theology of the city (2012a:135–180). He presented much of this content at the 2010 Lausanne meeting in Cape Town, under the title “What is God’s global urban mission?” (2010b). His theology of the city is compelling, balanced and finely nuanced. He calls for Christians to face up to the challenges and opportunities that urbanization presents to gospel ministry. “I argue that there is nothing more critical for the evangelical church today than to emphasize and support urban ministry” (2012a:162).
- He is not a theological iconoclast. Keller contends (2012a:342) that a healthy church should have institutional elements (like inherited traditions) and exhibit movement dynamics (like vision and flexibility). He advocates a responsible balance between the church as institution and the church as a dynamic, contemporary movement. In his endeavours to reach New Yorkers with the gospel, he is standing firmly on the shoulders of spiritual giants – Reformed theologians of bygone times. Redeemer Presbyterian Church is flourishing with wealthy, trendy “yuppies” of Manhattan. Yet the preaching of the Bible remains central, and the tone, structure and emotional atmosphere remain remarkably traditional.
- He calls for a contextualization that is comprehensive and holistic. In his two books on mercy, *The Call of the Jericho Road* and *Generous Justice*, he bemoans the fact that evangelism and social concern have been separated. He writes (2005:5): “A sensitive social conscience and a life poured out in deeds of service to the needy is the inevitable outcome of true faith.” He calls for thinking biblically about preaching, evangelism, apologetics, music, worship, liturgy and leadership. But he is equally insistent on issues such as justice and mercy ministry and stresses a Christian vocation in all spheres.
- He is a practitioner, not an ivory tower theologian. He is contextualizing the ministry of the gospel to thousands of people lost in the fog of secular postmodernism in New York. His preaching and ministry that span over 25 years can be scrutinised and evaluated.

1.4 Research problem

1.4.1 Primary research question

To what extent is Dr Timothy Keller's model of deliberate, holistic contextualization relevant for Reformed evangelical churches and church planting in the urban contexts of South Africa?

1.4.2 Sub-questions arising out of the primary research question

- What characterizes the contemporary South African urban scene, and what is the current state of Reformed evangelical ministry in it?
- What are the biblical-theological foundations of valid, orthodox contextualization from a Reformed perspective?
- What are the central features and contours of Keller's model of contextualization, and how does it compare with others in the Reformed tradition?
- How does Keller's holistic, comprehensive approach to contextualization function in his total model of contextualization?
- What lessons from best practices have been learnt that may contribute to Reformed missiology and urban Christian ministry in contemporary South Africa so that God's transforming grace may be radiated in the midst of human sin and brokenness?

1.5 Central theoretical argument

Keller's model and theology of comprehensive contextualization could be of substantial benefit to Reformed evangelical ministry in South Africa if utilized wisely.

1.6 Aims and objectives

- To give an accurate analysis of the South African urban scene and the current state of Reformed evangelical ministry in it. Part of the discussion will involve defining what is meant by "Reformed" and "evangelical". Prevailing worldviews will be identified and discussed, and an analysis of the issues facing the unchurched and nominally churched in urban South Africa will be considered. The aim is to demonstrate what the Reformed pastor, church planter or missionary is facing in urban South Africa.

- To identify and discuss the biblical-theological foundations of valid, orthodox contextualization. It has been noted that some conservative evangelicals are suspicious and even critical of contextualization. Therefore, the research will include discussion on the essential components of orthodox contextualization, as posited by various Reformed scholars, as well as interaction and dialogue with Keller's detractors.
- To describe and critically evaluate Keller's model of contextualization. This will include a discussion on perceived strengths and weaknesses of his approach. Keller's theology of contextualization will be compared and contrasted with those of other Reformed missiologists and pastors (both historical and contemporary). The purpose is to provide criteria by which Keller's model can be evaluated and critiqued.
- To demonstrate that this comprehensive approach to contextualization could be ideally suited to ministry in contemporary urban South Africa. The aim is to highlight lessons and practical recommendations for Reformed evangelicals engaged in gospel ministry and church planting in urban South Africa.

1.7 Research methodology

This research is undertaken from the perspective of one who is theologically Reformed and evangelical and has a missional (*missio Dei*) understanding of evangelism and mission. It is extremely important for this researcher that the Bible is the final authority and norm for all ministry, including evangelism and church planting.

The research will be undertaken in the form of a literature review. A recent (18 October 2016) catalogue search has indicated that there is no completed or current research being undertaken on this topic.¹² While there is research being done abroad on Keller's theology, preaching and church planting, there is nothing related to contextualization and the South African urban context.

His theology and model of contextualization will be gleaned from two of his major works, *Center Church* (2012a) and *Urban Church Planting Manual* (Keller & Thompson, 2010). In addition, his other major publications, articles, podcasts, lectures and sermons will be discussed and critically evaluated where they have relevance to the topic under investigation. This research will not include

12 A search was done on the NEXUS, Sabinet African ePublications and ISAP, EBSCOhost and ProQuest catalogues.

an exhaustive overview of Keller's theology, but will be restricted to his theology and praxis as they have bearing on contextualization.

The focus of the research will be on urban South Africa. While South African cities are not uniform and monochrome, their inhabitants do share common worldviews and social, political and economic demographics. The recent history, trends, characteristics, developments and challenges, and the anticipated future directions of South African cities will be noted and discussed. Anomalies and specific characteristics of different urban centres will be highlighted to avoid vagueness and unhelpful generalizations.

1.8 Ethical considerations

As the research is in the form of a literature review and uses secondary sources, it poses little if any ethical threat.

CHAPTER 2 KELLER: A REFORMED EVANGELICAL WITH SPECIFIC EMPHASES

Our goal here is to define what is meant by the designation “Reformed evangelical” and give it some specific parameters. Then we will consider the fundamental tenets of Keller’s theological understanding to ascertain whether he fits within the category of a Reformed evangelical. We will proceed to identify and discuss two key aspects of Keller’s theology that have direct implications for his understanding and praxis of biblical contextualization.

2.1 What is a Reformed evangelical?

There is no simple answer, for these terms carry significant baggage. It is imperative that we define what is meant by a Reformed evangelical for the purposes of this research. Reformed evangelicalism must be distinguished from liberal Protestantism, from mainstream popular evangelicalism, from hyper-fundamentalism and from churches or denominations that were historically Reformed but have morphed into a liberal, compromised state.

2.1.1 Evangelical

Because “evangelical” is the broader term, we begin with it here. Noll (2014:24) cautions: “Efforts to define *evangelicalism* will always remain somewhat imprecise because the phenomenon designated by the word represents a set of beliefs and practices rather than a single organization.” He adds: “The term *evangelical* designates a set of beliefs, behaviors and characteristics within the broad Christian tradition.”

British historian David Bebbington (1989:2–17) has identified four key components of evangelicalism, termed the “evangelical quadrilateral”:

- Conversionism: The need for a definite turning away from sin in order to find God in Jesus Christ.
- The Bible or “Biblicism”: Evangelicals may respect traditions, and utilize science and reason, but the ultimate authority for all matters of faith and practice is the Scriptures.
- Evangelism and activism: Evangelicals have been moved to action, whether social reform or spreading the good news, because of their own experience of God.

- The cross or “crucicentrism”: Evangelicals have consistently stressed the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as the heart of the Christian faith, especially emphasizing the substitutionary character of the atonement between God and sinful man.

Pierard and Elwell (2001:405-409) affirm the following as characteristic tenets of evangelical theology:

- A stress on the sovereign, transcendent, holy, personal God.
- A high regard for Scripture as being the inspired record of God’s revelation and the authoritative, infallible, authoritative guide for faith and practice.
- The total depravity of humanity.
- God initiated and provided atonement through the substitutionary suffering, death and resurrection of his Son.
- Evangelicals believe that salvation is an act of unmerited divine grace received through faith in Christ, not through any kind of penance or good works.
- Believers are called to bear witness to the gospel by following their Lord in a life of discipleship and bearing the burdens and needs of others.
- Heraldry the word is an important feature of evangelicalism. Holy living is part of the process of witness, because life and word are inseparable elements of the evangelical message.
- Evangelicals look for the visible, personal return of Jesus Christ to set up his kingdom of righteousness and a new heaven and earth.

Noll (2014:21) points out that, while holding to these core essentials, evangelicals are often flexible about non-essentials. He adds that the nearest thing to a visible global expression of evangelicalism has been the Lausanne Movement.¹³

13 In 1974, 2 500 delegates from 150 countries gathered for the Lausanne Congress, officially known as the International Congress on World Evangelization. John Stott, Billy Graham and Francis Schaeffer were among the key initiators. Out of this were birthed the Lausanne Covenant and the Lausanne Movement. The Covenant is used by evangelical missions organizations worldwide as a basis of faith, action and partnership. The slogan of the Lausanne Movement is: “The whole church taking the whole gospel to the whole world.”

In his *Evangelicalism Divided: A Record of Crucial Changes in the Years 1950 to 2000*, Iain Murray (2001) highlights the considerable importance and influence of men like Billy Graham, Carl Henry and J.I. Packer (in North America) and Martyn Lloyd-Jones and John Stott (from Britain). He demonstrates that evangelicalism was not a monolithic entity, but that there were strains and tensions between the different parties. Lints (1993:29–56) is also sceptical about meaningful unity among evangelicals. He affirms that there are certain core evangelical doctrines, but he bemoans the lack of a robust theological framework and vision among evangelicals.

In a January 2018 TGC article, “On the Evangelical Identity Crisis”, Trevin Wax discusses the contemporary viability of the term. He points out that some people who adhere to central evangelical beliefs do not claim the label for themselves. And conversely, many who do not hold to evangelical beliefs actually use the term gladly. He points out that Trump’s 2016 election has muddied the waters and exacerbated the identity crisis, as he captured a large percentage of the “evangelical” vote. Wax posits a two-track understanding of the term that holds together an aspirational definition and a cultural one. He argues that there is “evangelicalism as a renewal movement based on common beliefs and distinctives; and evangelicalism as a sociological and political phenomenon.” The first is aspirational and is closely aligned to the movement’s roots, while the second is a sociological manifestation of varying traits of evangelical culture.

This writer is in essential agreement with Wax, who states that he does not want to lose the “aspirational beauty” of the term. He proceeds to say that we should not use an aspirational definition (even if it is useful and confessional) to disavow “cultural evangelicals”. He advocates serious soul-searching as we examine the gap between the historic, doctrinal evangelicalism and its cultural and sometimes sociopolitical expressions. He goes on to say that “evangelical” is not an exclusively American reality – it has a rich history which far pre-dates the current debate. “It is a narrow and American-centered view of the world to allow American controversies to define the movement.”

2.1.2 Reformed

Similarly, the term “Reformed” means different things to different people. De Witt (1981:3–23) contends that it means more than embracing the five points of Calvinism, affirming that it is more

comprehensive. De Witt cites seven characteristics that constitute the essentials of the Reformed faith:

1. Its doctrine of Scripture: A very high view of the Bible, with particular insistence on the authority of Bible.
2. The Reformed faith is characterized by the insistence that God is to be known and worshipped as the sovereign God. It is thoroughly God centred.
3. It insists upon the invincibility of the grace of God: The doctrines of grace, an election of grace, and the efficacy of Christ's atoning work.
4. It accentuates the biblical doctrine of the Christian life: With its grasp of the covenant of grace, it has insisted upon a multifaceted, full-orbed Christian life, a life in the world, but not oriented to the world and its standards; a life that is always *coram Deo*, in the presence of God.
5. A clear understanding of the distinction and relationship between law and gospel. Luther's stress was on the first use of the law, while Calvin's was on the third. The law is not the gospel, but the gospel is not law-less; it is the way of life for God's people.
6. Its positive view of the relationship between the kingdom of God and the world. There is no single, uniform position. The Reformed tradition has expressed great interest in the form and culture of the world, not in the sense of conformity to the world, but in the sense of transformation of the world. There is a "cultural mandate": we cannot be indifferent to the societal evils around us.
7. It is marked by a distinctive view of preaching. By this is meant the faithful exposition of the biblical text in its proclamation and application.

Points 1, 4 and 6 will prove to be very important in understanding and evaluating Keller's theology of contextualization.

Letham (1988:569–572) emphasizes the centrality of God when listing the key characteristics of Reformed faith. The Reformers attempted to bring the whole of reality under the sway of the supremacy of God. The whole of personal life and corporate life is to be subjected to God. Importantly, he asserts that "Reformed theology is not, nor has been, monolithic. It has possessed creative vitality sufficient to encompass diversity within an over-all consensus" (1988:570).

The classic representative statements of Reformed theology are found in the catechisms and confessions of the Reformed churches: the Belgic Confession of 1561, the Heidelberg Catechism of 1563 and the Westminster Confession of 1647.

It must be noted that there has been something of a global resurgence of the Reformed faith in recent years. This resurgence has been traced and discussed in Collin Hansen's 2008 book *Young, Restless and Reformed: A Journalist's Journey with the New Calvinists*. He points out this movement is more Baptist (Southern Baptist) than Presbyterian, has an appeal to the younger generation and has a strong missional and church-planting ethos. Furthermore, it is clearly complementarian in its understanding of gender roles in church and family. Though he is describing a predominantly American phenomenon, the ripple effects of this resurgence are evident in Southern Africa. Smethurst makes the same points in his 2013 article "Where did all these Calvinists come from?" He highlights the various sources God has used to reinvigorate Reformed theology in this generation. He cites the considerable influence of men like Martyn Lloyd-Jones, J.I. Packer and John Piper, the Banner of Truth Trust publications, and influential parachurch ministries such as the Gospel Coalition (of which Tim Keller is a founder), 9Marks, Acts 29, Redeemer City to City (which was birthed by Keller's Manhattan Presbyterian Church) and Campus Outreach.

Noll (2014:19) notes tensions within Reformed evangelicalism. For example, the Reformed or Calvinistic tradition stresses the external and rational that are foreign to other evangelicals who place an emphasis on the heart and "evidence" of experience. Yet both forms have "demonstrated an extraordinary ability to cross borders, to locate themselves in many places and within a wide variety of organizational forms, and yet, in adapting, to retain their essential character." This researcher will argue that part of Keller's value is that he does not polarize head and heart, objective and subjective, but insists on both. His integrative emphasis will be considered in this chapter.

This researcher would affirm these definitions above and notes the following:

- Being a Reformed evangelical is more than having a Calvinistic soteriology (holding to the so-called five points of Calvinism).
- The appeal of Reformed evangelicalism is its God-centeredness and its scope and relevance to all of life. There is a firm commitment to the world and to holistic ministry. This precludes hyper-fundamentalism.

2.2 Keller's theology: A bird's-eye view

The goal here is not to give an exhaustive description of Keller's theology, but to give the broad contours of his theological understanding and expression and demonstrate that Keller fits into the Reformed evangelical designation as defined above.

Monergism, a Reformed website,¹⁴ describes Keller's theology with this five-fold designation:

- He is covenantal.
- He is a five-point Calvinist.
- He is a paedobaptist.
- In terms of his eschatology, he is an optimistic amillennialist.
- He is a strong advocate of presuppositional apologetics.

2.2.1 Keller's influencers

A consideration for those who have influenced Keller can be gleaned from the index pages of *Center Church* (2012a:387–395). Among his main theological mentors have been E.P. Clowney and Harvie Conn, both of whom he studied under at Westminster Theological Seminary (WTS). Clowney's influence can be seen in Keller's ecclesiology¹⁵ (2012a:15) and Conn has shaped Keller's appreciation of contextual theology and his approach to urban ministry (2012a:103). Keller did his doctoral studies under Conn at WTS. In 1989 his PhD research was published as a book, *Ministries of Mercy: The Call of the Jericho Road*. Richard Lovelace's major work, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life* (1979), has had a significant impact on Keller, particularly on his understanding of the uniqueness of the gospel of grace and its implications (2012a:64).

In terms of historical theologians, Keller frequently quotes Calvin, Luther, Augustine, Jonathan Edwards, Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck, Geerhardus Vos and C.S. Lewis. In a TGC video, Keller stated that he considered Calvin, Edwards and Lewis as among those who have shaped him the most.¹⁶ Keller started reading Kuyper and Bavinck at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in the 1970s. He recounts that he was very impressed with the balance and thoroughness of Bavinck's theology in that he displayed a healthy piety yet insisted that the implications of Christ's

14 <https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/articles/bio/timkeller.html> Date of access: 4 Apr. 2017.

15 Keller regards Clowney's book *The Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995) as the best academic, yet accessible, theology of the church.

16 Which can be accessed at <https://za.pinterest.com/pin/49891508348212022/>

Lordship should be worked out in all of life.¹⁷ Keller also shows great familiarity with the writings of the English missionary-theologian Lesslie Newbigin, who has undoubtedly influenced his own missional theology and practice (2012a:393).

2.2.2 Keller's major publications

It must be noted that Keller has been first and foremost a pastor – a practitioner more than a theoretician or academic theologian. His weekly work has comprised preaching, teaching and pastoring. With the exception of his PhD thesis, he only started writing books at the age of sixty. Since 2008 his book output has been prolific. His books, in chronological order, with very brief précis, include:

- *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*, 2008. Classical and contemporary objections to the Christian faith are considered in an engaging way. Keller takes a presuppositional approach.
- *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith*, 2008. Keller unpacks Luke 15:11–32, with a particular look at the works righteousness of the older son.
- *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope that Matters*, 2009. Keller identifies contemporary idols of Western culture. Identifying and exposing idols is a central aspect of Keller's theology and is an important element in his praxis of contextualization.
- *Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes Us Just*, 2010. Keller posits a biblical theology of justice where he argues that an experience of God's grace in the gospel gives his people a passion for justice. His thesis is that the justified are given an appetite for justice.
- *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God*, 2011. Co-authored with his wife, Kathy, Keller posits a biblical-theological vision for marriage, deals with its challenges and complexities, and offers hope.
- *King's Cross: The Story of the World in the Life of Jesus*, 2011. A look at the life and ministry of Jesus Christ from the Gospel of Mark.

17 See <https://bavinckinstitute.org/2011/07/tim-keller-on-kuypers-and-bavincks-influence/> article for how Bavinck and Kuyper have influenced him.

- *Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Your Work to God's Work*, 2012 (co-authored with K.L. Alsdorf). Keller's burden is to integrate faith and work and recover the notion of vocation in this biblical theology of work.
- *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City*, 2012. This could justifiably be called Keller's *magnum opus*. It represents the fruit of decades of theological reflection and gospel ministry in Manhattan, New York. It outlines a theological vision for urban gospel ministry. It is a compendium of Keller's theological understanding and teaching. It has been republished in 2016 in three parts that include critique by and dialogue with other scholars: *Shaped by the Gospel*, *Loving the City* and *Serving a Movement*.
- *The Freedom of Self-forgetfulness*, 2012. In this short work, Keller shows what true gospel humility looks like and shows how it flows from the gospel of grace.
- *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*, 2013. Keller engages with the problem of suffering in a non-trite way, with the aim of both helping and challenging believers and enquirers.
- *Galatians for You*, 2013. A verse-by-verse unpacking of the Epistle to the Galatians.
- *Encounters with Jesus: Unexpected Answers to Life's Biggest Questions*, 2013. The stories of some of those who encountered Jesus in the Gospels are unpacked, showing how Jesus answered their big questions and met their (and our) greatest needs.
- *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God*, 2014. Keller discusses the theological, experiential and methodological aspects of prayer, arguing that it is both an encounter and a conversation with God. This volume is also very suited to enquirers.
- *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism*, 2015. Keller affirms the supremacy of preaching and reflects on how to preach expositionally and engage the culture, as well as on the necessity of exegetical study and felt affections in preaching.
- *The Songs of Jesus*, 2015. A daily devotional through the book of Psalms.
- *Romans 1–7 for You*, 2014 and *Romans 8–16 for You*, 2015. A readable, non-technical exposition of Paul's letter to the Romans.

- *Hidden Christmas: The Surprising Truth Behind the Birth of Christ*, 2016. Keller takes a fresh look at the nativity story and all its implications.
- *Making Sense of God: An Invitation to the Skeptical*, 2016. A volume that could be called pre-evangelism in that it starts further back than *The Reason for God* in showing why the Christian faith should be considered at all.

A cursory survey of his published works indicates a wide range of themes and topics addressed. His published work covers presuppositional apologetics, the devotional life of the believer, Christian living and practice, an exposé of contemporary postmodern idols, the life and ministry of Christ, the uniqueness of Christ, the uniqueness of the gospel of grace, Christian ministry, missiology and NT commentaries. It is this researcher's view that it is precisely Keller's well-rounded, comprehensive theology that gives his views on contextualization credibility. Furthermore, a perusal of the index pages of these books indicates the diverse sources (both ancient and contemporary, from various disciplines and walks of life) Keller appeals to in his writings. It is significant that a number of these publications have proven to be very helpful and challenging to believers and nonbelievers alike. We will observe that Keller regards making a sharp distinction between ministering to believers and ministering to nonbelievers as unhelpful and unnecessary. A fundamental reason is that Keller has done the hard work of deliberate, biblical contextualization.

2.2.3 Keller's preaching

In his book *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism*, he deems preaching irreplaceable and is committed to mostly expository preaching (2015:5, 32–39). A survey of his preaching records (2012a:307–308) indicates those subjects he covers regularly and deliberately in preaching: the uniqueness of Christ (Jesus is the only way to God), the authority and inerrancy of Scripture, the Trinity, propitiation and penal substitution, imputation, justification by faith alone, sanctification by faith alone, final judgement and hell, the reality of transcendent moral absolutes, total depravity and inability of humankind, the bent of the heart toward idolatry, the sinfulness of any sex outside of marriage¹⁸ and the sovereignty of God over all circumstances, including trouble

18 In the volatile sexual culture of Manhattan, he has held to a historic, traditional understanding of sexual ethics and gender roles. His stance has recently (March 2017) resulted in him forfeiting the Kuyper Prize for Excellence in Reformed Theology and Public Life at Princeton Seminary. According to *Christianity Today* journalist Kate Shellnutt (2017), the Princeton authorities rescinded their decision out of concern that awarding the prize to Keller may have implied an endorsement of his views against the ordination of women and LGBTQ people.

and suffering. This survey indicates that he does not shirk from preaching on many topics which are considered highly controversial and that his intention is to cover the whole counsel of God.

2.2.4 Keller's critics

Keller is not without his critics, even within the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). But what is very significant is that these critics do not doubt Keller's theological orthodoxy. *Engaging with Keller: Thinking through the Theology of an Influential Evangelical* (Campbell & Schweitzer, 2013) is a collaborative work of a number of PCA pastors who are critical of some aspects of Keller's theology. What is noteworthy is that they do not question Keller's personal orthodoxy. They call him one of the "most influential leaders of our time" (acknowledgements, in 2013:14). They recount his commitment to the Reformed faith, his commitment to the Westminster Confession of Faith, and his publication of the New City Catechism, and they comment favourably on his critique of the new perspective on Paul. What they do question is whether he communicates historic, Reformed evangelicalism in a faithful way to his largely postmodern hearers. In other words, it is *precisely his contextualization that is open to criticism*, according to these authors (introduction, in 2013:16–21). Their concerns and arguments will be engaged with at several points in this research project.

2.3 Two theological emphases that shape and inform Keller's contextualization

Here we note two emphases of his theological understanding that shape his theology of contextualization. In identifying these two emphases, we are not asserting that they are unique to Keller, nor that he gives overdue attention to them, but we are affirming that they are key theological principles that inform and shape his theology and praxis of biblical contextualization and that he gives them notable emphasis. Furthermore, these two emphases are of particular importance and value to Reformed ministry in urban South Africa.

2.3.1 Keller's integrative, holistic and comprehensive theology

In his introductory chapter to *Center Church* (2012a:21), Keller states that much of the book is about striking the balances that Scripture does: "of word *and* deed ministries; of challenging *and* affirming human culture; of cultural engagement *and* counter-cultural distinctiveness; of commitment to truth *and* generosity to others who don't share the same beliefs; of tradition *and* innovation in practice."

“Balance” is a key word in this book. This researcher appreciates how Keller uses it. Sometimes balance can mean an insipid compromise between opposing positions. This is certainly not how Keller uses it. For Keller, balance means being controlled simultaneously and all the time by *all* the teaching of Scripture (2012a:292).

One major section of Keller’s *Center Church* (2012a:291–336) is titled “Integrative Ministry” and consists of five chapters. Keller speaks of four ministry “fronts” (2012a:293), which together constitute integrative ministry:

- connecting people to God through evangelism and worship
- connecting people to one another through community and discipleship
- connecting people to the city through mercy and justice
- connecting people to the culture through the integration of faith and work.

Put simply, he tends to reject a polarizing either / or approach, and insists on a both / and approach. Keller (2012a:291) contends:

Because the gospel not only converts nonbelievers but also builds up believers, the church should not have to choose evangelism over discipleship. Because the gospel is presented to the world not only through word but also through deed and community, we should not choose between teaching and carrying out practical ministry to address people’s needs. Because the gospel renews not only individuals but also communities and culture, the church should disciple its people to seek personal conversion, deep Christian community, social justice and cultural renewal in the city.

He argues that these ministry fronts should be seen as interdependent and fully biblical.

2.3.1.1 Evangelism versus social action: Historical overview and analysis

The relationship between proclamation and social concern has proven to be a thorny one in conservative evangelicalism in recent decades. Historically, evangelical believers have generally had a good record in keeping proclamation and social concern together in Christian mission. Yet it seems like evangelism and social justice went through a messy divorce somewhere in the middle of last century. The more conservative evangelicals have majored on proclamation, while the more liberal churches have majored on justice. Some have held to a mediating position, arguing that deeds of mercy and justice are the springboard for the verbal proclamation of the gospel. There

have been pockets in evangelicalism in recent decades that have veered towards a pietistic fundamentalism on the matter of the relationship between word and deed. Several scholars underscore this point.

Bosch (1985:27–40) notes that during the twentieth century there were two missiological models competing for supremacy, namely the ecumenical and the evangelical approaches to mission. He speaks of polarization in mission. The evangelical model stresses the discontinuity between God’s activities and ours, between salvation history and world history, and between eternal and temporal salvation. The ecumenical model accentuates continuity between the church and the world and sociopolitical action.

Bosch calls the typical evangelical approach an “emaciated” gospel (1985:202–211) and critiques it for being dualistic, for being restrictive in its commitment to sound doctrine, and for being selectively conservative. He also cites this model’s failure to see Christ as the head of the cosmos, as well as of the church. He calls the ecumenical approach a “diluted” gospel (1985:212–220). He is critical of its redefinition of sin in categories of oppression, and its consequent understanding of salvation as purely temporal liberation. Furthermore, he is critical of the ecumenical reductionistic interpretation of the gospel. He warns against opening the floodgates of universalism and is critical of limiting what salvation entails and underplaying a personal encounter and commitment to God.

Similarly, Goheen (2014:228–237) notes that our legacy is one which is marked by a split between word and deed, and Conn (1982:57–71) laments what he terms “one-dimensional spirituality”. He argues that there are two forms. World-centred spirituality considers bodies without souls and focuses on the present, and soul-centred spirituality considers souls without bodies and has a future focus. Conn makes a case for “holistic” or “lordship” ministry (1982:9).

Social involvement was re-established within evangelicalism with the Lausanne Covenant. The contributors to the Lausanne Covenant wrestled with this relationship. The Covenant includes the following affirmation in Article 5, “Christian Social Responsibility”:

... we express penitence... for having sometimes regarded evangelism and social concern as mutually exclusive. Although reconciliation with other people is not reconciliation with God, nor is social action evangelism, nor is political liberation salvation, nevertheless we affirm that evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty (in Stott, 2009:28).

The Covenant goes on to affirm that word and deed (evangelism and social involvement) are distinct yet inseparable in gospel ministry. However, paragraph 6 of the document affirms, “in the church’s mission of sacrificial service, evangelism is primary” (in Stott, 2009:32). This researcher goes along with Wright, who questions the appropriateness of the word “primary”. It is difficult to avoid coming to the conclusion that all else is secondary. “Ultimate” is a better word. Bosch (1985:203) calls the Lausanne Covenant (of which he is mildly critical at this point) approach a “seed and fruit” approach, in the sense that the one leads to and forms the other. He points out that it is disputable if this in fact works out in practice.

Chester, in his work *Good News to the Poor* (2004:13–50), also makes a robust case for holistic Christian ministry. After citing the example of the early Christians, Chester argues that Christians are to care for the poor based on:

- The character of God: Scripture portrays God who upholds the cause of the oppressed.
- The reign of God: The gospel calls us to resubmit to the reign of God in every area of life.
- The grace of God: We are to show our love to the poor and marginalized in a way that reflects our experience of God’s grace.

He also debunks the notion of a privatised faith, arguing from Col 1:15–20 that Jesus Christ is Lord of all.

We must affirm that it is the Cross that must be the centre and motivation of all mission. It would be quite wrong to think that evangelism must be centred on the Cross, while deeds of justice and mercy have some other foundation. “Holistic mission must have a holistic theology of the Cross”, insists C.J.H. Wright (2006:315). He argues that the scope of Christian mission must address the full scope of the effects of sin. Sin affects every dimension of the human person, it affects human society and history, and it affects the whole environment of human life. His point is that a comprehensively fallen creation needs a comprehensive rescue. Wright asserts that we “need a holistic gospel because the world is in a holistic mess.” In a similar vein, Conn (1982:50) writes: “The scope of our evangelism must be as pervasive as the power of sin.”

2.3.1.2 An overview of Keller's comprehensive, holistic theology

Keller follows Bosch, Conn, Wright, Goheen and Chester in calling for an integrated theology of word and deed. Keller has authored two books on the subject¹⁹ and preached a great deal on matters relating to justice and social concern. There is an obvious connection between his integrated theology and how it shows in contextualization. He contends that contextualization should be comprehensive, holistic and integrated.

Keller (2012a:322–325) states that “conservative” ministry emphasizes a real personal salvation experience and personal morality through the preaching of the gospel. “Liberal” ministry stresses social justice and rejects overt calls to convert others. He contends that Jesus calls his disciples to both *gospel messaging* (calling people to repent and believe the gospel) and *gospel neighbouring* (sacrificially meeting the needs of people around them). He cites the following key points as the essential biblical foundations for ministries of mercy and justice:

- Christians are to love their neighbour (Luke 10:25–27).
- Christians are called to serve (Luke 10:40, Matt 27:55, 1 John 3:17–18).
- Christians are instructed to “do justice” or “live justly”. In discussing Mic 6:8, Keller shows that “justice is an everyday activity. It means living in constant recognition of the claims of community upon us; it means disadvantaging ourselves in order to advantage others” (2012a:323).
- Following C.J.H. Wright and Harvie Conn, he argues that the motivational and theological basis for doing justice is salvation by grace.

In his 2008 essay “The Gospel and the Poor” (2008b), he affirms the primacy of the gospel and proceeds to answer the question: what does it mean to be committed to the primacy of the gospel?

- It means that the gospel must be proclaimed. A winsome, loving community is essential, but this cannot replace gospel proclamation.

19 *Ministries of Mercy: The Call of the Jericho Road*, 1989 (in which he unpacks the parable of the Good Samaritan – Luke 10:25–37), and *Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes Us Just*, 2012.

- It means that the gospel is the basis for Christian practice, inside and outside the church, individually and corporately. The gospel is to shape our entire life – and one of the most prominent areas that the gospel ought to affect is the believer’s relationship to the poor.

He cites Jonathan Edwards’ discourse “Christian Charity”, arguing that giving to the poor is a crucial, non-optional aspect of the gospel-shaped life. Paraphrasing Edwards, Keller states that Christians should be famous for their mercy and generosity.

- Believing the gospel will move us to give to the poor. He argues his case from 2 Cor 8:8–9 and Gal 6:1–10, showing Paul’s reasoning that those who understand the gospel will share their material goods with the poor. He affirms that the gospel teaches us to be involved in the lives of the poor, not only financially, but personally and emotionally.
- Keller argues that a burden for mercy is an inevitable sign (not a meritorious work) that someone has justifying faith and grace in their heart. He cites Matt 25:34–46, where the Lord teaches that people will be condemned or accepted on the basis of how they treated the hungry, homeless, immigrant, sick and injured. “A sensitive social conscience and a life poured out in deeds of service to the needy is the inevitable outcome of true faith” (2008b:13). He laments how relatively absent this emphasis on the poor is in conservative evangelical preaching today.

Keller, in the same article, argues that the commission to help the poor is not given to individual Christians alone, but to the Christian church corporately. He notes how God gave Israel many laws encompassing social responsibility that had to be carried out corporately, and how in the NT the office of deacon was established to oversee the church’s ministry of mercy. He contends that evangelism and ministry to the poor are inseparably connected.

He concludes with some practical considerations on the implementation of ministry to the poor. He cautions that it is one thing to want to help the poor; it is another thing to do it wisely. This is a hugely important consideration in the South African context and will receive further consideration in the practical section of this thesis.

In his 2010 work *Generous Justice: How God’s Grace Makes Us Just*, Keller (2010a) develops a robust theology of justice and social action. His basic thesis is that a true experience of the grace of Jesus Christ inevitably moves a believer to seek justice in the world. “The most traditional formulation of evangelical doctrine, rightly understood, should lead its proponents to a life of doing justice in the world” (2010a: xiv). He traces the theme of justice, highlighting its meaning

and scope from the OT to Jesus and the NT epistles. He (2010a:78–108) stresses the importance of motivation. He argues that both the image of God and God’s grace in the gospel should motivate deeds of justice. Discussing Deut 10:16–19 and Jas 2:14–16, he argues for a cause-and-effect relationship between justification and justice. His chapter 6 (2010a:109–147) deals with practicalities of how to do justice. The subject of practical ministry to the poor has proven to be prickly. But this topic is of immense importance in urban South Africa. Various publications speak of the potential pitfalls.²⁰ Keller advocates three levels of practical help and intervention:

- Relief: Direct aid to meet immediate physical, material or economic needs.
- Development: Giving to a person, family or community what they need to move beyond dependency on relief into a condition of self-sufficiency.
- Social reform: This level seeks to change or transform the conditions that cause the dependency.

Keller (2010a:115–116) cites the example of John M. Perkins, who initiated ministries in Mississippi as well as urban Los Angeles. His approach was holistic and very broad in the scope of programs he started. Keller calls Perkins’ approach revolutionary in that he combined traditional, evangelical theology and ministry with a holistic vision for ministry both to the person and the community. Perkins’ strategy for promoting racial reconciliation is also noted by Keller. The givers and receivers of aid are often from different race groups. Perkins insisted on a non-paternalistic partnership of people from different races and social contexts. While outsiders were invited to help, the residents of poor communities had to be empowered to take control of their own destiny.

In his book *A Quiet Revolution* (1976), Perkins argues that both evangelism and social action have been cheapened. He laments that evangelism has often been reduced to “Jesus saves” and a smile, while social action has become charity and welfare. Perkins (1976:217–221) argues that there are three ways that Christians could affect their neighbourhood positively:

20 For example, Fikkert and Corbett’s 2009 book *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor and Yourself*. The authors analyse poverty within a framework of biblical theology. They reject all forms of paternalistic intervention and are forthright in detailing the problems and challenges in helping the poor. They call their model the ABCD approach: Asset-based community development. Another book which deals with the similar concerns is R.D. Lupton’s *Toxic Charity* (2011).

- Relocation: He calls for some believers to move in amongst the poor, both to live and to work. He cites the incarnation as the ultimate example of this and states that living among the poor turns statistics into friends.
- Reconciliation: He calls for reconciliation across racial and cultural barriers, insisting that reconciliation must be evidenced and experienced, not hypothetical.
- Redistribution: Christians must seek justice by coming up with means of redistributing goods and wealth to those in need. This calls for a long-term commitment that has as its goal the development of a sense of self-determination and responsibility within the neighbourhood.

Putting it all together, Keller argues that doing justice in poor communities includes direct relief, individual and community development, racial reconciliation and reform.

Keller insists that while doing justice can lead people to give the gospel of grace a hearing, to equate deeds of mercy and justice with evangelism would be a fatal mistake. He argues that the relationship between evangelism and justice should be considered as an “asymmetrical, inseparable relationship” (2010a:139). He argues that evangelism is the most basic and radical ministry possible – not because the spiritual is more important than the physical, but because the eternal is more important than the temporal. However, he reiterates that doing mercy is inseparably connected to preaching grace. The gospel produces both a concern for the poor and deeds of justice, which gain credibility for gospel proclamation. “In other words, justification by faith leads to doing justice, and doing justice can make many seek to be justified by faith” (2010a:140).

In his chapter “Doing justice in the public square” (2010a:148–169), he goes about answering the question whether Christians should work together with those of other faiths for justice. He goes to great lengths to show that the concept of justice has become something of a buzzword and means different things to different people in the marketplace. He proposes that our work for justice in the public arena should be marked by “both humble co-operation and respectful provocation” (2010a:158).

Keller’s views as expressed in *Generous Justice* have been critiqued by P.J. Naylor in *Engaging with Keller*, chapter 4, “The Church’s Mission: sent to ‘do justice’ in the world?” (2013:135–169). While Naylor’s argument does raise a few pertinent questions, it appears to be typical of the debate between those who insist on gospel proclamation only versus those who call for holistic ministry. This researcher has the following concerns with Naylor’s critique:

- The title of the chapter is misleading. Nowhere does Keller argue for “doing justice” as the sole mission of the church, nor the primary mission.
- Similarly, after critiquing Keller for his stress on justice, he writes of Keller: “He is leading us to concentrate on the wrong goal” (2013:159). Not so. Given Keller’s stress on proclamation, this is a misrepresentation and represents a caricature of Keller’s teaching.
- Naylor (2013:159–161) contends for the centrality of the Great Commission in the mission of the church. By this he means gospel proclamation. However, does not the Great Commission include and subsume the cultural mandate and the great commandment (as argued by Wright, 2006:324–356; and Horton, 2011:210–246)?
- Naylor writes that believing that the gospel is the power of God for all who believe requires us “to devote all our energies to the single task of proclaiming the gospel” (2013:161). He warns that when the preaching of the Word is abandoned, there is nothing left to do but social activism (2013:161). He insinuates that Keller has skewed Christ’s mission from the spiritual plane and eternal plane to the temporal plane and social plane (2013:162). Again, he warns against focussing on the problem of material poverty, as this can lead to a distraction from the real problem: the spiritual plight of man. It seems that Naylor’s criticisms are targeting a reductionistic, caricatured version of Keller’s holistic theology. It seems apparent that Naylor is concerned about the dangers of drifting towards mere social activism, and is not dealing with Keller’s actual theology as articulated in his writings.
- Naylor does a very inadequate job in showing what one “should do” with the plethora of scriptural passages which call for works of justice and mercy. He says what one apparently cannot do with them, but one of Naylor’s concluding statements reduces it to “the Christian should exercise love and mercy in all his relationships” (2013:163). This seems lame and inadequate given the biblical data.

Overall it seems that Naylor is fearful of anything that gives justice or the horizontal dimensions of the Christian faith profile in that it could be a defaulting into the social gospel. His article seems more about warning against an unbalanced social emphasis than about what Keller has actually written.

Naylor does raise some pertinent questions (2013:140–141). Are all individual believers called to social action and deeds of mercy, or is the call given to the church as a whole? Is there a difference between the mandate given to the church as an organized entity and to individual believers? What

should the church's relationship to the government be in ministries of mercy and justice? And in the South African context, what about the church and NGOs? This question would have significant consequences in South Africa.

In *Center Church*, Keller (2012a:292) argues that a truly biblically informed church will seem counterintuitive in that it will demonstrate ministry emphases never usually associated together. It would be so focussed on calling people to repentance and faith that it might cause zealous pietists some embarrassment. Yet the same church would so emphasize justice and mercy that it would seem liberal. Keller seeks to debunk the regular stereotyping of churches on the liberal-conservative continuum. He argues that biblically gospel-centred churches should combine zeals that are not typically seen in the same church. Healthy local congregations should be connecting the people to the city through both evangelistic proclamation and ministries of justice and mercy. Suffice to point out at this stage that, given South African urban realities, there is enormous need, opportunity and scope for this type of ministry.

2.3.1.3 Other ramifications of Keller's integrative theology

It is critical to note that Keller's integrative, holistic theological understanding is seen in other places. Keller's integrative theology is evidenced in the "inner" life of the church (gathered) and in the "outer" life of the church (scattered). His desire for integration is worked out in all of the church's ministry.

His integrative theology has substantial ramifications for the inner life of the church – its regular worship services (2012a:291). He contends that the sharp distinction between edification and evangelism is not always helpful. Following the Reformed tradition, Keller affirms the "regulative principle" of Christian worship (2012a:298). He contends that the weekly worship service can be very effective in evangelism of non-Christians *and* in edification of Christians if it is gospel-centred and in the vernacular. Making his case from 1 Cor 14:24–25 and Acts 2, he argues that it is a "false dichotomy" to think that there is a choice before us between seeking God and being concerned with what unchurched people are thinking about in our services. Arguing from the same Scriptures, he makes the following points:

- Nonbelievers are to be present in Christian worship.
- Nonbelievers should understand the worship of Christians.
- Nonbelievers can be convicted and be converted through comprehensible worship (2012a:302–304).

His fundamental point is that both believers and nonbelievers need to hear the gospel of grace over and over again.

Keller's integrative and holistic theology is also evidenced in his teaching on work and vocation. In his work *Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Your Work to God's Work* (2012b, co-authored with K.L. Alsdorf), he articulates a biblical theology of work. He organizes his theology around creation (the design and dignity of work, work as cultivation and service), fall (work as fruitless, pointless and idol creating) and redemption (the gospel gives us a new conception and compass of work and a new power for work.). His objectives are to expose and correct the dualism underlying the thinking of many Christians, to rescue the concept of vocation and to posit a fully orbed Christian worldview that shapes all work. He rejects and exposes dualistic Christianity, where believers have often privatised their faith away from work or expressed it in a subculture. He affirms that all our work matters to God, and that God matters to all our work (2012b:330–336). His integrative, holistic theology also has clear consequences for believers in the workplace and in society.

Keller would affirm D.A. Carson's (2005:234) strongly worded statement about the danger of false antitheses:

So, which shall we choose? Experience or truth? The left wing of the airplane, or the right?

Love or integrity? Study or service? Evangelism or discipleship? The front wheels of a car, or the rear? Subjective knowledge or objective knowledge? Faith or obedience?

Damn all false antitheses to hell, for they generate false gods, they perpetuate idols, they twist and distort our souls, they launch the church into violent pendulum swings whose oscillations succeed only in dividing brothers and sisters in Christ.

2.3.2 Keller's missional emphasis

2.3.2.1 A historical overview and analysis of the term

Keller (2012a:249–290) devotes four chapters to this subject. He notes how the term “missional” became very popular after the 1998 publication *Missional Church* (edited by Daniel Guder). He comments that it became something of a buzzword in evangelical circles, with ministers searching for the true missional church as if it were the Holy Grail. Keller cites the contributions of David Bosch and Lesslie Newbigin in outlining a missional theology.

In his important work *Witness to the World* (1985:239–248), David Bosch explained that the term *missio Dei* is grounded in Trinitarian theology. The concept of *missio Dei* implies that mission should be “understood as being derived from the very nature of God ... put in the context of the doctrine of the Trinity, not of ecclesiology or soteriology.” The Trinity is, by nature, “sending”: The Father sends the Son into the world to save it. The Father and Son send the Spirit into the world. “Mission is God giving up himself, his becoming man, his laying aside of his divine prerogatives and taking our humanity, his moving into the world, in his Son and Spirit” (1985:239). And now the Spirit is sending the church. God does not merely send the church on mission. God is already on mission, and the church must join him. Mission is the triune God moving into the world.

In his short book *Believing in the Future* (1995), Bosch articulates a vision for mission in the post-Christian West. Like Newbigin, one of his central ideas is that the church in Western culture must view its work as mission in the same way it views mission to other cultures. These are his key ideas:

- The centrality of the *missio Dei* is restated: God’s mission is to restore creation; it concerns the universal reign of God, and the church is called to participate. He asserts that two opposing errors must be avoided: trying to recreate a Christian society and withdrawal from society into the spiritual realm.
- The church must publicly and prophetically challenge the idols of modernity – specifically autonomous reason and individualism.
- The church must aim to be a contrast society that demonstrates what life looks like free from the idols of race, sex, wealth, power and individualism.
- Consequently, the biblical message must be contextualized to avoid both syncretism on the one extreme, and irrelevance on the other.
- The laity must be equipped for public life.
- Vital, life-shaping worship must be cultivated and fuel mission.
- Unity between churches must be modelled to the world.

Bosch spoke of the cultural captivity of the church in the West, contending that it is profoundly shaped by the spirit of the age in both its liberal and conservative forms. In its liberal form it has

succumbed to de-supernaturalizing the gospel and turning the church into social service centres. In its conservative form, it has bought uncritically into the idolatrous notion of religion as the fulfilment of individual consumer needs. He argues that both wings are captive to the reigning idols of Western culture.

Bosch (1995:55–60) identifies the following six features as key ingredients of a missiology of Western culture:

- It must include an ecological dimension as Western global economic structure is destroying the environment and the earth will not survive without change.
- It must be countercultural, though not escapist. Rampant hedonism (of which the prosperity gospel is a symptom) needs to be challenged. Sacrifice, simplicity and self-discipline need to be rediscovered.
- It will have to be ecumenical. Bosch contends that denominationalism is the religious aspect of secularisation; it is the form that religion takes in a culture dominated by Enlightenment thinking.
- It must be contextual. He states that we have lost ground in the West precisely because there never was a contextual approach.
- It must be primarily a ministry of the laity – this is how public and private will be brought together.
- It must flow from a local, vibrant worshipping community.

Keller recounts the experiences and subsequent teaching of Lesslie Newbigin. Newbigin was a British missionary who served in India for several decades last century. After he returned to England in the 1970s, he noted with alarm the massive decline of the church and of Christian influence in society. When he left England, the church still “Christianized” people, and people attended church out of social convention and social expectation. The English church had supported “missions” in foreign non-Christian cultures but had neglected mission in its own context.

Newbigin had observed that the Indian church functioned in a very different way: they did not support or promote missions; they were missional in every way. Every aspect of church life – worship, preaching, community dynamics and discipleship – was a part of mission. On the mission field, visitors could not be expected to have any familiarity with the gospel or the church.

Consequently, preaching and worship had to address them in ways that were comprehensible and challenging.

Back in England, Newbigin observed that Western culture was fast becoming a non-Christian society, a mission field. However, Western churches bemoaned the cultural shift and carried on ministering as before. Their preaching and practice assumed that they were in the “Christian” West, but the Christian West was disappearing. Newbigin contended that that the church had to come to grips with the fact that it was no longer ministering in “Christendom.” Critical to its mission was the unmasking of false gods, for example, the ideology of the European Enlightenment and its commitment to the autonomy of human reason, which led to the illusion of neutral, value-free knowledge. Newbigin called for a confrontation with false ideology and emphasized the necessity of believers being equipped to integrate their faith and work as they moved out into their vocations in the world.

2.3.2.2 Keller’s missional theology

The work of Bosch and Newbigin has influenced Keller. Keller shows a keen awareness of a broad range of meaning in the term “missional”, and writes of the danger of being reductionistic in defining the term. He shows (2012a:256–258) how there have been four broad overlapping streams in the missional conversation. Being missional is essentially being:

- evangelistic
- incarnational
- contextual
- reciprocal and communal.

He states that many conservative evangelicals reject the term because of its connection with the ecumenical movement and its links to leading figures from the emerging church movement, such as Brian McLaren.²¹ He argues that those from conservative backgrounds are found in the first category (missional as evangelistic) and are beginning to populate the second and third categories (missional as incarnational and contextual). Pastors with more liberal inclinations are found in the second and third categories, but are attracted especially to the fourth category.

21 Brian McLaren is regarded as one of the most influential leaders in the USA. He is a pastor, author and activist, and is identified with progressive and postmodern Christianity. His books, including *Generous Orthodoxy* and *A New Kind of Orthodoxy*, have caused a furore among evangelicals. This author believes he represents an example of contextualization gone wrong.

Despite these differences, Keller contends that there are important commonalities between these broad areas of emphasis. He identifies and summarises the areas of consensus and strength as follows:

- The post-Christendom age: Times have changed in that the church in the West no longer has a privileged place.
- The cultural captivity of the church: There is a call for a contextualised, authentic gospel that is both comprehensible and challenging for those in a pluralistic, late-modern society.
- The church is called out and sent out to be a blessing: Every Christian is in mission; every Christian is blessed to be a blessing (Gen 12:1–3; 1 Pet 2:9). Laypeople must be equipped for evangelistic witness and for public life and vocation.
- A contrast community: The church must be countercultural. The quality, distinctiveness and beauty of our communal life must be a major part of our witness and mission to the world.

In his chapter “Centering the Missional Church” (2012a:264–275), Keller identifies three concerns he has with some segments of those engaged in the missional conversation.

- First, the understanding of missional is not comprehensive enough. For example, any missional church must be intensely and pervasively evangelistic. But he points out that the typical gospel presentation in the West is too shallow. It speaks of God, sin, Christ and atonement. But it assumes that those listeners have the same understanding as the speaker – which is a dangerously false assumption. This has important consequences for pursuing faithful contextualization.
- Second, missional gets reduced to one particular form. Keller cites the incarnational versus the attractional approach and the subsequent form the church takes. He takes issue with those who insist that only a small church can be missional (2012a:267). He does assert that an attractional church that has no concern for the broader community cannot be considered missional. But this need not be the case. His point is that the features of an effective missional church can be present or absent within any model or size.
- Third, the loss of a clear gospel understanding. This is Keller’s greatest concern. Though missional literature uses the term “gospel” constantly, it is clear that they do not mean the

same thing by that term. Keller argues that the final result of God's redeeming in Christ will be a completely renewed cosmos – a new heaven and earth. Again, he points out the comprehensive nature of the redemption that Christ has won. God not only pardons our sins and saves our souls, but he heals all the ways sin has marred and ruined creation. He is critical of those who stress the horizontal dimension to the virtual exclusion of the vertical dimension, and vice versa. He is critical of those who reject the classic doctrines of sin as an offence against God, incurring his righteous wrath; as Christ propitiating God's wrath, taking our place as our substitute; and of our sin being placed on Jesus, and his righteousness being placed on us. Keller affirms the corporate and horizontal aspects of sin and redemption. But he cautions against giving these horizontal aspects so much profile that the classic doctrines of grace are denied, resulting in a destructive imbalance. Keller affirms the classic Protestant understanding of the gospel that includes the notion that God is holy and that we are under his wrath and curse, but that Jesus bore the wrath, curse and punishment in our place.

He proceeds to identify and describe six marks of a biblically faithful missional church:

- It will have to confront the idols of Western society, particularly how “modernity makes the happiness and self-actualization of the individual into an absolute”, which leads to greed and consumerism (2012a:271).
- The church must contextualize skilfully and speak in the vernacular, for an understanding of Christian terminology cannot be assumed. Christian doctrine cannot be revised, but sound contextualization is required to ensure a compelling, understandable presentation.
- Such a church must equip people for mission in every area of their lives. It should be more committed to deeds of mercy and justice than traditional liberal churches and more deeply committed to evangelism and conversion than traditional conservative churches.
- The church must be a counterculture for the common good. The church should be a servant community, distinct, yet set within its surroundings, sacrificially utilizing its resources for the common good of the city.
- The church itself must be contextualized (i.e., contextualization is to be comprehensive). The church should expect nonbelievers, inquirers and seekers to be involved in many aspects of the church's life and ministry. In this sense, the church should be “porous”,

welcoming strangers and doubters and involving them in community so they can see the gospel fleshed out.

- The church should practise unity on the local level. Keller points out that in the Christendom era, churches received definition and identity by contrasting themselves with other churches. Now we should define ourselves more by contrasting ourselves with the world – our surrounding, nonbelieving culture.

Inherent to contemporary missional theology is its call for a missionary encounter with Western culture. In his article in the Redeemer Report “A missionary encounter today” (2017), Keller recounts how the early Christians pre-Constantine were persecuted for being too narrow and exclusive, and yet were fast growing, particularly in the cities. He states that they were marked by offence and attraction, confrontation and persuasion. Christianity did not adapt to culture in order to grow, but neither did it remain a small, reclusive band.

Keller argues that there are two vital lessons to be learned from the early church that can be instructive for our times:

- We must avoid thinking that faithful witness will mean either fast growth (if we get the right formula) or a long-term dwindling of impact and fruit.
- We must avoid both assimilation and rigidity. (Or, to anticipate the discussion in the next chapter, both over- and under-contextualization must be avoided.)

He posits the following features of what would constitute a faithful missionary encounter in our day:

- We need a public apologetic that is both popular and high. We should not only have a rational apologetic, but a cultural one. He cites Augustine, who had a high critique of pagan culture and defended the exclusivity of Christian belief by showing that it strengthened social fabric, not weakened it. There must also be accessible popular apologetics to show how society cannot make good on its promises of happiness and fulfilment, but that the gospel of Christ can and does.
- We need to be a counterculture, with several characteristics:
 - a striking multi-ethnicity
 - marked by great civility, building bridges to those who oppose us

- known for generosity, justice and care for the poor
 - we should be committed to the sanctity of life, and to being a sexual counterculture.
- Faithful presence within the vocations. Christians must be equipped with the doctrine of vocation to integrate their faith and their work.
 - An evangelistic stance and approach. There is no one presentation that suits all contexts. But the gospel relates to other cultures as “subversive fulfillment” – the gospel fulfils culture’s deepest aspirations, but only by contradicting the distorted and idolatrous means the world adopts to satisfy them. This theme shall be considered in a subsequent chapter.
 - Christian formation in a digital age. Keller points out how the early Christians received up to three years of catechetical training and contends that this approach is how we will form Christians who are shaped by the Bible. He advocates the use of modern technology.²²

2.3.2.3 Comparison with other scholars and writers

Other scholars and practitioners share Keller’s core missional understanding and approach. C.J.H. Wright has authored what is generally regarded as the most compelling biblical-theological case for a missional understanding of the entire Scriptures. In his *The Mission of God*, Wright develops a hermeneutical approach that sees the mission of God (and the participation of God’s people in it) as a framework by which the entire Bible can be read. He regards it as a major key that unlocks the whole grand narrative of Scripture (2006:17). He argues convincingly that instead of proof-texting the case for missions, the whole Bible is itself a “missional” phenomenon. Arguing from Luke 24:27 and 44, he contends that Jesus never taught only a messianic interpretation of the OT, but a missional one. “The proper way for disciples of the crucified and risen Jesus to read their Scriptures, is *messianically* and *missionally*” (2006:30).

The Lausanne Covenant is clearly missional. In article 1 (“The Purpose of God”), the document states that God “has been calling out from the world a people for himself, and sending his people back into the world to be his servants and witnesses ...” Article 6 (“The Church and Evangelism”) states that “Christ sends his redeemed people into the world as the Father sent him, and this calls for a similar deep and costly penetration of the world” (in Stott, 2009:12, 32).

22 Keller has developed the New City Catechism, based on the Westminster and Heidelberg catechisms, and this is available digitally.

Roxburgh and Boren, in their 2009 publication *Introducing the Missional Church*, give the broad contours of what it means to be missional. They are careful not to reduce the meaning to a predetermined formula, and are critical of a purely attractational form of church ministry. Like Keller, they assert that being missional cannot be reduced to one model. Rather, it can be expressed in diverse forms and traditions. They contend that being missional involves three realities:

- There needs to be the realization that the West is a mission field.
- We need to rethink the gospel in terms of *missio Dei* and recapture a God-centred gospel and God-centred mission.
- The church needs to be what it is called to be: a sign and witness of God's kingdom; a contrast society in the world.

Hastings, in his *Missional God, Missional Church: Hope for Re-evangelising the West* (2012), affirms the holistic dimensions of Christian mission. Hastings unpacks John 20:19–23 and sees similarities between the defeated, insular disciples and the church in the West. He stresses the need for churches to get past attractational strategies and equip their members to follow Jesus into the world. He calls for the church in the West to break free from the trap of indiscriminate enculturation. He claims that the church has largely bought into the values of modernity and postmodernity (such as consumerism, dualism, materialism, ethnocentrism, control, individualism, cynicism, hedonism and technocracy). He is also critical of what he terms the “cultural disconnection” of the church, meaning the failure of the church to engage redemptively in all areas of human culture. He stresses that being missional is not the latest fad to hit the fad-prone evangelical church, but is firmly grounded in the doctrine of the Trinity. The church is a sent community because it is the community of the sending, triune God.

Goheen, in his 2011 work *A Light to the Nations: The Missional Church and the Biblical Story*, traces the history of the missional church, stressing that the church has a double identity: called and set apart by God; for the world, directed outward. Like Newbigin, he laments the state of the church in the West and its compromise with surrounding culture. One of his major concerns is the syncretism of the Western church, which he believes has uncritically adopted the idolatrous thinking and lifestyle patterns of the world. He identifies globalization, postmodernity and consumerism as three dominant forces shaping public life in the West today. In chapter 9 (2011:201–227), he answers the question of what a biblically healthy missional church would look like today. He identifies and discusses the following characteristics. Such a church would:

- emphasize authentic worship that nurtures its missional identity
- be empowered by the preaching of the gospel, one element of worship that requires special attention
- be devoted to communal prayer
- strive to live as a contrast community
- understand its cultural context
- be trained for a missionary encounter in its callings in the world
- be trained and equipped to do evangelism in an organic way
- be deeply involved in the needs of its neighbourhood and world
- be committed to missions
- have well-trained leadership
- have parents who nurture their children in the faith
- have small groups that nurture disciples for mission in the world.

To summarize, Keller’s missional theology is neither innovative nor controversial. However, it must be stressed that for Keller, missional theology cannot be separated from a robust, comprehensive theological understanding. We noted that the word “missional” became something of a buzzword and had a faddish appeal for many.²³ Some have jumped on the missional bandwagon who do not share the robust historical Reformed evangelicalism that Keller does.

We also noted that for many, being missional involves unity and co-operation between churches, denominations and networks. It could be argued that at a practical level, Keller gives more attention and profile to practical unity across denominational lines than do many of his PCA colleagues. This is a cause for concern to them. They are critical in that he does not appear to be overtly Presbyterian enough and he is broader in terms of with whom he associates. “Tim Keller is the most famous Presbyterian pastor in the United States today; but whether he identifies his ministry self-consciously with Presbyterianism is another matter”, according to Hart (2013:211–238). Hart’s concerns constitute an “in-house” denominational squabble. For those on the outside (non-Presbyterians), his reservations seem petty and parochial.

23 For example, see the Verge Network at <http://www.vergenetwork.org/>. While there are good contributors with many helpful and challenging articles, courses, ebooks and video clips, it is impossible to find a title without the word “disciple” or “missional” in it. The obvious response may be that this is its exact purpose. But this writer would argue that you cannot make disciples by purely focussing on mission and discipleship. The full range of theology (the whole counsel of God, Acts 20:27) has to be considered.

2.4 Keller's profile and acceptability among Reformed pastors in urban South Africa

Koning and Buys (2018:131–133) conducted research among 53 Reformed pastors in urban settings in South Africa to try and gauge Keller's acceptability. These pastors were from four groups: REACH-SA, GKSA, Acts 29 Network and Reformed Baptists. In terms of location, socio-economic status, pastoral experience and cultural diversity, the group seemed to be a fair sample and reflection of South African urban demographics.

These are the key findings:

There was substantial familiarity with Keller's work: 93% of the respondents had read Keller's material or listened to his sermons and podcasts.

All the pastors were at least tentatively positive about his theology and praxis, while most were significantly positive. The respondents highlighted the following positives:

- Pastors affirmed and expressed appreciation for his thoroughly gospel-centred approach to life and ministry. One Baptist pastor labelled his approach "effective ministry without gimmicks."
- A number of pastors commented that they found his identification and debunking of contemporary idols of the heart tremendously helpful. They commented that "exposing the sin under the sin" was pastorally very necessary and helpful.
- Pastors also expressed appreciation for his views on biblical contextualization and his part in helping them think more rigorously about contextualization. They commented that he had helped them to engage with their own particular cultural contexts, to connect with and confront their hearers. One Baptist pastor stated that Keller "provides a balanced framework for doing ministry that is grounded in the ancient Word and aware of the present world." Another REACH-SA pastor affirmed his "intellectual contextualization" and his use of presuppositional apologetics.

(These three factors – his gospel centrality, his biblical contextualization, and his focus on exposing and debunking contemporary idols – were the most affirmed aspects of his theology.)

- One REACH-SA pastor expressed appreciation for Keller's stress on social justice and mercy ministry: "While I would want to caution against these things eclipsing

the church's primary calling to gospel proclamation, he has put them back on the agenda for me.”

- A REACH-SA seminary lecturer, active in local church ministry, stated that Keller has “put church planting and evangelism back on the Reformed Evangelical map... to be Reformed now doesn't mean necessarily identifying with being tiny, out of touch, inward-looking churches.”
- Pastors expressed appreciation for his writings. One GKSA pastor said, “*Centre Church* opened my eyes”; another church planter from Mamelodi labelled the same book “revolutionary”.
- A number of respondents conveyed their admiration for his preaching to both the heart and the mind. A REACH-SA pastor commended Keller for: “... preaching biblically, pastorally, evangelistically, apologetically and relevantly to his context and at an intellectually satisfying level.” An Acts 29 pastor highlighted Keller's ability to effectively converse and preach to sceptics. Another minister spoke of his ability to preach the true gospel to postmodern people.
- An Acts 29 church planter expressed appreciation for his generosity of spirit: while holding “firmly to the orthodox (Reformed evangelical) position he exhibits a generosity of spirit towards those of other church traditions.”

When asked about what concerns or criticisms they have of Keller's theology and methodology, the following issues were raised:

- Four pastors expressed concerns about Keller's exegesis and hermeneutics. A Baptist pastor wrote: “He gets too quickly from text to application... sometimes he gets to Christ in an artificial way.” Another Baptist pastor labelled his trajectory to Christ as “taking a rabbit out of the hat.” A REACH-SA pastor also expressed caution: “His use of Jeremiah 29 to point to the priority of the city is questionable.” Another REACH-SA pastor was cautious about a perceived “psychological hermeneutic”.

- Three respondents had reservations about Keller’s views on creation, which could be labelled as tending towards “theistic evolution”.²⁴
- One REACH-SA pastor responded: “His framing of sin as primarily idolatry can sometimes downplay the fact that sin is an offence against God.”
- Two pastors pointed out that his material and approach are aimed at very educated people.
- One pastor cautioned that “contextualization can become the beginning and end of all things.”
- Three pastors were cautious about his views and language of “redeeming the city”. Linked to this was a caution about a perceived overly optimistic eschatology, with “post-millennial leanings”.
- A Baptist pastor warned against a perceived pragmatism in Keller’s theology.
- A REACH-SA minister expressed this concern: “His desire to be as winsome as possible and to find areas of commonality sometimes takes the edge off the sharper points of biblical truth, e.g. judgement, wrath and sin.”
- A couple of Baptist pastors expressed a fundamental disagreement with Keller’s views on baptism, but also affirmed that this was not a “dealbreaker”.
- A GKSA pastor pointed out the very big difference in context between Manhattan and most of South Africa: “his context is vastly different from South African informal settlements.”

This research indicates that South African Reformed evangelical pastors seem to be fairly well acquainted with Keller’s theology and approach. Overall, there is a widespread appreciation for Keller’s theological approach and praxis. This appreciation is not unconditional or without reservation. Godly wisdom would affirm that nobody’s theology is perfect and completely balanced in all respects. It should be remembered that those who have critiqued Keller and expressed cautions are reading his books and listening to his podcasts and sermons fundamentally because they find him valuable.

24 These views are presented in his 14-page ‘white paper’ put out by the Biologos Foundation, entitled *Creation, Evolution and Christian Laypeople*, which can be accessed at: https://biologos.org/uploads/projects/Keller_white_paper.pdf Date of access: 17 May 2015.

This chapter has endeavoured to prove that it is entirely appropriate to classify Keller as a Reformed evangelical. Furthermore, his stress on holistic ministry and his missional emphasis are neither innovative nor particularly controversial. Both inform and shape his theology and praxis of contextualization. Because of his general credibility and acceptance among Reformed pastors and church planters in South Africa, giving Keller's model of contextualization further careful consideration would be natural and legitimate.

CHAPTER 3 KELLER’S THEOLOGY OF CONTEXTUALIZATION

The goal is to identify, define and describe the salient features of Keller’s theology of contextualization. The core building blocks of his theological undergirding of contextualization will be examined and evaluated. The aim is to assess whether it is Reformed and orthodox, and whether it has any peculiar innovative characteristics. Some of these features are clear and overt; some are more underlying, but nevertheless important. This chapter is to some extent apologetic in tone, as it anticipates (as Keller does) both objections against biblical contextualization and misunderstandings concerning the nature and scope of contextualization.

3.1 Definitions and importance

Keller devotes four chapters of his major work *Center Church* (2012a:89–134) to the subject of gospel contextualization. His definition of contextualization (2012:89a) is quoted in full because a number of his key theological assumptions and convictions arise out of it.

Sound contextualization means translating and adapting the communication and ministry of the gospel to a particular culture without compromising the essence and particulars of the gospel itself. The great missionary task is to express the gospel message to a new culture in a way that avoids making the message unnecessarily alien to that culture, yet without removing or obscuring the scandal and offense of biblical truth. A contextualized gospel is marked by clarity and attractiveness, and yet it still challenges sinners’ self-sufficiency and calls them to repentance. It adapts and connects to the culture, yet at the same time challenges and confronts it. If we fail to adapt to the culture or if we fail to challenge the culture – if we under- or overcontextualize – our ministry will be unfruitful because we have failed to contextualize well.

He goes on to assert that skill in contextualization is one of the keys to effective ministry (2012a:91) and a core characteristic of a biblically healthy church (2012a:274). In his *Urban Church Planting Manual* (Keller & Thompson, 2010:3), he affirms that Christian leaders regularly underestimate the importance and complexity of contextualization.

Keller’s appreciation of the importance of contextualization is shared by other writers. Goheen (2014:265) candidly states: “Contextualization is essential to the gospel, and this makes it a pressing missional problem for the church everywhere in the world.” Goheen adds that

contextualization should not be an exotic item of interest for the cross-cultural missionary, but that it is a critical concern for every church in every cultural setting, as well as for the global church as a whole. He terms contextualization a “pervasive and vital issue” (2014:267).

Hesselgrave (1991:143) defines contextualization as “the attempt to communicate the message of the person, works, word and will of God in a way that is faithful to God’s revelation, especially as it is put forth in holy Scriptures: and that is meaningful to the respondents in their respective cultural and existential contexts.” Horton (2011:115) affirms that contextualization “is the attempt to situate particular beliefs and practices in their cultural environment.” C.J.H. Wright (2006:447) describes contextualization as a “constant missiological task” from biblical times to the present, which must keep discerning “the fine lines between cultural relevance and theological syncretism.” Ott and Strauss (2010:266) define contextualization as “relating the never-changing truth of Scripture in ever-changing human contexts so that those truths are clear and compelling. It is the process of engaging culture in all its varied dimensions with biblical truth.” He goes on to assert that faithful mission “must be true both to Scripture and authentic for the countless diverse human contexts around the world.” He contends that when the gospel is communicated in a manner that neglects to speak to every area of human existence, weak churches develop that seem irrelevant to their cultures. Conversely, by rooting all theology and practice in Scripture, and by penetrating to the level of worldview and interacting with every aspect of context, we can help ensure the emergence of healthy churches that connect with and transform their worlds. He contends (2010:267) that “biblically based contextualization is essential if Christian faith is to take deep root in any culture.” D.A. Carson (1996:97) asserts that while we must be aware of the abuses of certain forms of contextualization, “we cannot reasonably doubt the importance of the phenomenon.”

3.2 Keller’s biblical-theological basis for contextualization

As Reformed believers and practitioners who hold to the authority and sufficiency of the Scriptures, this is a crucial subject and clearly the place to start. Keller does not give this subject exhaustive treatment, but posits his case for contextualization in his chapter “Biblical Contextualization” (2012a:108–117). He cites seven main arguments from the Scriptures.

3.2.1 Romans 1 and 2, which teaches the mixed nature of culture, provides the *basis* for contextualization

Keller (2012a:108) affirms that “Every human culture is an extremely complex mixture of brilliant truth, marred half-truths, and overt resistance to the truth. Every culture will have some idolatrous discourse within it. And yet every culture will have some witness to God’s truth in it.” He regards the “mixed” nature of culture as providing the basis for contextualization.

- In Romans 1 and 2, the apostle Paul forthrightly declares the sinfulness and lostness of all people and all cultures. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. The pagan Gentiles may make sensuality an idol, but the religious Jews make moral righteousness an idol. All are separated from God and under the wrath of God.
- Yet Romans 1 and 2 also affirms that all human beings possess a primordial knowledge of God: with the law written on the heart of every human, all have a sense of the rightness of honesty, justice and love. At some deep level all know there is a God and that we are accountable to Him. Keller defines “common grace”, or “general revelation”, as a “nonsaving knowledge and likeness of God that he grants to all those who bear his image – present in some way in every culture” (2012a:108–109). Arguing from Romans 1:18–25, Keller contends that general revelation is not merely a set of innate ideas or static principles. He points out that the verbs in verse 20, *νοούμενα* (“are being understood”) and *καθορᾶται* (“are being seen”), are present participles. General revelation, then, is the continuing and insistent pressure of God’s truth on the consciousness of every human being. He states plainly that this is not salvific knowledge (2012a:109).

While biblical contextualization relies much on the category of common grace, we note that although Keller (2012a:108) affirms the value of common grace, he also makes clear-cut statements concerning the limitations of common grace. He stays far away from anything that could be construed as universalism or relativism, for he asserts that saving knowledge of Jesus and his gospel comes only through the special revelation of the Bible.

The doctrine of sin means that we are never as right as our worldview should make us; and conversely “the doctrine of our creation in the image of God, and an understanding of common grace, remind us that nonbelievers are never as flawed as their false worldview should make them” (2012a:109).

This means that our stance toward every human culture (including our own) should be one of critical enjoyment and an appropriate wariness. The insights and creativity of other cultures should be enjoyed; and we should recognize and celebrate expressions of justice, wisdom, truth and beauty in every culture. But we ought to approach every culture with an awareness that it has been deeply distorted by sin, especially the sin of idolatry. This twin approach of both appropriate appreciation and considered critique forms a vital element of contextualization.

The Lausanne Covenant, article 10 (in Stott, 2009:43), affirms the following, which is essentially in agreement with Keller: “Culture must always be tested and judged by Scripture. Because men and women are God’s creatures, some of their culture is rich in beauty and goodness. Because they are fallen, all of it is tainted with sin and some of it is demonic.” Horton (2011:116) has stated similarly: “Every culture is in bondage to sin and death. And every culture offers rich treasures, given by the Spirit in common grace.”

3.2.2 First Corinthians and flexibility toward culture

First Corinthians 9:19–23 is usually the first passage people think of when the subject of contextualization is considered; it the most well-known “prooftext” for contextualization. Keller puts this passage in the broad context of the whole epistle. He argues that prior to this section, Paul had been speaking about *skandalizō* (“cause to stumble”) and provides as a case study a conflict in the Corinthian church. Jewish believers sometimes bought meat after it had been used in idol ceremonies. Jews had no qualms about eating this meat, for they knew that idols were non-entities. As former pagans, Gentiles “stumbled” over this practice – they could not eat meat without feeling spiritually defiled (1 Cor 8:7). To see Jewish brothers doing this distressed them.

Paul responds by saying that although the Jews were theologically correct (1 Cor 8:4–5), they were not correct in terms of lifestyle. They should rather refrain from eating meat offered to idols to remove the cultural offence, the stumbling block (1 Cor 8:9–12), from their Gentile brothers and sisters. “Cultural adaptation here is seen as an expression of love” (Keller, 2012a:110).

In addition to Keller’s observations, this researcher notes five vital principles for contextualization that emerge from 1 Cor 9:19–23:

- (i) Paul’s choice to forego his personal freedom: “... I have made myself a servant to all...” (v. 19)

- (ii) the supremacy of the gospel in Paul’s ministry: “I do it all for the sake of the gospel...” (v. 23)
- (iii) Paul’s commitment and sensitivity to understanding different kinds of people: “To the Jews..., to those outside the law, to the weak...” (v. 20–22)
- (iv) Paul’s flexibility of approach to different kinds of people: “To the Jews I became as a Jew... I have become all things to all people...” (v. 20, 22)
- (v) Paul’s burning desire to see people converted: “that by all means I might save some” (v. 22). In this regard, Kistemaker (1996:309) writes: “Opponents might accuse Paul of being ineffectual, unstable and changeable. If so they would completely misunderstand his motive. They would fail to see the driving purpose that motivated ... his mission endeavour: to bring the Gospel to as many people as possible.” Morris (1987:135) concludes: “The apostle ... adapted himself to the position of his hearers in a whole-hearted determination to win them for Christ.”

Keller (2012a:110–111) applies Paul’s methodology practically: In areas that the Bible does not specifically address, the Christian communicator should be constantly engaged in cultural adaptation. This may involve in refraining from certain attitudes or practices to remove unnecessary stumbling blocks from the path of people with culturally framed perceptions. This could include music, clothing, food and other non-essential practices that distract or repulse people from clearly understanding the gospel. Similarly, we should not elevate relative human cultural norms and make them absolutes. For example, a style of dress should not be absolutized, and it should not be claimed that rhythmic music is less pleasing to God than melodic music, and must therefore be excluded from worship. Keller states that in this sense, contextualization is an expression of unselfishness – it involves choosing not to privilege yourself or to exercise your full freedom as a believer – so people can hear and obey the call of Christ (2012a:111). Yet our teaching must never eliminate the offence, the *skandolon*, of the cross (1 Cor 1:23). What the Scriptures insist upon can never be soft-pedalled. Biblical contextualization means causing the right scandal – the one the gospel presents to all sinners – and removing all the unnecessary ones.

This writer notes that Paul’s approach is clearly demonstrated in a number of places in Acts: he had Timothy circumcised “for the sake of the Jews” (16:3; my translation); he took a Nazirite vow to “conciliate the Jewish Christian leaders he was going to see in Jerusalem” (Stott, 1998:300);

and he joined four Nazirites in their purification rites and paid the expenses for the sacrificial offering (Acts 21:23–26).

Keller concludes and applies this point in the following way: we must avoid turning off listeners because *we* are culturally offensive. In this way, biblical contextualization is an expression of unselfishness, in that it is choosing not to privilege yourself or exercise your full freedom as a Christian so people can hear and follow Christ’s call. Yet our preaching must not obscure or eliminate the offence – *skandalon* (1 Cor 1:23) – of the cross. He very firmly asserts that what the Bible has clearly and absolutely taught cannot be soft-pedalled. If we do, we have adapted and capitulated to the culture. He cites the example of social justice. If a wealthy congregation is never challenged in the area of social justice, which is a direct implication of the gospel (James 1 and 2), we eliminate a biblical imperative.

This is an important statement, because some Reformed, conservative pastors may be cautious, suspicious, or even opposed to contextualization – they regard it as a gimmick to “soft-sell” the gospel, or as a way of avoiding the offensive parts of the gospel. An example would be John MacArthur, pastor of Grace Bible Church, San Francisco, who enjoys considerable profile in conservative evangelical circles worldwide. He is extremely suspicious and critical of contextualization. His views are outlined in a series of blog posts from 2014 on the Grace to You website. In the final blog post in the series, “Contextualization and the corruption of the church”,²⁵ he writes that “Contextualization of the gospel today has infected the church with the spirit of the age. It has opened the door wide for worldliness, shallowness, and in some cases, a crass, party atmosphere. The world now sets the agenda for the church.” This researcher would regard this critique as an unhelpful caricature of contextualization. He is taking the worst-case example as normative. At best, MacArthur is painting with a very broad brush; at worst, he is creating a straw man. Another example would be those from Keller’s own denomination who take issue with some of his views and methodology in *Engaging with Keller: Thinking Through the Theology of an Influential Evangelical* (Campbell & Schweitzer, 2013).

3.2.3 First Corinthians 1 and the biblical balance

Keller affirms that 1 Cor 1:22–25 provides the basic *formula* for doing contextualization. The mixed nature of culture is assumed. When Paul spoke to Greeks, he confronted their culture’s idol

25 This can be accessed online at: <http://www.gty.org/library/blog/B110922/contextualization-and-the-corruption-of-thechurch>

of wisdom. The Greeks were infatuated with philosophy, intellectual attainment and the arts. For them, a salvation that came not through teaching or philosophical reflection, but through a crucified saviour, was absolute foolishness. Paul confronted their idol of wisdom.

Jewish culture was very different, being highly practical and valuing actions and results. Paul describes what appeals to this culture with three synonyms: miraculous signs, power and strength. Rather than philosophical musings, the Jewish culture valued getting things done through power and skill. To them, a salvation that came through a crucifixion was weak and ineffective. A messiah should overthrow the oppressive Romans – he should *do something*. A saviour dying in weakness made no sense to the Jews. Paul confronted their idol of power.

While the gospel offended people in different ways, it also drew people to Christ and his salvific work in different ways. Greeks who were saved came to see that that the cross was the ultimate *wisdom*, making it possible for God to be both just and the justifier of all who believe. And Jews who came to faith came to see that that the cross was true *power*, for it means that our most potent enemies – sin, guilt and death – have been defeated.

Keller affirms that it is very noteworthy how the apostle applies the gospel both to confront and to complete each society's baseline cultural narrative. He does this both positively and negatively. He confronts each culture for its idols. He shows how the cross challenges the hardcore pride of the Greeks and the works-righteousness of the Jews. But he also affirms their basic collective longings, demonstrating that Christ alone is the true wisdom that the Greeks have looked for and is the true righteousness that the Jews have sought.

Paul's strategy is neither completely affirming nor completely confrontational. He does not simply expose and preach against Greek pride in intellect and Jewish pride in power. Instead, he shows them that the way they are pursuing these things is self-defeating. He reveals the deadly contradictions and idolatry within their cultures and points them to the resolution that can only be found in Jesus Christ. This approach is called "subversive fulfilment", though Keller does not label it as such at this point. It was first coined by Hendrik Kraemer and more recently revived by Dan Strange.²⁶ This dynamic between connecting (or affirming) and confronting (or challenging) so as to present Jesus Christ forms the substance of Keller's model, as we shall note in the following chapter.

26 The "subversive fulfilment" idea was coined by Kraemer in "Continuity or Discontinuity" (1939:5). Strange uses it in his *Their Rock is Not Like Our Rock: A Theology of Religions* (2014).

3.2.4 Paul's speeches in Acts

Here we see the apostle actually doing the work of contextualization – presenting the gospel to different groups of people in different cultural contexts. Keller cites six speeches and their differing audiences and contexts:

- Acts 13:13–43 – an audience of Bible believers (Jews and proselytes) in the synagogue in Antioch
- Acts 14:6–16 – an audience of peasant polytheists in Lystra
- Acts 17:16–34 – an audience of sophisticated pagans in Athens
- Acts 20:16–38 – a farewell sermon to the Ephesian elders
- Acts 21:27–22:22 – a hostile Jewish mob in Jerusalem
- Acts 24–26 – Paul addresses Felix, Festus and Herod Agrippa, “governing elites” (2012a:112) of mixed backgrounds and some knowledge of Judaism and paganism.

Keller (2012a:112) writes: “We are immediately struck by how Paul’s gospel presentations differ markedly, depending on the culture of the listeners.”

He notes the *differences* between the speeches: Paul’s appeal to authority varies with different hearers. With Bible believers (Acts 13:13ff) he quotes Scripture; with pagans (Acts 14:6ff and 17:16ff) he argues from general revelation and the greatness of creation. The biblical content also varies. With Jews and God-fearers, Paul spends little time on the doctrine of God and goes straight to Christ. However, with pagans he spends most of his time on developing the concept of God.

When speaking of sin, Paul clearly informs his Jewish listeners that neither the law nor moral effort can save them (Acts 13:39). He is essentially saying: You think you are good – but you aren’t good enough. His approach with a pagan audience is to urge them to turn from “worthless things” (idols) to “the Living God”, who is the true source of joy (Acts 14:15–17). Paul is in effect saying: You think you are free – but you are enslaved to dead idols.

Paul varies his use of emotion and reason, his vocabulary, his introductions and conclusions, his figures of speech and illustrations, his identification of the audience’s concerns, hopes, and needs. In every case, he adapts his gospel presentation to his hearers (2012a:113).

Despite the significant differences, the speeches show important *commonalities*. While there is no standardized gospel presentation, it is assumed in Acts that there is only one gospel for all peoples.

It is called “the good news about the Lord Jesus” (11:20; NIV), “the good news” (14:7, 21; NIV), “the message of the gospel” (15:7; NIV), “the gospel” (16:10) and “the gospel of God’s grace” (20:24; NIV).

All the sermons contain an epistemological challenge. The listeners are told that their understanding of God and ultimate reality is skewed. Jews are told that though they think they have understood their Scriptures, they have seriously misunderstood the Bible. Gentiles are informed that though they think they understand the world, they misread creation and their instincts. Both groups are told about a God who is both powerful and good (13:16–22; 14:7).

There is a personal challenge regarding sin and a depiction of the hearers’ fallen condition. Jews (trapped by works-righteousness) are trying to obey the law (13:39), and pagans (enslaved by idolatry) are giving themselves to idols, which cannot satisfy (14:15). All people are failing in their efforts at self-salvation.

There is the proclamation of Jesus Christ as the answer and solution to their sin. To pagans, Paul highlights the resurrection to prove that Jesus is the divine Saviour come into the world (Acts 17:31; 26:23). To Jews, Paul shows how the covenant promises are fulfilled in a suffering Messiah (Acts 13:26–41). Both Jews and Gentiles are told to turn from their schemes of performance because God has broken into history to accomplish salvation.

In summary, there is truth about God (you think you know who God is, but you don’t), truth about sin and our need of salvation (you’re trying to save yourself, but you cannot), truth about Jesus (he is the messianic King who comes to accomplish your salvation for you) and a call to respond to these truths by repenting and believing in him.

Keller summarizes:

These speeches of Paul give us a strong biblical case for engaging in careful contextualization. They remind us that there is no universal, culture-free formulation of the gospel for everyone. The Scriptures show numerous instances where gospel truths are brought out in different orders, argued for using different premises, and applied to hearts in distinctive ways... And yet, while these gospel truths are never expressed in the same way to all, it is clear that they have the same content – the nature of God as just and loving, the state of our sin and lostness, the reality of Christ’s accomplishment of salvation on our behalf, and the necessity of receiving that salvation by faith and through grace (2012a:114).

Here we see Paul “translating and adapting the communication and ministry of the gospel to a particular culture without compromising the essence and particulars of the gospel itself” (as per Keller’s definition, 2012a:89). Flemming concurs: “In each case, Paul’s preaching exudes a dynamic, audience-oriented flexibility” (2006:85). There can be no doubt that Paul’s gospel proclamation was carefully, creatively and intentionally contextualized to the different belief systems, histories and cultures of his hearers.

3.2.5 The evangelistic appeals of the Bible

Keller (2012a:114–115) has interacted with Carson’s article “Pastoral Pensées: Motivations to Appeal to in Our Hearers When We Preach for Conversion” (2010:258–264) in demonstrating the reality of contextualization in the evangelistic appeals of the Bible. Carson and Keller list a number of motivations that the Bible employs to appeal to unbelievers to believe the gospel:

- There are appeals to come to God out of fear of judgement and death (Heb 2:14–18; 10:31).
- There are appeals to come to God for relief from guilt and shame (Gal 3:10–12; Ps 51).
- Sometimes the appeal is to come to God out of appreciation for the “attractiveness of truth”. Commenting on 1 Cor 1:18–19, Keller (2012a:115) writes that Paul “holds up the truth for people to see its beauty and value, like a person holding up a diamond and calling for people to admire it.”
- There are evangelistic appeals based on God’s ability to satisfy unfulfilled existential longings. This was Jesus’ appeal to the woman in John 4, when he offered her “living water”. He was offering her inner joy and deep satisfaction to be experienced in the present.
- Sometimes the appeal is to come to God for help with a problem. There are many examples of this in the Gospels. Jesus does not hesitate to give that help, but he also helps people see their sin and their need from rescue from eternal judgement as well (Mark 2:1–12; Luke 17:11–19).
- The appeal may be to come to God simply out of a desire to be loved. “The person of Christ as depicted in the Gospels is a compellingly attractive person. His humility, tenderness, wisdom, and especially his love and grace draw people like a magnet” (Keller 2012a:115).
- An appeal may be on the basis of hope. Carson (2010:262) puts it like this: “a ... desire to be on the side of what is right, of what is from God, of what is Biblical, of what is clean,

of what endures.” He cites the personal evangelistic encounters with Christ in John 1:19–57 as examples.

There is thus little doubt that the biblical authors use a range of motivations when appealing to their readers to believe and obey the truth. Carson makes four theological and pastoral reflections on this survey (2010:263–264):

1. We do not have the right to choose only one of these motivations and to appeal to it restrictively. (Just as we cannot use only one of the atonement metaphors to comprehend the atonement.)
2. Yet we have the liberty to emphasize one motivation above the others in a particular situation, with a particular audience.
3. The comprehensiveness of our appeal to diverse motivations will reflect the comprehensiveness of our grasp of the Gospel.
4. All of the biblically sanctioned motivations for pursuing God say complementary things about God himself. Therefore, the failure to cover the sweep of motivations ultimately results in diminishing God.

In commenting on Carson’s article, Keller says that “to make any one of these forms of persuasion *the* paradigm for gospel communication will lead to fruitlessness in ministry” (2012a:114). He adds that when expounding a particular text, we tend to use our own “pet” motivation, even though the biblical author may not. We have come to Christ through one of these motivations, or we are part of a community that finds one particularly appealing and compelling. People of a conservative temperament may want to stress judgement even more than the Bible does, while people of a liberal disposition may want to stress unconditional love more than the Bible does. It is natural, but dangerous, to use this one motivation exclusively in our appeals to others. Ultimately, it is a failure in contextualization.

3.2.6 The gospel and contextualization

Keller (2012a:115–116) argues that faithful contextualization is an immediate implication of the gospel of salvation by grace alone through faith alone. He cites how Paul confronted Peter with the gospel of justification in Gal 2:14 when he criticized Peter’s failure to be culturally open to Gentile believers. He proceeds to say that the gospel gives two impulses that lead us toward balanced, biblical contextualization. The gospel (I am accepted because of Christ and his work at the cross) makes us both humble and confident. It leaves no room for arrogance or inferiority.

These two attitudes are imperative for doing sound contextualization. He argues that if we need the approval of the receiving culture too much (not enough gospel confidence) we will compromise in order to be liked. Conversely, if we are too proudly rooted in any one culture (not enough gospel humility), we will be rigid and unable to adapt. The gospel gives the balance we need.

3.2.7 Sola scriptura and contextualization

Keller (2012a:115–116) maintains that a high view of the Bible also calls us to faithful contextualization. If we really hold to Sola Scriptura, “then at any place where the Bible leaves our consciences free we should be culturally flexible.” The Bible is not prescriptive regarding dress and music, therefore:

there is freedom to shape dress and music in such a way that both honors the biblical boundaries and themes and yet fits a culture. To deny that much of our Christianity is culturally relative is to elevate human culture and tradition to a divine level and to dishonor Scripture (2012a:116).

3.2.8 A critique of Keller’s biblical basis for contextualization

It is immediately apparent that Keller has limited his biblical basis for contextualization to the NT book of Acts (which is essentially descriptive) and the NT epistles of Romans and 1 Corinthians. While he has done a good job with these texts, it does appear that he is too narrow and selective. In mitigation, it must be noted that Keller was not setting out to give an exhaustive biblical-theological basis for contextualization. However, this writer would argue that in view of the reservations over and resistance to biblical contextualization from some conservative evangelical quarters, the biblical-theological basis for contextualization needs to be more fully spelled out. This writer believes that a comprehensive biblical-theological justification for deliberate contextualization would serve the Reformed evangelical constituency particularly well. Flemming (2006) has done excellent work on the NT and contextualization, but it is this writer’s conviction that the discussion has got to start “much further back”.

For example, there seems to be remarkable overlap between Calvin’s principle of accommodation (also called “condescension”) and the concept of contextualization. For Calvin (1983:110) and his Reformational descendants (such as Bavinck, 2004:158–159), it is the vast chasm between God and humanity that necessitates divine accommodation. God is transcendent, eternal, pure, infinite and glorious. In contrast, man is finite, sinful, corrupt and spiritually blind. Bavinck wrote: “A deep chasm separates God’s being from that of all creatures. It is a mark of God’s greatness that

he can condescend to the level of his creatures and that, though transcendent, he can dwell immanently in all created beings” (2004:159). Scripture speaks of God communicating with man and man understanding something of God. Calvin likens this “divine descent” to the way the nurse will speak to a young child: God “lisps” to us as nurses speak to children (*Institutes*, 1.13.1; 1983:110). Contextualization and accommodation are not identical concepts. Accommodation in Calvin’s usage refers to what God alone has done in sovereign grace: revealing himself through his word and the incarnation of his Son. Contextualization is the task of the Christian communicator who works from an authoritative revelation – the closed and complete canon of Scripture. Although they are not identical concepts, we can see a considerable deal of overlap:

- Both require intentional action on the part of the communicator.
- Both are receptor orientated.
- Both seek to address people where they are at. Both appeal to the ideas, thought forms, illustrations, history, habits and culture of the hearer.
- Both aim for clarity in understanding.
- The absence of both results in the absence of true, saving knowledge of God.

3.3 An unflinching commitment to the authority of the Bible, with responsible, orthodox hermeneutics based on a sober epistemology

3.3.1 Keller’s hermeneutical concerns and approach

Keller’s definition above indicates that contextualization involves the dynamic interplay between the unchanging Bible, or gospel, and changing contexts. While Keller insists on the necessity of giving deliberate, careful attention to context, he affirms that this is not a relationship of equals. He asserts (2012a:204) that “true contextualization begins with Scripture as a normative, nonnegotiable truth” and (2012a:93) “The truths of the gospel are not the products of any culture, and they stand in judgment over all human cultures.” He insists that *Sola Scriptura* must be maintained.

Goheen (2014:292) affirms: “Only the Scriptures carry universal authority... we may not exalt any human tradition to the place of Scripture.” Similarly, Ott and Strauss (2010:277–278) affirm the necessity of Scripture being the ultimate authority in mission and ministry, as does Vanhoozer (2007:106). Wells (2005:9) affirms that “... the Word of God is the means by which God

accomplishes his saving work in his people.... When the Church loses the Word of God it loses the very means by which God does his work.” Empirical research done via questionnaires has demonstrated that South African Reformed pastors and theological educators ascribe maximum importance to being faithful to Scripture.²⁷ This is entirely necessary and appropriate.

Like others in the Reformed tradition, Keller speaks of the hermeneutical spiral (the title of Osborne’s important book on hermeneutics²⁸), rather than the hermeneutical circle. He says (2012a:105) that if Scripture and culture are equally authoritative, then the movement between text and context is an endless circle of change. But because Scripture is our ultimate authority, the text–context movement is a spiral moving us toward a better understanding of the word and how it can be communicated and applied to a particular culture.

In his chapter “Balanced Contextualization” (2012a:101–107), Keller deals with the crucial relationship between responsible hermeneutics and contextualization. He introduces the subject by borrowing John Stott’s “bridge” metaphor (Stott, 1982:31). Some sermons are like a “bridge to nowhere” – they are grounded in the biblical text, but they never come down on the other side. They fail to connect biblical truth with issues people are facing and neglect to speak to their hearts. Other sermons are like “bridges from nowhere” – they reflect on contemporary issues, but the insights they bring to bear on modern and felt needs do not arise out of the biblical text. “Proper contextualization is the act of bringing sound biblical doctrine all the way over the bridge by reexpressing it in terms coherent to a particular culture” (2012a:102).

Any reader of the Bible must go back and forth between two different horizons: the biblical text and the reader’s cultural context. Scripture is perfect, complete, can never be wrong, and subsequently never needs to be corrected. But the communicator’s understanding of the Bible may be wrong or warped; in fact, it is always partly so. The same goes for the communicator’s understanding of the hearer’s context. In this manner, Keller takes cognisance of D.A. Carson’s “three horizons of understanding”. D.A. Carson (1987:218) helpfully speaks of three “horizons of understanding” that are integral to responsible, orthodox hermeneutics:

1. The biblical documents themselves: the first listeners or readers of Scripture as their perspective is found in the Bible.

27 This research will be presented in chapter 5 of this dissertation.

28 *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Osborne, 1997).

2. The interpreter's horizon: that is, us, as we try and understand the Scriptures in our own situation.
3. The horizon of understanding of the group being evangelized.

Carson (1984:1) points out that these three horizons all pose challenges to the interpretation and application of Scriptures, particularly as one tries to cross from the second horizon to the third. The missionary must attempt to “fuse his own horizon of understanding with the horizon of understanding the text, and then attempt to bridge the gap between his own horizon of understanding, as it has been informed and instructed by the text, and the horizon of the person or people to whom he ministers”. The challenge of hermeneutics is to transpose the message from its original historical context into the context of the present-day hearers so as to produce the same kind of impact on their lives as it did on the original hearers or readers. Carson insists that specific texts must be understood within the context of the whole canon. He argues that recognition of the canon of Scripture implicitly forbids an “atomistic” approach to individual texts.

Keller is critical of preachers who see gospel communication as a one-way bridge, who believe that their task is simply to carry biblical doctrine over the bridge into the new culture. They do not recognize the importance of information coming over the bridge in the other direction; or they may consider it a threat to the authority of Scripture. The problem with this is that it assumes that we who are on one side of the bridge have an undistorted grasp of the gospel, and that our knowledge of the culture on the other side is not important. This approach is blind to the truth that we are sinful and finite, and that we do not have perfect and exhaustive knowledge of anything.

He posits the question: How can we guard the authority and integrity of Scripture and remain open to being corrected in our understanding of it? How can our message to a new culture be both faithful and fruitful? His answer: to allow some two-way traffic on the bridge. He points out that we always bring our pre-understanding to the text. That does not imply that we have not or cannot arrive at a sufficient and true understanding of the text, but it does mean that the process is not a simple one.

Because of our cultural blind spots, we must not only speak to the people over the bridge; we must listen to them as well. This interaction with a new culture shows us many things taught in the Bible – things we may have missed or may have considered unimportant because we have read the Bible through our own cultural assumptions. Interaction with a different culture leads us to ask questions of the text we may not have asked before and to see things we did not see clearly before.

“Entering into the text from a different perspective provides a point of triangulation that can help us to identify our culturally bound presuppositions about the gospel” (2012a:102). There should be heavy traffic back and forth across the bridge. We speak and listen, speak and listen, each time doing so more biblically and more compellingly to the culture.

In his article *Theological Vision for Ministry* (TGC, 2008:3–7), Keller poses and answers the question, How should we read the Bible?

- We must read “along” the whole Bible. This requires us to discern the basic plot line of the Bible as God’s story of redemption (creation, fall, redemption, restoration) as well as the themes of the Bible (covenant, kingship, temple) that run through every stage of history and climax in Jesus Christ.
- We must read “across” the Bible. This involves the systematic arrangement of all Scriptural teaching on designated themes or topics. This means collecting its declarations, promises, summons and truth claims into categories of thought such as Christology, eschatology, ecclesiology, and so on. From this perspective, the gospel appears as organized around God, sin, Christ and faith.

In *Center Church* (2012a:40), he calls these two ways of reading “diachronic” and “synchronic”.

Keller argues that many who major on the first way of reading the Bible tend to dwell more on the corporate aspects of sin and salvation. The Cross is seen mainly as an example of sacrificial service and defeat of worldly powers, rather than substitution and propitiation for sin. In this imbalance there is little emphasis on vigorous evangelism and apologetics, and expository preaching and the importance of regeneration are neglected. Reading across the Bible tends to result in a more individualistic Christianity, centring almost completely on personal conversion and a safe passage to heaven. Though there is expository preaching, it is often moralistic. There is little emphasis on the importance of the work of justice and mercy for the poor and oppressed. Keller affirms that these two approaches are not contradictory in any way, but are integral for grasping the meaning of the biblical gospel.

A study of Keller’s actual sermons indicates his hermeneutical concerns and approach. After a thorough analysis of 42 of Keller’s sermons (from all the major Scriptural genres), Arthur Andrew in his 2011 PhD dissertation, “The Role of Biblical Theology in the Gospel-Centered, Expository Preaching of Timothy Keller”, found that “Keller developed and delivered gospel-centered, expository sermons with hermeneutical integrity and homiletical consistency” (2011:185). Andrew

concluded that Keller's concern was to understand the text in its immediate context, its broader biblical-theological context, and its gospel context, to make application and to aim for the adoration of Christ through stirring the affections of his hearers.

In his 2012 PhD dissertation, "Worldview Preaching in the Church: The Preaching Ministries of J. Gresham Machen and Timothy J. Keller" (2012:72–86), Michael Galdamez shows that Keller has a thoroughly Christocentric hermeneutic. Galdamez studied six sermon series²⁹ of Keller's in various genres of Scriptures, preached between 2001 and 2010, totalling 31 sermons. Galdamez (2012:147) summarizes: "In all thirty-one sermons, Keller relates the preaching passage and its topic to the gospel by presenting the gospel as the answer to the problem of sin and suffering. He expresses the redemptive message of the gospel in terms of the person and work of Christ, particularly Christ's work on the cross, which he describes in the language of substitutionary atonement and God's grace."

According to Galdamez (2012:144–145), Keller's hermeneutical approach involves a three-stage process – the explanation of the text (involving historical-grammatical principles of interpretation), the application of the text, and the fulfilment of the text in the person and work of Christ, which provides believers with the motivation and pattern for living out the truth of the text.

3.3.2 Keller's epistemology

In his article "Theological Vision for Ministry" (TGC, 2008:1–7), Keller deals with the critically important subject of epistemology: "How should we respond to the cultural crisis of truth?" This is of supreme significance in contexts that are pervasively postmodern – as are large sectors of urban South Africa.

In sketching the historical background, he shows how since the period of the Enlightenment it was generally agreed that truth – expressed in words that substantially correspond to reality – does exist and can be known. Postmodernism has critiqued this set of assumptions, asserting that we are not objective, but that we interpret data through the grid of personal experience, self-interests, cultural prejudices, language limitations, and relational communities. Postmodernism insists that the claim to objectivity is arrogant and inevitably leads to conflicts between communities with differing opinions as to where the truth lies. Keller asserts that postmodernism's response is

29 These sermon series were: The life of Jacob (from the Law), Esther (from OT history), Habakkuk: Living by faith in troubled times (from the Prophets), Who's afraid of doctrine? (from Psalms), St John's Passion (from the Gospels) and a series on James (from the Epistles).

dangerous in insisting that claims to objective truth be replaced by a humble tolerance and an inclusively diverse, subjective pluralism that allows no firm ground for “the faith once for all entrusted to the saints.”

David Wells, in his acclaimed 2005 book *Above All Earthly Pow'rs: Christ in a Postmodern World* (2005:158), argues that the dichotomy that postmodern epistemology wants to force is one between “knowing everything exhaustively or knowing nothing at all. Because it would be extremely arrogant to claim what God alone knows, the only option is to accept that our knowledge is so socially conditioned that we are left with no certain knowledge of reality at all”. Of course, this is an entirely false choice.

Keller affirms the following (TGC, 2008:1–7):

- Truth is correspondence to reality, which can be known. While the Enlightenment made an idol out of unaided human reason, to deny the possibility of purely objective knowledge does not mean the loss of truth that corresponds to objective reality, even if we can never know such truth without an element of subjectivity.
- Truth is conveyed by Scripture, which is pervasively propositional. All statements of Scripture are completely true and propositional. But the truth of Scripture cannot be exhaustively contained in propositions. It exists in the genres of narrative, metaphor, and poetry, “which are not distillable into doctrinal propositions, yet they convey God’s will and mind...” (TGC, 2008:1).
- Truth is correspondence of life to God’s will; that is, it is not only a theoretical correspondence, but also a covenantal relationship. Biblical revelation is to be known and lived. “Truth, then, is the correspondence between our entire lives and God’s heart, words and actions, through the mediation of the Word and Spirit” (TGC, 2008:2).

These principles shape ministers and ministries in the following manner:

- Keller posits a “chastened” correspondence theory of truth that is less triumphalistic than that of some in older evangelicalism. He rejects any epistemology that considers truth as the internally coherent language of a particular faith community. He maintains the principle of Sola Scriptura (TGC, 2008:2).

- Truth is not only something merely to be believed, but to be received in worship and lived out in wisdom. This balance ought to shape preaching and discipleship. While sound doctrine is nonnegotiable, it must be remembered that Christian growth is not simply information transfer. Growth takes place when the whole of life is shaped by Christians making use of the means of grace in community.
- Our theoretical knowledge of God’s truth is only partial, even when accurate. We can have certainty that what the Bible tells us is true (Luke 1:4). It is through the Spirit’s work that we receive the words of the gospel in full assurance and conviction (1 Thess 1:5).

Keller’s epistemology could be classified as falling within the parameters of *critical realism* – this is Paul Hiebert’s term (1994:19–51). Critical realists uphold the authority of the Bible and the objectivity of truth, but also appreciate that we bring our own pre-understanding and sinful biases into our communication of the gospel. Goldsmith’s important caution (1983:19) must be noted: “Our rock-like assurance in an absolute and unchanging revelation of God must not blind us, however, to the fallibility of our human understanding of that perfect revelation.” Pastors and missionaries who hold to this epistemological view would try and understand the culture in an effort to make the gospel message more understandable. But recognizing that they do not comprehend the whole message of the Bible in all its depth, scope, richness and balance, they will also be open to discovering new insights from the receptor culture that will help them better understand the Bible. This needs to be done in the context of the hermeneutical community (the church), where different people aim to discern and apply the truth of the Scriptures. Lints (1993:8) exposes what he terms the “fundamentalist fallacy”: the false conviction that God reveals himself outside of a cultural setting to communicate timeless truths to people who themselves are not influenced by their own cultural setting. He later (1993:101–103) cautions against the opposite errors of cultural fundamentalism (the belief that the Bible and its theology can be expressed in culture-free, universal terms) and cultural relativism (the idea that the Scriptures have imputed meaning from the present-day situation and its readers). Horton (2011:120–121) has also cautioned against cultural fundamentalism: “... we have to resist modernist and fundamentalist assumptions that we ‘just read the Bible’ without any interpretive assumptions. There is no neutral ‘view from nowhere.’ ”

A modern illustration of how underlying epistemology affects theology can be seen in the differing statements of Keller and Brian McLaren. Keller has affirmed several times in his sermons and writings that if somebody thinks that he fully understands the gospel in all its depth, richness and

profundity, then he certainly has significant gaps in his knowledge and understanding.³⁰ This is a helpful statement, illustrating a humble orthodoxy that acknowledges that nobody has a perfect grasp of the truth. However, Brian McLaren, a prominent leader in the Emerging church movement, goes much further: “I don’t think we’ve got the Gospel right yet... What does it mean to be saved? None of us have arrived at orthodoxy.”³¹ This is a typically postmodern statement. He has gone beyond humility, which is a virtue, and is verging on agnosticism. This represents a step into the fog of postmodern epistemology. Carson’s observation (1996:119) is helpful: “Postmodernism gently applied rightly questions the arrogance of modernism; postmodernism ruthlessly applied nurtures a new hubris and deifies agnosticism.”

There is no reason for Reformed evangelicals to “re-invent the wheel” when it comes to epistemology. D.A. Carson has done excellent work in this field. His work *The Gagging of God* (1996) needs to be studied. His position is that there *is* objective truth; humans can know objective truth – not exhaustively and absolutely, but increasingly and truly.

3.4 A biblically balanced theology of culture

“Culture is the fertile soil of contextualization”, states Flemming (2006:118). He adds that if we desire to construct a biblical theology of contextualization, the fascinating question of the interface between gospel and culture must be addressed. Goheen (2014:290) states: “Faithful contextualization requires that the church understand its cultural context”, and he argues that the relation of the gospel to culture is a concern facing the church in mission everywhere – not just for the church that wants to communicate the gospel in a new cultural place. In his essay in *Christianity Today* “A new kind of urban Christian” (2006:1), Keller stated that “the relationship of Christians to culture is the singular current crisis for the church.” In his definition, Keller (2012a:89) states that biblical contextualization aims

to express the gospel message to a new culture that avoids making the message unnecessarily alien to that culture, yet without removing or obscuring the scandal and offense of biblical truth... It adapts and connects to the culture, yet at the same time challenges and confronts it.

30 For example, in his sermon, “What is the Gospel?”
http://sermons2.redeemer.com/sites/sermons2.redeemer.com/files/sermons/RPC-What_Is_The_Gospel.mp3

31 <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2004/november/12.36.html?start=4>

Keller's discussion on cultural engagement forms a substantial component of his major work, *Center Church* (2012a:181–249). He contends that behind many of the apparent doctrinal disputes within contemporary conservative evangelicalism lurks the question of how Christians should relate to the culture around us. Borrowing from Reinhold Niebuhr (1951) and D.A. Carson (2012), he does a thorough job in describing and evaluating the four prevalent models of relating Christianity to culture:

- Transformationist (“Christ transforming culture”): Engages culture mainly through an emphasis on Christians pursuing their vocations from a Christian worldview, and endeavours to transform every part of culture with Christ.
- Relevance (Keller combines Niebuhr’s “Christ of culture” and “Christ above culture” in this category): This model tends to have a very positive view of culture, believes God is at work redemptively within a wide array of cultural movements, and sees Christianity as fundamentally compatible with surrounding culture.
- Counterculturalist (“Christ against culture”): Those within this model emphasize the church as a contrasting society. This model strongly affirms that the kingdom is manifest primarily as a church community in opposition to the kingdom of this world.
- Two Kingdoms (“Christ and culture in paradox”): God rules all creation, but he does so in two distinct ways. There is the “common or earthly kingdom”, established through the Noahic covenant, and the redemptive kingdom, established by the Abrahamic covenant. Proponents argue that believers should not confuse the two.

Keller engages with each model's modern proponents. Keller affirms that in positing models there exists the danger of overgeneralization and that even within one particular model there exists a spectrum of positions. He appears to be even-handed and fair in his critique of the models. He does an excellent job in affirming their strengths and critiquing their weaknesses. He notes that there is a great deal of literature coming out on this matter, and he observes (2012a:216) that “a percentage of people in each camp [are] listening to the critiques and [are] incrementally ... making revisions [that move] them closer toward the other camps and positions.” His basic point is that the models are not as inherently mutually exclusive as sometimes perceived. He argues (2012a:217) that the way forward to best engage culture is “a careful balance among several polarities.”

In his chapter “Why all the models are right... and wrong” (2012a:223–234), Keller states that each model has inherent value in that it contains an essential truth about the relationship of the gospel

to culture. Yet none of them, by itself, gives us the complete picture. Each, by itself, tends to be reductionistic. He says that there are two fundamental questions that are at the root of the question of how the church relates to culture:

- Should we be pessimistic or optimistic about the possibility of cultural change? Keller argues that each model has a tendency to be either too optimistic or too pessimistic about culture change – and how culture can be changed. Some stress the importance of truth claims; others stress the importance of community.
- Is contemporary culture redeemable and good, or fundamentally fallen? Keller (following D.A. Carson's *Christ and Culture Revisited*) advocates theological balance by making use of a biblical-theological approach. The major points on the biblical storyline (creation, fall, redemption and restoration) and their relevance for Christian cultural engagement must be noted. He argues that this ought to result in theological balance, not of compromise, but by being controlled by all of Scripture all the time.

As the title of the next chapter, “Cultural Engagement through Blended Insights” (2012a:235–247), suggests, Keller affirms that while not all the models can be morphed into one perfect model, the most suitable approach would be to seek to blend the biblical and cultural insights of all the models into our practice and ministry. He advises the proponents of each model to discern and incorporate the insights of the other models, for “each model has at its core a unique insight about the world and a fundamental truth from the Bible that any professing Christian must acknowledge” (2012a:236). Carson (2012:224) has similarly cautioned that none of the models is “compelling as a total explanation or an unambiguous mandate.” The Relevantists are particularly inspired by the coming shalom and restoration of all things. They stress the importance of the church doing sacrificial service for the common good. So all Christians of all places should be known as people who serve others sacrificially. The Transformationists (with their awareness of the effects of the fall) emphasize thinking and living in a distinctively Christian way, and therefore their call to equipping and supporting people to follow Christ in all of life needs to be heeded. The Counterculturalists’ central motif is that God calls the church to be a contrasting community and sign of the future kingdom. This is always an urgent and essential theme. The Two Kingdoms view (which focuses on the goodness of creation) centres on the dignity of secular vocation and the importance of doing this work with an excellence that all can see.

Though he argues persuasively for a blended insights approach, Keller says that the ideal position is not simply an aggregate of all the positions – one that balances all the insights and emphases of the models in perfect symmetry. He posits two reasons:

1. He develops Niebuhr's idea that Christianity's relationship to culture goes through an almost inevitable cycle. Keller helpfully speaks of four seasons: *Winter* describes a hostile relationship to a pre-Christian culture where the church appears to be weak and embattled and there is scant evidence of evangelistic fruit. *Spring* describes a situation where the church is embattled (even persecuted), but it is growing (China would be an example). *Summer* is where the church is highly regarded by the public, where so many Christians are found in the centres of cultural production that they feel at home. *Autumn* (which largely describes the church in the West today) is where the church is increasingly marginalized in a post-Christian culture and looking for ways to strengthen its distinctiveness and reach out winsomely. His basic point is that knowing the season helps us in developing an appropriate strategy and approach in cultural engagement.
2. Keller argues that, to some extent, each model attracts people on the basis of their different ministry gifts and callings. He relates how in his pastoral experience he has encountered church members who have felt passionately about evangelism, or social concern, or administration. He points out that many had these particular gifts – so they were sensitized to the particular ministry. So it is with the cultural engagement models. For example, a person with a calling and gifting to serve the poor would most likely be attracted to a Relevance or Countercultural model.

Keller's point here is very noteworthy. He is arguing that to some degree, our engagement with culture will itself be contextually determined!

Keller points out that one of the greatest points of tension between the models is how they understand and define the mission of the church. Traditionally, the Great Commission is understood as the church being given the mandate to preach the gospel to all peoples, in order to make disciples of all nations. Keller states that three of the four models seem to add to this mission. Some fear that emphasizing mercy and justice will displace or erode the church's capacity for evangelism and discipleship. He affirms that, while warnings about the social gospel are warranted, we still have to come to grips with the biblical call to do justice and love mercy.

Keller argues that this is done by appreciating the critical distinction between the “church institutional” and “church organic”. Following Kuyper, Keller states that the church institutional is the gathered church, organized under biblical leadership. It is called to word and sacrament: to proclaim the gospel, baptize and make disciples. The church organic refers to all Christians living in the world who have been discipled and equipped to bring the gospel to bear on all of life. Christians in the world should not be thought of as detached and separate individuals. They are the body of Christ and are to work, think and contribute, and so be the church organic that the church institutional has discipled them to be.

A biblically balanced and robust view of culture provides the basis for contextualization. A balanced theology of culture will inevitably lead to a posture of being prophetic and critical of culture, yet also being affirming and positive toward culture.

We have noted there are a number of people in the Reformed evangelical constituency who are concerned that contextualization is a theological gimmick that amounts to compromise – easy-believism, false conversions, and giving people what they want to hear. Knowing and appreciating some of the concerns and reservations of his own constituency (specifically the PCA, but conservative evangelicals more broadly), Keller immediately points out that sound contextualization is not giving people what they want to hear. It is not a “soft-sell” or a “dumbing down” of the gospel. He affirms that contextualization is giving people the Bible’s answers, which they may or may not want to hear, “to *questions about life* that people in a specific time and place are asking, in *language and forms* they can comprehend, and *through appeals and arguments* with force they can feel, even if they reject them” (Keller, 2012a:89). Similarly, Ott and Strauss (2010:270–271) argue that the gospel ought to be presented in such a way that the listeners feel at home in their culture (the indigenous principle), and yet it must prophetically challenge their own culture (the pilgrim principle). Whitman (1997) has helpfully stated:

Good contextualization offends people for the right reasons... When the gospel is presented in word and deed, and the fellowship of believers we call the church is organized along appropriate cultural patterns, then people will more likely be confronted with the offense of the Gospel, exposing their own sinfulness and the tendency toward evil, oppressive standards and behavior patterns within their culture.

3.5 The priority of the gospel

All those in the Reformed evangelical tradition would strongly assert that Christian ministry should be fuelled by a passion for God's glory and that the priority of faithfully communicating the gospel must be maintained. This is in line with Paul's burden in 1 Cor 9:16, 23, where he exclaims: "Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel" and "I do it all for the sake of the gospel". If the gospel is not being faithfully communicated, then our Christian witness is fundamentally flawed and seriously defective. In the above definition, Keller affirms that sound contextualization means "translating and adapting the communication and ministry of the gospel to a particular culture..." However, what constitutes the gospel is not a straightforward matter.

Keller devotes a section of his book *Center Church* to what he calls "Gospel Theology" (2012a:29–52). He stresses the great importance that churches understand the gospel correctly and be shaped by it, and he proceeds to discuss the nature and scope of the gospel. He makes the following points about the gospel:

- The gospel is good news, not good advice. It is not primarily something we do, but something that has been done for us.
- The good news concerns a rescue from deadly peril that has been fully accomplished and provided.
- Its focus is on God's action in Jesus Christ. It centres on what Jesus Christ has done to restore sinners to a right relationship with God. Divine substitutionary atonement is at the heart of the gospel.
- The gospel has two perennial enemies: legalism and antinomianism. A very sharp distinction between these false doctrines and the gospel is crucial for the life-changing power of the Holy Spirit to work.
- Preaching general biblical truth and biblical content is not preaching the gospel. In this sense it is possible to be "biblical" and yet avoid the gospel.
- However, biblical truth, doctrine and content must form the backdrop for the effective proclamation of the gospel. Keller (2012a:32) writes: "The more we understand the whole corpus of biblical doctrine, the more we will understand the gospel itself – and

the more we understand the gospel, the more we will see that this... is what the Bible is really about.”

- The gospel should be understood within the grand narrative of cosmic redemption. Keller identifies the four points of creation, fall, redemption and new creation / restoration as the critical points of the biblical narrative. The gospel ought to be tied to the overarching narrative.
- Because of the bigness of the gospel and all the biblical material that relates to it, there is no single way to present the biblical gospel. As such, “the gospel has supernatural versatility to address the particular hopes, fears, and idols of every culture and every person” (Keller, 2012a:44). The gospel should not be reduced to a trite, simplistic formula.
- Keller points out that the gospel affects everything and changes everything. He contends that it is not the ABC of the faith (for novices), but the A–Z of the faith, for all believers at all times.
- Because the gospel is “endlessly rich and deep, it can handle the burden of being the one main thing” (2012a:36) of a church. It can be, and should be, preached from all the scriptural genres, all the stories, all the pages, all the themes and principles of Scripture.
- Keller affirms that the gospel should shape and inform contextualization. He states that faithful contextualization is a direct consequence of the gospel of salvation by grace alone through faith alone.

In the next chapters of *Center Church* (2012a:54–88), Keller discusses “Gospel Renewal”. Using material from Richard Lovelace’s *The Dynamics of Spiritual Renewal* (1979), Keller discusses the need for gospel renewal, the essence of gospel renewal and the work of gospel renewal. This researcher deems this section especially important and relevant where a nominal Christianity holds sway, as it does in many parts of urban South Africa. Koning (2016:45-52) conducted both qualitative and quantitative research among GKSA, Reformed Baptist and Acts 29 pastors to ascertain the dominant worldview in the areas in which they minister. Every pastor, without exception, indicated that the “nominal Christian” worldview was a substantial reality in their context.

In his article *Theological Vision* (TGC, 2008:5), Keller contends that the gospel creates, shapes and sustains a counter-cultural community. He asserts that because the gospel removes both fear and pride, people should get on in the church who could never get along outside. Because it points us to a man who died for his enemies, the gospel creates relationships of service rather than selfishness. Because it calls us to holiness, we should live in loving bonds of mutual accountability and discipline. In short, the gospel creates a community radically different from any society around it.

In his PhD dissertation, Galdamez (2012:94) goes to great lengths to show that that Keller takes the gospel as his worldview. In a lecture given at Redeemer Presbyterian in August 2003, Keller stated:

The gospel is not just a set of beliefs that you have to agree to in order to get into the club – it is a grid, a whole distinct worldview. A worldview is a set of beliefs so basic that they determine how you look at everything else. The gospel is a grid, a way of looking at everything differently.

It must also be recalled that for Keller, the gospel does not only fuel verbal proclamation, but it is the basis for all deeds of mercy and justice. He states (2012a:322) that “... Jesus calls his disciples to both *gospel messaging* (urging everyone to repent and believe the gospel) and to *gospel neighboring* (sacrificially meeting the needs of those around them, whether they believe or not).”

3.6 An appreciation of the inevitability of contextualization and an acknowledgement of the dangers of contextualization

3.6.1 The inevitability of contextualization

There is no way that contextualization can be avoided, because there is no universal presentation of the gospel for all people, argues Keller (2012a:93–94). As soon as the gospel is verbalized, it is done so in a way that is more accessible and understandable for people in some cultures and less so for others. Keller points out a paradox, which he claims is easy to miss. The fact that a Christian pastor or missionary must communicate universal truth in a particular cultural context does not mean that the truth itself is somehow lost or less universal. There is no single way to express the Christian faith that is universal for everyone in all contexts and cultures. While there is no culture-transcending way to express Christian truth, there is only one true gospel. The truths of the gospel are not the products of any culture, and they stand in judgement over all cultures.

Keller proceeds to point out the dire consequences of not appreciating this paradox. If the fact that there is no cultureless presentation of the gospel is neglected, we will think that there is only one true way to communicate it, and this will result in a rigid, culturally bound conservatism. If the truth that there is one true gospel is jettisoned or neglected, we will find ourselves in relativism, which will lead to a rudderless liberalism. He points out that if there is no single, context-free way to express the gospel, then contextualization is inevitable. As soon as we choose words, idiom and metaphor, we are contextualizing. His point here is that contextualization is unavoidable – therefore, it is best done intentionally and carefully.

Other Reformed scholars and missiologists affirm the same truth. Carson (1984:19) asserts that “every truth from God comes to us in cultural guise: even the language used and the symbols adopted are cultural expressions. No human being living in time and speaking any language can ever be entirely culture-free about anything.” Goheen (2014:283) states: “No single expression of the gospel stands above history and culture and therefore is universally normative.” He proceeds to contend that it is not a matter of whether the gospel is shaped by culture: the only question is whether the contextualization of the gospel is faithful or unfaithful. He forthrightly asserts (2014:294): “It must be stressed that it is not a matter of whether we will contextualize the gospel...; it is only a matter of whether we will do so faithfully...” Hitchen (1991:30) argues that we cannot choose whether or not we will contextualize; we can only choose whether we will do it well or poorly. Ott and Strauss (2010:266) point out that whenever the gospel is presented, it is presented in cultural clothing. The question is not whether we will contextualize the gospel. The only question is whether we will do good contextualization or bad contextualization.

This writer would argue that church history also illustrates the inevitability of contextualization. Some conservative evangelicals often exhibit a “restoration” mentality and approach – they make the case that they are striving to return to the pattern of faith, doctrine and lifestyle of the early church in Acts. In one sense this is highly commendable; in another sense it is extremely naïve. The fact of the matter is that there is no church on earth today that mirrors the church of Acts. There are significant differences in terms of structure, organization, worship style, emotional atmosphere, liturgy, attitude to time, preaching and gender roles. Furthermore, we would have to ask which church in Acts we are trying to pattern ourselves on: Jerusalem? Antioch? Corinth? There is a sense in which those first-century churches were themselves contextualized. The fundamental reason why no twenty-first-century church closely resembles a first-century church is that contextualization has occurred. Yet it would certainly be affirmed by contemporary

Reformed evangelicals that we hold to the same apostolic gospel and are committed to the same body of truth once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3).

3.6.2 An appreciation of the dangers of contextualization

Keller's definition includes a candid acknowledgement of the dangers of contextualization. In *Center Church* (2012a:88–100), he describes the dangers of both over- and under-contextualization. This follows logically from the inevitability of contextualization, and he again debunks the idea contextualization can be avoided. Under-contextualization will lead to a rigid fundamentalism, whereas over-contextualization will lead to relativistic liberalism.

The apostle Paul exhibited a seemingly paradoxical attitude in his ministry. In Galatians 1:6–9 we see him contending for the gospel. In very strong language he affirms the reality of one, true, objective, eternal and unchanging gospel. He is totally unyielding, firm and dogmatic on this. His approach is, “This is the truth, and if you dare tamper with it, may you be eternally cursed.” Yet in 1 Cor 9:19–23, where Paul speaks of his own ministry and strategy, we noted that he was extremely flexible and adaptable. He is receptor oriented – there is no “one size fits all” gospel presentation. The faithful pastor has to live in the missiological tension between contending (Gal 1:6–10) and contextualizing (1 Cor 9:19–23).

Gilliland's (1989:12) sober warning should be heeded:

Contextualization is a delicate enterprise if ever there was one. The evangelist stands on a razor's edge. Fall to the right and you will end up in a rigid obscurantism. Slip to the left and you will end up in a rudderless syncretism. No word in the Christian lexicon is as fraught with difficulty, danger and opportunity as contextualisation.

Hastings (2012:17) argues similarly, saying that the two primary ways that the church has been rendered ineffective are through cultural disconnection (failure to connect with people in context) and indiscriminate enculturation (when the church fails to challenge the culture and becomes like the culture).

Keller warns of the dangers of assuming contextualization can be avoided and the dangers of not contextualizing – or thinking we are not. He argues that because all gospel ministry is already adapted to a particular culture, it is imperative to do contextualization consciously. “If we never deliberately think through ways to rightly contextualize gospel ministry..., we will unconsciously

be deeply contextualized to some other culture” (2012a:96). He asserts that our gospel ministry will be both overadapted and underadapted to new cultures – which leads to a distortion of the Christian message. He shows how contextualization is hard to grasp for members of socially dominant groups. He cites the issue of individualistic cultures versus cultures who are characterized by community. Often, believers who live in individualistic cultures (like the USA) are blind to the importance of being in deep community and being under biblical accountability and discipline. This results in the phenomenon of American Christians seeing membership as optional, and serial church hopping. In this way, a nonbiblical feature of American culture is imported into their Christian life. On the other hand, believers in more patriarchal and authoritarian cultures are often blind to what the Scriptures say about freedom of conscience and the grace-related aspects of Christian discipleship. This can manifest in their leaders stressing duty and a heavy-handed approach to leadership.

Whereas Keller talks of over- and under-contextualization, Goheen (2014:268–270) makes essentially the same points, but speaks of the problem of ethnocentrism and relativism. Ethnocentrism takes hold where one cultural expression is considered normative for all other peoples and cultures. Relativism takes hold where no cultural expression of the gospel can be judged good or bad by the church on the basis of Scripture. Sounding Kellersque, he says that the key issue is that the church must be faithful to one unchanging gospel (without falling into ethnocentrism) and embrace plural expressions (without falling into relativism).

Keller demonstrates that a failure to see and appreciate one’s own enculturation has serious consequences. He states that one of the most basic mistakes pastors make is simply to regurgitate the methods and programs that have personally influenced them. Because they were personally impacted in a positive way, they take up the programmes and methods of that ministry and simply reproduce them elsewhere. If they were personally edified and challenged by a ministry that had 45-minute verse-by-verse expository preaching, a particular style of singing, and a specific order and length to the service, they try to reproduce it down to the small details. Unwittingly, they have become method and programme driven, not theologically driven. “They are contextualizing their ministry expression to themselves, not to the people they want to reach” (2012a:97). In the opinion of this writer, this is exactly what some of Keller’s detractors do.

This attitude and approach are seen in those who critique him in *Engaging with Keller: Thinking Through the Theology of an Influential Evangelical* (Campbell & Schweitzer, 2013). In their introduction, Campbell and Schweitzer make some favourable comments about Keller’s extensive ministry and impact. Then they caution against his method of contextualization. They write

(2013:17), “We think that the root of the difficulty arises from the very challenging task that Keller has assigned himself – to communicate the old orthodoxy in ‘relevant’ ways to a contemporary, postmodern audience.” They proceed to say: “Keller seems to have assigned himself a very demanding project: to package Christianity for the contemporary unchurched and largely postmodern audience”, and they warn of the danger of “overreach” (2013:21).

It is this writer’s view that these reservations say at least as much about the authors’ theology as they do about Keller’s. These quotes seem to indicate that Keller has taken upon himself a very challenging, demanding and novel project: to proclaim the gospel to contemporary, largely postmodern people in New York. The counter question must surely be: Why is this regarded as innovative and as a special project of Tim Keller’s? Is not every Christian communicator called to a dual fidelity – to be faithful to the Bible and faithful to his hearers in their particular context? Is this not the task of every Bible communicator in every context? Is this not a nonnegotiable for every Christian pastor? And when is proclamation ever not challenging and demanding? While Keller’s detractors are cautioning against a possible accommodating and relativizing syncretism, are they not themselves entrenched in a kind of cultural fundamentalism? Their caution concerning “overreach” is well founded and entirely necessary, yet they seem to think that defaulting to an option of playing it safe and gospel underadaptation constitutes faithfulness. Dan Strange (2014:91) makes the *ironic* point that syncretism and cultural fundamentalism are very alike – accommodating, relativizing and worldly. “This is an important point for us conservative evangelicals who claim to resist contextualization but who actually have been blown about by philosophical winds, usually those of modernity.”

Keller’s fundamental point (2012a:97) is that everyone contextualizes, but few think much about how they are doing it. We should make our contextualization processes visible and intentional, to ourselves and others.

3.7 Contextualization is to be comprehensive

Keller’s definition (2012a:89) calls for an all-of-ministry approach: “Sound contextualization means translating and adapting the communication and ministry of the gospel to a particular culture...” For Keller, contextualization goes beyond the verbal proclamation of the gospel – it is far more than the language and idiom utilized for proclamation. It involves the total ministry of the gospel. In his chapter “Equipping People for Missional Living” (2012a:277–289), Keller proposes that Christians themselves must be contextualized “letters of the gospel” (as Paul teaches in 2 Cor 3:1–13). He contends that Christians will have gospel impact if they are *like* those around

them (in terms of clothes they wear, food they eat, work life, recreational and cultural activities, and civic engagement), yet at the same time profoundly *different and unlike* them (in terms of integrity, generosity, hospitality, chastity, handling adversity, and so on). In this sense, contextualization is a matter of everyday life for all followers of Christ.

Keller makes the case that worship services should be appropriately contextualized. While he holds to the “regulative principle” (2012a:298), Keller points out how people can wrongly believe that there is only one way to worship, and wrongly believe their own version of Christianity transcends history and culture. He affirms that our preferences in worship are typically based on a combination of theological principle, temperament, and culture. This allows for a certain flexibility when planning worship services. The regulative principle states that we should not include anything in gathered worship unless there is scriptural warrant for it. But a distinction must be made between the biblical elements of worship (e.g., reading and preaching the Bible, singing, prayer, and baptism) and the particular ways in which these elements are performed. When it comes to the length of the service, or the time devoted to each part, the level of formality, the predictability of the service, the kinds of harmony and instrumentation of the music, the degree of emotional expressiveness, and even the order of worship, there is place for appropriate and sensitive contextualization and place to allow the cultural context to shape the service within biblical parameters. Keller believes that a contextualized weekly worship service (which is gospel centred and in the vernacular, and has appropriate musical accompaniment and emotional expression) can be very effective in both evangelizing nonbelievers and edifying Christians. He resists the dichotomy of having to choose to edify believers or reach nonbelievers in worship.

Hesselgrave (1991:143) affirms, “Contextualisation is both verbal and non-verbal and has to do with theologising, Bible translation, interpretation and application, incarnational lifestyle, Christian instruction, church planting and growth, church organisation, worship style – indeed with all of those activities involved in the carrying out of the Great Commission.” Speaking of the scope and purpose of contextualization, Scott Moreau (2012:136) has written: “The goal is to make the Christian faith as a whole – not only the message but also the means of living out of our faith in the local setting – understandable.” Ott and Strauss (2010:266) concur: “Appropriate contextualization shapes the presentation of the gospel and the release of its transforming power in evangelism, lifestyle, church life, and social change.” Goheen (2014:283) affirms the same point: “Contextualization is a process that is concerned with every part of life.”

3.8 Evaluation

How do we evaluate Keller's theology of contextualization? Comparing his central building blocks of contextualization with other conservative theologians and practitioners is illuminating.

These are six key characteristics of responsible biblical contextualization, gleaned from the writings of Carson (1996:537–553), Hesselgrave (1991:131–144), Moreau (2012:103–141), Hiebert (1987:104–111), Goheen (2014:264–295) and Ott and Strauss (2010:265–291):

1. A commitment to the authority of Scripture and the priority of the gospel; and consequently, responsible, orthodox methods of biblical interpretation and application.
2. A commitment to sacrificially entering into, studying and understanding the target culture and its people, values, history and worldview. As such, contextualization should be a two-way process.
3. A commitment to a balanced view of culture and society. Aspects of culture should be affirmed and appreciated because of common grace. Aspects of culture should be confronted and challenged because of the fall and the pervasiveness of sin. The gospel communicator should not fail in being prophetic, nor in appropriate affirmation.
4. A commitment to being comprehensive: it is not just the message that is contextualized, but the church as a whole needs to be contextualized. Contextualization extends far beyond evangelistic strategies.
5. A commitment to being dynamic: because culture is non-static and ever-changing, faithful Christian ministry requires ongoing re-evaluation and adjustment of approaches.
6. A commitment to interdisciplinary research. Insights from anthropology, sociology, history, economics, psychology and linguistics should be harnessed.

Keller's views (2012a:89–133) outlined in *Center Church* are in substantial agreement with these points. In terms of his theological assumptions, convictions and emphases, there appears to be nothing substantially innovative or peculiar concerning Keller's theoretical understanding of biblical contextualization. Reformed missiologists would echo the central tenets of his theological understanding. Dan Strange in his critique of Keller's model of contextualization (2014:89–103) is mostly positive and complimentary. He states that he appreciates Keller's approach not because

it is “new and innovative, *but precisely because it is not*”. He contends that Keller’s model is founded on a “solidly orthodox and traditional” chassis (2014:89).

What *is* innovative (and what this writer deems tremendously necessary and helpful), however, is the profile Keller gives contextualization and his insistence on its importance. Keller has brought contextualization – which is often regarded as belonging solely to the field of cross-cultural missiology – into regular pastoral ministry in the West. This, together with his clarity in pointing out the blind spot of defaulting to a position of perceived non-contextualization, is imperative. Furthermore, the fact that he deliberately contextualizes and the fact that his processes can be tracked and observed is very useful. We now turn to Keller’s praxis of biblical contextualization.

CHAPTER 4 KELLER'S MODEL OF CONTEXTUALIZATION

Having established the theological foundations and parameters of sound contextualization, we proceed to the praxis of contextualization. Our objective here is to describe and evaluate Keller's methodological model of contextualization. While describing Keller's model, several other authors will be engaged with. The evaluation of his model will be done in terms of his own definition of faithful contextualization (2012a:90) given in chapter 1:

Sound contextualization means translating and adapting the communication and ministry of the gospel to a particular culture without compromising the essence and particulars of the gospel itself. The great missionary task is to express the gospel message to a new culture in a way that avoids making the message unnecessarily alien to that culture, yet without removing or obscuring the scandal and offense of biblical truth.

This requires asking the following questions of Keller's model:

- Are the objectivity and supremacy of biblical truth clearly maintained?
- Is the priority of the gospel obvious?
- Does his model show suitable sensitivity to the recipients?
- Is his approach being both affirming and prophetic towards culture?
- Is it comprehensive? Does it impact the overall ministry of the gospel?

Having done this, we shall consider how it compares with other Reformed approaches, both older and contemporary. This chapter will conclude with an overall evaluation of Keller's model and its suitability.

4.1 Keller's model: Active, practical contextualization

Keller's basic paradigm for "doing" biblically balanced contextualization follows logically from his theology of culture. He has called his model "active contextualization" (2012a:119–134), and his basic approach is to both *connect with and confront* culture. He contends that the Christian pastor or missionary must enter the new culture sympathetically and respectfully *and* confront it where it contradicts biblical truth. He cautions that if we as communicators simply rail against the evils of culture, we will not gain a hearing. While we may feel we are being bold, we will have failed to present the gospel in its most compelling form. Conversely, if we simply affirm the

culture, we will not see people converted. We may feel we are being open minded and gracious, but we will fail to let the gospel speak prophetically and pointedly.

He utilizes a helpful illustration from the world of demolition. Suppose you were building a road, and a huge boulder had to be removed. You would drill a shaft into the centre of the rock. Then you would insert explosives into the shaft and detonate them. If the shaft is drilled, but the explosives are never ignited, you will not move the boulder. The same is true if you blast without first drilling towards the centre of the rock: only the exterior part would be sheared off. “All drilling with no blasting, or all blasting with no drilling, leads to failure” (2012a:119). Both are required to remove the rock.

So Keller affirms two essentials for contextualization: respectful affirmation of culture (“drilling”) and confrontation of culture (“blasting”). This tension is what makes contextualization so challenging. Both *cultural captivity* (the refusal to adapt to new times and cultures) and *syncretism* (introducing unbiblical views and practices into Christianity) must be avoided.

Keller is critical of many books and articles on contextualization, saying they are impractical. This often results in Christian leaders either being ignorant of the concept or naïvely against it, or being for contextualization but not sure how to proceed. Thus contextualization mostly happens passively, with the result that the gospel is enculturated in unconscious and unhelpful ways. Keller posits a process called active, practical contextualization, because it requires the communicator to be “proactive, imaginative, and courageous” (2012a:120). He stresses the need to make our assumptions and processes intentional and insists on being faithful to biblical patterns of contextualization.

His model involves a three-step process:

- entering the culture
- challenging the culture
- appealing to the culture.

4.1.1 Entering and adapting to culture

The first step in active contextualization is to immerse ourselves in the culture, to understand it and to try to identify with the people we are seeking to reach. The pastor or church planter should diligently (and continuously) endeavour to become fluent in their social, linguistic and cultural reality. This includes learning to express the people’s dreams, aspirations, idols and objections to

faith as accurately as the people themselves do. Academicians can be helpful in this area, but Keller affirms that the most valuable way of learning will be by spending much time in close relationship with people, listening to them carefully. This approach is strongly advocated by Brewster and Brewster (1982:160–164) in an article entitled “Language Learning *Is* Communication – *Is* Ministry!” They write of being firmly committed to the principle of having viability from the insider’s perspective. They speak of total immersion into the new culture as a precondition of effective and valid contextualization.

In their chapter “Getting to know the context: Doing Neighborhood Research”, Keller and Thompson (2010:75–84) advocate both quantitative (demographic) and qualitative (ethnographic) inquiry. Quantitative questions deal with the numbers of people in the city or neighbourhood, their educational levels and income profiles using polls and surveys. Qualitative inquiry gives us insights into the people of our specific neighbourhood, their social structures, family and relational structures, worldview and religious convictions.

Keller and Thompson teach that neighbourhood research should combine the findings of both formal and informal research. In order to contextualize to a specific people, there are four profiles we need to understand:

- Interior life: What are their hopes, aspirations, fears and problems?
- Worldview: What aspects of biblical truth do they understand? What biblical truth do they deny? What are the pressure points? What are the people’s stories?
- Social context: What are their economic realities and educational levels?
- Religious institutions: What are the religious bodies and churches within this city or neighbourhood? How are they doing? How are they organised?

Conversion to Jesus Christ requires transformation at a deep and fundamental level (Rom 12:1–2; 2 Cor 10:4–5). As stated by Keller above, there has to be change at the level of worldview. This is the central thesis of missiologist Paul Hiebert’s important work *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (2008). He points out (2008:9–12) that when trying to evaluate evidence for conversion, missionaries and pastors typically look for changes in belief, behaviour and ritual. He insists that conversion to Christ must encompass behaviour, beliefs *and the worldview that underlies them*. He issues this caution (2008:11):

Conversion may include a transformation in beliefs and behavior, but if the worldview is not transformed, in the long run the gospel is subverted and the result is syncretistic Christo-paganism, which has the form of Christianity but not its essence.

Hiebert contends that the task of changing worldviews ought to be central in the twenty-first-century church. For the South African pastor, this will require faithfully applying the gospel to those who are entrenched in a highly communal shame–honour culture which is sometimes accompanied by ancestor veneration and witchcraft. In another South African urban context, the faithful pastor will have to apply the gospel to those entrenched in materialism, comfort, hedonism and individualism. The critical point is that the gospel should never be offered as a kind of “spiritual add-on”. Rather, the gospel should confront at the level of worldview.

The method advocated by Keller is qualitative research, or personal networking. This involves intentionally “hanging out” with the people and asking probing questions about these four areas.³² They also affirm the value of walking around the city or neighbourhood, noting social, religious and economic features, as well as shops and facilities. The aim should be to write a “People Profile” of the target people or area in the city. They emphasize that the key to effectively understanding the people you minister to is living within the community – strongly affirming the incarnational approach (2010:79).

In a sidebar in *Center Church* (2012a:121), Keller speaks of the need to develop CQ, or cultural quotient. While many people are acquainted with IQ and EQ,³³ CQ is not easily developed. There are at least three fundamentals in developing cultural resourcefulness:

- We must have a thorough understanding of our *own* culture and how it shapes us. One of the significant barriers to effective contextualization is the invisibility of our own cultural assumptions.
- Cultural intelligence requires a heart shaped by the gospel. This means that we are secure enough that we are liberated from our culture’s idolatries and the need for approval from the new culture.

32 Missiologist David Hesselgrave (2000:67–72) includes a fifth profile requiring investigation, a geographical profile. This would include a description of the land, land usage and transportation.

33 Intelligence quotient and emotional intelligence quotient.

- CQ requires us to immerse ourselves in a new culture, spending a great deal of time with people and seeking to understand and learn. Significantly, Keller (2012a:122) asserts that “immersion in the pastoral needs of people in our community” is imperative. “If we are living in the culture and developing friendships with people, contextualization should be natural and organic.”

Keller argues that contextualized communication adapts to the “conceptuality” of the listener. He explains that the illustrations we use should be from the people’s social world; the emotion expressed should be within their comfort range, the questions and issues raised should be relevant to them, and the authorities cited should be respected by them. He adds that contextualized gospel communication adapts to a culture in the way it persuades, reasons and appeals to people.

Hesselgrave (1991:163–174) writes of the “Seven Dimensions of Cross-Cultural Communication”. The worldviews, cognitive processes, linguistic forms, behavioural patterns, social structures, media influence and motivational resources of the respondent culture must be understood and appreciated. Like Keller, he also insists that communicators (missionaries or pastors) should take trouble to be self-aware and understand their own assumptions, practices and preferences with regard to these seven areas.

Borrowing from Hesselgrave (1991:196–236), Keller speaks of three basic ways to reason:

- Conceptual (Western) people make decisions and arrive at convictions through analysis and logic.
- Concrete-relational (Chinese) people make decisions and arrive at convictions through relationships and practice. They are very community orientated.
- Intuitional (Indian) people make decisions and arrive at convictions through insight and experience. They find stories far more compelling than propositions.

Georges (2016:15–72) asserts that large sections of Africa are characterized by shame–honour (collectivistic) cultures and fear–power (animistic) cultures. This results in many Africans making decisions by consensus in community; others are motivated in their decision making by their fear of evil spirits and their desire to pursue power over them.

Keller (2012a:122–123) argues that there is biblical support for appealing to all three categories and affirms that no way of persuasion is inherently better than the others. They can all lead to a

true knowledge of God – or lead away from true knowledge of God. He does caution that culture is more complex than these broad distinctions imply.

To illustrate, Keller (2012a:123) cites the example of Jonathan Edwards, an eighteenth-century pastor and theologian. While in the Congregational Church of Northampton, western Massachusetts, he preached to and pastored a church filled with many prominent people. When he was relieved of his duties in Northampton, he went to Stockbridge, on the American frontier, where he preached to a congregation consisting of many native Americans. His sermons changed significantly. They became simpler, and he made fewer points. His way of reasoning changed. He utilized more narrative, parables and metaphor, and he made less use of syllogistic reasoning. He preached more from the accounts of Jesus' life and less on propositional material from Paul's letters.

Keller's (2004) article "Deconstructing Defeater Beliefs: Leading the Secular to Christ" is very illuminating. Every culture hostile to Christianity holds to a set of "common sense" consensus beliefs that automatically make Christianity seem implausible to people. He states that Christianity is disbelieved in one culture for totally opposite reasons for which it is disbelieved in another. For example, in the West it is widely assumed that Christianity cannot be true because of the cultural belief that there cannot be just one "true" religion. It is implausible to many. But in the Middle East, the idea of one true religion is highly plausible. Rather, here it is thought that Christianity cannot be true because of the perception that American culture, based on Christianity, is unjust and corrupt. Sceptics should realize that the objections to the Christian faith are themselves culturally relative. Each culture has its own set of culturally based doubt generators which people call "objections" to Christianity.

When a culture develops a combination of several commonly held defeater beliefs, it becomes a cultural "implausibility structure". In this situation, people do not feel they have to give Christianity a good hearing, for they perceive it cannot be true.

When entering a culture (Keller, 2012a:123), we should be looking for two kinds of beliefs:

- "A" beliefs: These are beliefs already adhered to via "the wisdom and witness to the truth that God, by his common grace, has granted to culture". Because of their "A" doctrines, some people will immediately find some aspects of biblical teaching plausible.
- "B" beliefs, which he also terms "defeater beliefs": These are beliefs of the culture that cause listeners to find some Christian doctrines implausible, unacceptable or offensive.

“A” beliefs may vary from culture to culture. Keller states that in New York, the biblical teaching on turning the other cheek is accepted (an “A” belief), while what it says about sexuality is strongly resisted (a “B” belief). He asserts that it is the exact opposite in the Middle East.

In our presentation of the gospel, we enter the culture by pointing out the overlapping beliefs they can easily affirm. Paul did this in his Athenian ministry (Acts 17:28). In this way respect for biblical truth is enhanced in the listeners’ minds. For example, Keller posits that a culture that puts a high premium on community and family relationships should be shown that there is strong biblical basis for this. Yet conversely, a culture that values individual human rights and justice should be shown how the biblical doctrine of the image of God is the foundation for human rights.

Care must be taken to affirm the “A” beliefs, because they will become the premises for challenging the culture. This is an important statement: for Keller, there is an integral link between connecting and confronting – we connect to confront. It must be noted that we never stop entering or identifying with a culture. It is not simply an initial exercise.

Kevin Vanhoozer (2007:8–60) similarly affirms the necessity of disciples of Christ understanding their cultural context. He calls faithful disciples to be “bilingual”: they need to understand the biblical text and their cultural context.³⁴ His concern is that all Christians can and should achieve some level of cultural literacy, that is, the ability to read or interpret the world through the lens of the Bible and the Christian faith. His focus is on exegeting culture and critical engagement, not merely passive consumption. He contends that cultural literacy is imperative for those who are not content to be swept along by prevailing cultural winds and waves, but who want to critically and constructively engage culture for the sake of the gospel. Vanhoozer cautions: “Christians cannot afford to continue sleepwalking their way through contemporary culture, letting their lives... become more conformed to culturally devised myths...” (2007:35). He argues that believers should be making their mark on culture, rather than lamely submitting to it (as per Paul’s exhortation in Rom 12:1–2). He posits three fundamental necessities to becoming an effective cultural agent: theological competence, cultural literacy and gospel performance. “The church, as a community of cultural agents, must be able to make its distinctive mark – the mark of the cross – on culture” (2007:55).

34 Vanhoozer has been teaching a course annually at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School called “Cultural Hermeneutics”, in which he endeavours to show how culture should be interpreted theologically.

While this researcher sees tremendous value in this approach, it must be pointed out that differentiating between “A” and “B” beliefs is not always a straightforward matter. Sometimes “A” beliefs can be substantially in line with biblical truth but can be applied and overemphasized in such a manner as to actually promote a “B” belief in practice. “Ubuntu” is a case in point. The pastor or church planter working among urban black Africans will have to understand and appreciate the significant role of ubuntu. Ubuntu is a worldview and way of life shared by most sub-Saharan Africans. It stresses the importance of community and connectedness to other humans and the cosmos. Mbiti (1969:108–109) states that the two central maxims of ubuntu are: “A human being is a human being because of other human beings and a human being is a human being because of the otherness of human beings.” He has combined these two statements into “I am because we are, and we are because I am.” The central concept is that full humanity is only experienced in relation to the group. This resonates with biblical truth and is a necessary corrective to the excessive individualism of the West. But it can be overemphasized, resulting in no individuality whatsoever and in economic exploitation. The issue of what is colloquially called “black tax” illustrates this. While providing for the poor and unemployed is an outworking of the gospel, there comes a point where a line is crossed and help can in fact amount to enablement.³⁵ The question is, then, is ubuntu an “A” or “B” belief? The question requires a nuanced answer that includes careful definition and explanation. This further illustrates the complexity of contextualization.

4.1.2 Challenging and confronting culture

It is critical to enter a culture before challenging it. Criticism of the culture will have no persuasive power unless it is based on something that we can affirm in the worldviews and beliefs of that culture. The wrong things ought to be challenged from the foundation of the right things they believe. It is critical to learn how to distinguish a culture’s “A” beliefs from its “B” beliefs, because knowing which are which provides the key to compelling confrontation.

35 See, for example, the *Mail & Guardian* article (30 Oct 2015) “How ‘black tax’ cripples our youth’s aspirations”. Mosibudi Ratlebjane writes: “Welcome to the world of ‘black tax’ – the extra money that black professionals are coughing up every month to support their extended families. If you are lucky enough to have a job, it is seen as your duty to subsidise relatives who are less well off.” (Available online at: <https://mg.co.za/article/2015-10-29-how-black-tax-cripples-our-youths-aspirations>; date of access: 5 Apr. 2018.) In a *Fin 24* article (9 March 2018), “The burden of black tax”, Nkosazana Ngwadla writes: “Every black person knows how it goes: there’s the normal tax every South African citizen has to pay then there’s black tax – the burden of having to share your salary with every family member until you have nothing left to save or invest. Frankly, you’re lucky if you have anything left to carry you into the next month.” (Available online at: <https://www.fin24.com/Money/the-burden-of-black-tax-20180309>; date of access: 5 Apr. 2018.)

Keller (2012a:124) illustrates: Logs float and stones sink. But if a few logs are tied together, and the stones are put on top, you can succeed in getting the stones and logs across the river. We need to float “B” doctrines on top of “A” doctrines. Each culture grasps some aspects of biblical truth, but not all of it. Because it is from God, all biblical truth is coherent and consistent with itself. Therefore “A” and “B” doctrines are equally true, are interdependent and flow from each other. The confrontation occurs because every culture is wholly *inconsistent* – affirming some biblical truths but rejecting others. If a certain group hold to “A” beliefs, they are inconsistent not to hold “B” beliefs, because the Scriptures, as the revealed truth of God, are always consistent.

Paul reasons this way when he speaks to the Athenian intellectuals in Acts 17. In verse 28 he quotes pagan poets that teach that God is the source of all existence and life. It is noteworthy that the apostle does not call God the Lord, or talk of creation *ex nihilo*, for this would have highlighted the differences between biblical doctrine and pagan beliefs. Instead, he stresses the similarity. “But then he turns on them” (2012a:125), arguing along these lines: “if God has fashioned us, how can he be fashioned by us, and be worshipped as we wish, through temples and images of our own design?” He shows that their beliefs fail on the basis of *their own* premises. He challenges their idolatry by showing that it is inconsistent with their own core beliefs. So, while Paul affirms what is true in the Athenian belief system and shows suitable respect, the degree of confrontation must not be underestimated. “With the authority of the Bible we allow one part of the culture – along with the Bible – to critique another part” (2012a:125).

Keller cites two examples of this. He recounts the experience of a missionary who worked in Korea among prostitutes. They could not accept that God’s grace could extend to them and include them (it was a “B” doctrine for them). The Presbyterian missionary came up with a radical initiative: he introduced them to the doctrine of predestination (which is very much a “B” doctrine in the West). Yet the idea of a God who is King, who does what pleases him, made sense to the Asian prostitutes. This King chooses people out of the human race to serve him. His people are saved not because of the quality of their lives but because of his sovereign will. This made sense to the women; they had no reservations about authority figures acting in this way. When asked how they could know they were saved, the missionary replied that if they heard the gospel and wanted to believe it and accept it, it was a sign that God was working in their hearts and seeking them. The missionary had differentiated between “A” and “B” doctrines and had built one on top of the other. “If God is King, then why don’t you believe that you can be saved by grace despite your track record?” (2012a:125–126)

He also cites the argument and logic of C.S. Lewis,³⁶ where he appeals to his readers to accept a jealous, holy God (a “B” doctrine in the West) on the basis that he is a loving God (an “A” doctrine in the West). Lewis argues persuasively that the notion of a loving God must surely include holy anger and jealousy, for he vehemently opposes anything that threatens his beloved.

Keller recounts an example of using this approach from his own experience in Manhattan. He (2012a:127–129) outlines how he experienced opposition to the concept of sin amongst his hearers. So he began to define and explain sin in terms of idolatry. He taught that sin is building one’s life’s meaning on anything – even a very good thing – more than on God. Whatever else we build our lives on will drive our passions and choices and will eventually enslave us. Following Augustine, he calls it “disordered love”. Making “an idol out of something means giving it the love you should be giving to your Creator and Sustainer” (2012a:128).³⁷

Keller states that this approach was effective with young urban professionals for two reasons:

- It neutralized (at least initially) their postmodern sensitivity to cultural diversity, for their default objection to biblical teaching on sin would be that different cultures have different moral codes. Keller argues that it helps them understand their own fears, drivenness, envy and addictions in proper theological terms. It reveals to them that they have been looking to their careers, romances and material accumulation to save them, while these things are impotent to do what only the living God can do. Importantly, Keller does affirm that postmodern people will have to be challenged on their naïve view of truth, but this is not the starting place.
- It makes a compelling case that supports a “B” doctrine (you are a sinner before God) on the basis of an acceptable “A” doctrine (you were created to be free). Formerly, Western people believed it was important to be a *good* person. Values have shifted, and our cultural narrative tells us that it is important to be a *free* person. The theological category of idolatry challenges people at precisely this point, for it demonstrates that, paradoxically, if they do not serve God, they can never be as free as they aspire to be.

Keller states that his experience has been that when he has described the things that drive our lives in terms of idolatry, postmodern people do not put up much resistance – they sheepishly

36 C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), 34–35.

37 Keller identifies and exposes the contemporary Western idols of money, sex and power in his 2009 book *Counterfeit Gods* (London: Hodder & Stoughton).

acknowledge that this is exactly what they are doing. “The biblical message of heart idolatry adapts the message of sin to their cultural sensibilities, but it’s far from telling them what they want to hear” (2012a:128). He depicts sin as an act of misplaced love, not just a violation of law. He states that this is a compelling point of contact for people in his context today.

Keller (2012a:128–129) identifies a number of other “pressure points” where Western culture is vulnerable to challenge:

- The commodification of sex: He points out the difference between a consumer relationship (marketplace) and a covenantal relationship (marriage, family). Traditionally, sex was governed by covenantal obligations, but now it has become governed by consumer concerns of people who idolize freedom. This leads to chronic loneliness, regret and feelings of being used. But the Bible teaches that sex is designed by God not as means of self-gratification but as a means of self-donation that creates stable community. Keller opines that if the biblical sex ethic is expounded in this way, using the culture’s “A” belief in the goodness of community, it can be very convincing.
- The problem of human rights: There is a contemporary concern for justice and human rights in the Western world (an “A” belief”), yet, running concurrent with this, there is a secular worldview that says there is no God and we are here purely by chance. Keller points out that this contradiction between a belief in human rights and a disbelief in God should not go unchallenged. For if God does not exist, there is no basis for human rights. Exploitation and oppression are the natural consequences of materialistic evolution. So it is necessary and possible to show that human rights and justice make far more sense in a world created by God than in a world that is not created by God.
- The loss of cultural hope: For many in the West (particularly in North America), self-fulfilment is the fundamental purpose of life (an “A” belief). However, the dogma of self-fulfilment cannot provide a society the resources it needs to create a healthy, functioning culture. If we allow absolute freedom to define and create ourselves, we become untethered from anything bigger or more enduring than ourselves. This results in meaninglessness, alienation and a sense of hopelessness.

It is the conviction of this writer that these examples afford the gospel communicator in the secular West great opportunity for persuasive gospel communication. However, the growing diversity in urban South Africa will make it more complex to apply in multicultural church planting settings.

4.1.2.1 Campbell's critique of Keller's theology of sin, and a counter response

Keller's teaching on sin has been questioned and critiqued by some within the PCA. Iain D. Campbell expresses concerns and reservations in his chapter "Keller on 'Rebranding' the Doctrine of Sin" (2013:33–64). Campbell (2013:34) contends that Keller's stress on seeing sin as idolatry is explicitly "pragmatic". Interacting with several of Keller's published works, Campbell argues that Keller defines sin fundamentally in the categories of identity, idolatry, lostness and self-centredness. Campbell's key concern is that Keller does not appear to clearly define sin as disobedience and transgression, and has subsequently rebranded the doctrine of sin. Campbell writes: "Keller wants to move his readers away from the idea that sin can be defined merely in terms of breaking divine rules; that is, in breaking the commandments of God." Campbell is essentially arguing that there is a very real danger that Keller defines sin in a manner that is more anthropologically focused than theologically centred. Campbell challenges Keller of being overly subjective in his treatment of sin, saying that there is a subjective element in sin, but the root of this subjectivity "lies not in how individual sinners choose their own God-substitutes but in the fact that all sinners oppose a personal God who is their lawgiver" (2013:39).

Furthermore, Campbell (2013:57–58) contends that Keller confuses the causes and symptoms of sin. He writes: "Sin as self-centredness is a *symptom* of, not a reason for, our condition." In endeavouring to reach the postmoderns of Manhattan, "he has attempted to redefine, in meaningful terms, the basic need of the human heart." Campbell's (2013:59) conviction is that "the trade-off between holding on to a biblical doctrine of sin and rebranding the concept to make it attractive to the modern sinner has resulted in a loss of substantive meaning."

This writer believes Campbell has misrepresented Keller's teaching on sin. Campbell appears to have overgeneralized in a couple of important places and has made some unhelpfully absolute statements. Keller does not "dismiss a definition of sin as a breaking of God's rules", as Campbell (2013:38) alleges. Keller (2012a:128) affirms that "a complete biblical description of sin and grace must recognize our rebellion against the authority of God's law." For Keller, then, sin is both the idolatrous disposition *and* the transgression of divine law. In his context he begins with and heavily accentuates sin as idolatry because he gains traction in that way. As per the definition in the paragraph above, part of Keller's aim is to show that sin cannot be understood as *merely* breaking divine rules. It seems that Campbell is imposing a false dichotomy between two equally biblically valid images of sin. Keller contends that if people become convicted about their sin as idolatry, it is easier to show them that one of the consequences of sin is living in denial about our hostility to God. He argues that sin is much like addiction and that idolatry can function very similarly to drink

and drugs. Once this is understood, it is more possible to hear the verdict of Romans 1, that all humans suppress the truth and live in a state of denial, denying the truth that we live in rebellion and bear hostility to God. “Communicating the concept of sin through the biblical teaching on idolatry is an effective way to convey the idea of spiritual blindness and rebellion to postmodern people” (2012a:128).

Keller’s emphasis on the idolatrous heart echoes Calvin, who famously asserted: “Man’s nature, so to speak, is a perpetual factory of idols” (*Institutes*, 1.11.8; 1983:97). Luther similarly stressed the first commandment as being foundational to the entire decalogue.³⁸ Luther’s commentary in his Larger Catechism (part 1, par. 326) on the first commandment is illuminating:

Thus the First Commandment is to shine and impart its splendor to all the others. Therefore you must let this declaration run through all the commandments, like a hoop in a wreath, joining the end to the beginning and holding them all together, that it be continually repeated and not forgotten...

Campbell’s definition and understanding of sin also seem to be at odds with the Heidelberg Catechism.³⁹ The catechism deals with the first commandment in question 94:

Question. What does the LORD require in the first commandment?

Answer. That for the sake of my very salvation I avoid and flee all idolatry, witchcraft, superstition, and prayer to saints or to other creatures. Further, that I rightly come to know the only true God, trust in him alone, submit to him with all humility and patience, expect all good from him only, and love, fear, and honour him with all my heart. In short, that I forsake all creatures rather than do the least thing against his will.

38 Available online at <https://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=950> Date of access: 2 Apr. 2018.

Luther’s numerical breakdown of the decalogue differs from mainline Protestant interpretation. Following Augustine, he combined what would later be regarded by Protestant evangelicals as the first (Exod 20:3) and second commandments (Exod 20:4) and called this the first commandment. He then made two separate commandments out of what would be regarded as the tenth commandment (Exod 20:17–18). This does not change the fact that he viewed all the other commandments as essentially a violation of the commandment prohibiting idolatry. See the preface to Luther’s Larger Catechism, on p. 5.

39 Available online at <http://www.heidelberg-catechism.com/pdf/lords-days/Heidelberg-Catechism.pdf> Date of access: 2 Apr. 2018.

Campbell (2013:61) contends that an appreciation of the nature of the gospel requires a full-orbed view of sin. Ironically, Keller would agree with this and insist that this is exactly what he is attempting to do. Keller does speak much about “the sin behind the sin”.⁴⁰ This writer believes this is immensely helpful, both evangelistically and pastorally. It locates the real problem of sin, it avoids pharisaism, and it is in line with Reformed truth and Puritan practitioners who trace sin back to unbelief, pride and idolatry.⁴¹ For Keller, then, sin as idolatry does not exhaust biblical teaching on sin, but it is a suitable starting point.

It must also be noted that we should distinguish clearly between Keller’s model of contextualization and his own utilization and application of the model. Suffice to say at this point that his specific application of his own model does not nullify the theological faithfulness and methodological value of that model.

4.1.3 Appealing to and consoling the listeners

Keller affirms that gospel presentation should conclude on a positive note, a note of invitation and consolation, which always includes a call to faith and repentance. Having entered a culture and challenged its idols, we should follow Paul in presenting Christ to them as the ultimate source of what they have been seeking. Put differently, we should show our listeners that the plotlines of their lives can find a resolution only in Jesus Christ: “We must retell the culture’s story in Jesus” (2012a:130).

In his TGC article⁴² “How to Have an Effective ‘Missionary Encounter’ with Culture”, Keller states:

There’s no one evangelistic presentation that perfectly fits every culture, since every culture needs the basics of sin and salvation to be communicated in a comprehensible way. The gospel relates to other religions and worldviews by means of ‘subversive fulfillment’ – that is, the gospel fulfills culture’s deepest

40 For example, in his analysis of the sin of the older brother (Luke 15:11–32) in his *Prodigal God: Rediscovering the heart of the Christian Faith* (Riverhead books, 2008).

41 For example, in Thomas Watson’s work *The Doctrine of Repentance* (2002:106–114), Watson lists twenty “evils”, or characteristics of sin. His first one is: “every sin is recession from God... God is the supreme good, and our blessedness lies in union with him.” Similarly, John Bunyan in his *The Acceptable Sacrifice* (2004:32) writes: “Many are sorry for actual transgressions, because they do oft bring them to shame before men; but few are sorry for the defects that sin has made in nature, because they see not those defects themselves.”

42 26 May 2017, Available online <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/how-to-have-effective-missionary-encounter-with-culture> Date of access: 20 July 2017.

aspirations, but only by contradicting the distorted and idolatrous means the world adopts to satisfy them.

We must note that the term “subversive fulfilment” was not coined by Keller, but he has borrowed it from a much older missionary-theologian, Hendrik Kraemer.⁴³

An example of “subversive fulfilment”, or the gospel completing a culture’s baseline narrative, for Keller (2012a:111–112) would be Paul’s approach as delineated in 1 Cor 1:22–25. Paul states that when he spoke to Greeks he confronted their idol of wisdom. For the Greeks, a salvation that came through a crucified Saviour was sheer foolishness. But the Jews were infatuated with actions and results obtained by power and skill. To them, a salvation that came through crucifixion was weak and ineffective. The gospel offended each culture in different ways, yet it also drew people to understand Christ and his work in different ways. Greeks who were saved came to see that Christ was the ultimate wisdom, making it possible for God to be both just and the justifier of those who believe. And saved Jews came to understand that the cross was true power, in that our most potent enemies have been defeated. It is instructive to see how the apostle applies the gospel to confront and complete each culture’s baseline narrative. He confronts their idols, yet he positively highlights their aspirations. He uses the cross to challenge the intellectual pride of the Greeks and the works-righteousness of the Jews, yet he shows that Christ alone is the true wisdom the Greeks have looked for and is the true righteousness that the Jews have sought. What the Greeks and Jews have been seeking is found in Christ and his work alone – but in a way that is counter-intuitive, or “subversive”. Paul’s approach is “neither completely confrontational nor totally affirming” (2012a:112). He does not simply preach against their idols but shows that the manner in which they are pursuing these good things is self-defeating. He exposes the contradictions underlying their idolatry and points them to the resolution that is found in Christ alone.

There is no standardized way in which to appeal to our hearers. Keller argues that the inter-canonical themes uniting the Bible are many, rich and diverse. He cites a few: sin and salvation, using the language of exile and homecoming, of temple, presence, sacrifice, covenant and faithfulness, kingdom and victory. “The Bible has enough diversity to enable us to connect its message to any baseline cultural narrative on the face of the earth” (2012a:130).

43 Kraemer apparently used the phrase only once in 1939, in an essay, “Continuity or Discontinuity”.

Keller (2012a:130) affirms that the saving work of Christ can be presented by many different “atonement grammars”:

- Battlefield (Col 2:15): Christ defeated the powers of sin, evil and death for us.
- Marketplace (Col 1:14): Christ paid the ransom price for us.
- Exile (Matt 27:46): Christ was exiled and banished so that we could be brought in.
- Temple (Heb 10:1–18): Christ is the sacrifice that purifies us and makes us acceptable to draw near to a holy God.
- Law court (Rom 3:21–26): Christ stands before the judge and takes our punishment.

In each “grammar”, Jesus does for us what we could never do for ourselves. Each “grammar” will have special resonance with certain cultures and temperaments. But according to Keller, the one irreducible theme that runs through all these models is the concept of substitution. “The essence of the atonement is always Jesus acting as our substitute... This act – giving one’s life to save another – is the most compelling, attractive, and electrifying story line there is” (2012a:131). The different ways of speaking about the atonement afford us with wonderfully appropriate ways of showing each culture how the atoning work of Jesus specifically solves its greatest problems and fulfils its greatest aspirations. “Lifting up the substitutionary sacrifice of Christ is the ultimate way to appeal to any culture...” (2012a:131) This researcher agrees. Yet there could be misunderstanding at this point, for the cross does not only console: it must be remembered that the cross is also radically confrontational and offensive. Schnabel (2008:400) writes: “The cross has been and always will be regarded as religious scandal and intellectual nonsense.” So this writer notes that the cross and empty tomb *both* confront and console at the most profoundly deep level.

In his “Deconstructing Defeater Beliefs: Leading the Secular to Christ”, Keller (2004) argues that, practically, there are at least two parts in sharing the gospel in a particular culture: a “negative” and a more “positive aspect”. Keller advocates a “sandwich” approach to sharing the gospel:

- With the use of apologetics, the culture’s implausibility structure has to be deconstructed. This means demonstrating that by the culture’s own terms (by its own definitions of justice, meaning and rationality), its objections to Christianity do not hold up.
- To connect the story of Jesus to the baseline narratives of the specific culture. It must be shown that, in line with the culture’s own best aspirations, hopes and convictions, its own cultural story will not be resolved or have a “happy ending” outside of Jesus Christ.

First the gospel should be presented in a brief, winsome way. It should be so “hooked into the culture’s base-line cultural narratives” that the listener says: “It would be wonderful if that were true, but it can’t be!” Until the listener comes to that position, one cannot work on the implausibility structure.

Then the plausibility structure must be dismantled. The leading defeaters must be dealt with clearly and convincingly. Keller helpfully affirms that defeaters are dealt with when the person feels we have presented the objections to Christianity in a more compelling way than they could have done. Keller stresses that the purpose here is not to answer or refute the defeaters but to deconstruct them, that is, to show that they are not as solid or as natural as they first appeared. It is important to show that all doubts and objections are alternative beliefs and faith-acts about the world. Keller’s (2008a) book *The Reason for God* is fundamentally aimed at answering defeater beliefs in the context of Manhattan, New York.⁴⁴

Finally, a longer, fuller explanation of the person and work of Christ is necessary.

The gospel is the deepest consolation you can offer to the human heart. Once you have taken care to enter and have found the courage to challenge the world of your hearers, be sure to offer this consolation with the passion of the one who has experienced it firsthand. (2012a:132)

Keller cautions that if you try an apologetic approach before a brief, attractive presentation of Christ, people will become bored. But if the cross and resurrection are explained at great length before the defeaters have been dealt with, they will not listen to us either.

For Keller, a distinctive of a missional church is its commitment to enter and retell the culture’s stories with the gospel. This means assuming the presence of sceptical people and engaging with their stories, not simply talking about old times. To enter involves showing sympathy and deep acquaintance with their music, literature, hopes and fears. The older culture’s story was “Be a good person and live a decent, merciful, good life.” Now the culture’s story is: “Be free and authentic (theme of freedom from oppression) and make the world safe for everyone else to be the same

44 In part 1, “The Leap of Doubt”, Keller deals with the following defeater beliefs: the exclusive claims of Christianity, suffering, Christianity as a “straitjacket”, the church and injustice, hell, and science and the Bible. Having deconstructed these objections, he proceeds to delineate the “Reasons for Faith”, which constitute the second part of the book.

(theme of inclusion of the ‘other’; justice).” To retell means to show how only in Christ can we have freedom without slavery and the embracing of others without injustice.

4.1.4 Evaluation of Keller’s model

In assessing Keller’s model (by Keller’s own criteria), this writer notes the following:

- Keller’s model is framed within the boundaries of Scriptural revelation. His model (both explicitly and implicitly) affirms and operates under the authority of Scripture. There are no hints of relativism.
- The priority of the gospel is clearly evidenced in Keller’s model. There can be no doubt that his burden is to make the good news of Jesus Christ clear.
- For Keller, sensitivity to the hearers is critical. This is evidenced by the great lengths that his model requires the Christian communicator to go to get to know and understand his hearers.
- Keller gives considerable attention to both affirming (connecting with) and challenging (confronting) the recipient group. While aiming to be winsome, Keller’s model does not sidestep the necessary confrontation that faithfulness demands.
- We have noted that Keller (along with other Reformed pastors and missiologists) calls for contextualization which should inform and impact all ministry. However, in this chapter, where he posits his model of practical, active contextualization, attention is only given to the verbal proclamation of the gospel. While affirming the absolute centrality and necessity of clear gospel proclamation, it would be helpful to see how sound biblical contextualization would affect other areas of ministry such as worship, counselling, discipleship, mercy ministry and leadership training. In Keller’s defence, it could be argued that he deals with some of these issues in a later section of *Center Church*.⁴⁵ Yet it is this author’s concern that by applying his model purely to proclamation – in the chapter where he outlines his methodology – he is creating an unhelpful impression.

45 For example, he has a helpful discussion on contextualized evangelistic worship in his chapter “Connecting People to God” (2012a:297–310).

4.2 A comparison with other Reformed models and approaches to contextualization

We begin with the approaches posited by the Dutch Reformed missiologists Hendrik Kraemer and J.H. Bavinck because it is evident that these two men have had considerable influence on Keller. It must be noted that neither Kraemer or Bavinck actually used the term “contextualization”.⁴⁶ However, it will be shown that they certainly engaged with the concept behind the term and attached great importance to it. Then we shall consider three contemporary Reformed evangelicals who have expounded their methodologies of contextualization.

4.2.1 Hendrik Kraemer⁴⁷

Kraemer’s theology and praxis of Christian engagement with those of other religious backgrounds is recorded in his 1938 work, *The Christian Message in a non-Christian World*.

In chapter 8, “The Missionary Approach” (1938:284–335), Kraemer stresses that the Christian communicator is obliged to “strive for the presentation of the Christian truth in terms and modes of expression that make its challenge intelligible and related to the peculiar quality of reality in which they live” (1938:303). This necessitates a knowledge of their religious and general human background. This requires love-inspired self-sacrifice on the part of the missionary. “We take it too easily for granted that we really present the Message, where, as is often the case, we speak in a quite mysterious language” (1938:303).

Like Keller, Kraemer insists that the Christian truth must be shown to relate to all spheres and issues of life, from the most mundane to the most significant.

He states that “adaptation” involves “the genuine translation of Christianity into indigenous terms so that its relevancy to their concrete situations becomes evident” (1938:323). This requires both a thorough grasp of the Christian faith and of the material in which it must be expressed. “The deep concern of the Christian church should be the clear expression of the Christian revelation;

46 According to Moreau (2012:129–131), the term “contextualization” was first coined in 1972 by Shoki Coe, principal of Tainan Theological College. Coe was a leading figure in the formation of the World Council of Churches.

47 Hendrik Kraemer (1888–1965) was a Dutch Reformed theologian, linguist and missiologist. He studied Indonesian languages in Rotterdam, served with the Netherlands Bible Society in Indonesia and acquired expert insight into Indonesian Islam. He also held the chair of Professor of History and Phenomenology of Religion at Leiden University.

consequently, its no less deep concern should be to find the best available form and the most creative pedagogical and psychological approaches” (1938:323).

Kraemer deems the concern to find points of contact as “legitimate and necessary”. He says that “Every missionary who has his heart in his work is all his life deeply concerned about points of contact” (1938:130) and this conviction should not in any sense be weakened by the fact that saving faith comes from the work of the Spirit. Yet he also cautions against the notion that these points of contact are the secret to missionary success.

The remarkable paradox in the life of every (Christian) worker... is that it is his plain obligation and privilege to exert himself to the utmost and to utilize every means that experience and knowledge and talent put at his disposal... and yet that he has to be deeply and reverently aware that it is ‘God who makes the seed grow’. (1938:134)

Kraemer clearly affirms the importance of the category of general revelation in reaching those in other religions. He affirms that, even as a fallen creature, man knows about God. The “quest for God, even when man tries to kill it in himself, is the perennially disturbing and central problem of man” (1938:130). Kraemer regards this as a fundamental point of contact with the message of the gospel, saying that to deny this virtually means denying the humanity of man. Kraemer appears to be following Calvin, who spoke of the *sensus divinitatus* (a basic sense of God’s existence) that is the *semen religionis* (the seed of religion).⁴⁸

Kraemer (1938:134–141) makes three fundamental cautionary statements about utilizing points of contact:

- Kraemer (1938:135) points out the “indivisible unity” of religious systems. He argues that every part of the system, whether it be dogma, rites or ordinances, is so related to the whole that it cannot be properly understood apart from the whole. He cautions that this must be noted and remembered. He insists that points of contact have value when the “totality of life which dominates this whole religion” is properly appreciated. He speaks of a “totalitarian” approach to a religion and its constituent parts (1938:136).

48 Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1.3.1. Calvin writes that “a sense of Deity is inscribed on every heart ... even idolatry is ample evidence of this fact.” (1983:43)

- Using a dialectical approach, Kraemer (1938:136) argues that in the illuminating light of the revelation in Christ, all apparent similarities and points of contact actually become “dissimilarities”. He contends that the light of the gospel will show that all religious life (both the lofty and the degraded) lies under judgement, because it is fundamentally misdirected. Kraemer’s words (1938:136–137) are quoted at length here because they form the basis of his “subversive fulfilment” model and of Keller’s subsequent model:

This is the dialectical ‘no’ of the revelation in Christ to all religious life, and therefore to every point of contact in the sense of its being one that, if it were properly developed, would end in the sphere of the revelation in Christ.

And yet:

... this revealing light means a dialectical ‘yes,’ a comprehension of religion and the various religions that is deeper and more adequate than their understanding of themselves, because it uncovers the groping and persistent human aspiration and need for ‘the glory of the children of God’ in the misdirected expressions of religious life.

Keller has utilized Kraemer at this point.

- Kraemer (1938:140) emphasizes the pastoral aspect of gospel communication and asserts that the fundamental point of contact is the “disposition and attitude of the missionary”. What is required is to have “an untiring and genuine interest in the religion, the ideas, the sentiments, the institutions – in short, the whole range of life of the people... for Christ’s sake and for the sake of those people”. He argues that whoever follows this maxim will find points of contacts; whoever does not will fail to find points of contact. He insists on the Christian communicator genuinely identifying with the people and having a genuine interest in them, not merely treating them as projects or objects of curiosity.

Kraemer asserts, then, that the issue of whether one should be primarily bridge building or making contrasts (connecting or challenging) takes on new significance. It is not so much about connecting or contrasting, but “by concentration on the living Christian truth of Biblical realism and on its living expression, of finding out where to build bridges and where to emphasize contrasts” (1938:323).

4.2.2 J.H. Bavinck⁴⁹

The salient features of Bavinck's theology and methodology of contextualization can be gleaned from his important work *An Introduction to the Science of Missions* (1960:121–190).

Bavinck (1960:122) strongly affirms the reality and necessity of being receptor orientated: "Paul's manner of preaching is different every time. It is different in Athens than in Lystre [*sc.* Lystra]; it is not the same in the synagogue and in the marketplace." Bavinck cautions that this is not a simple matter, and he contends that evangelistic efforts can be ruined because a missionary initially took the wrong tack.

Bavinck (1960:124–125) considers the problem of how quickly the Christian communicator should get to the heart of the message. Should we go directly to the essential points of the gospel and issue a call to faith and repentance? Or should we deal first with an "attack on the outer defences, behind which refuge has been sought?" (1960:124), that is, should we first deal with what Keller calls "defeater beliefs"? He labels them the direct and indirect methods and affirms that neither has unequivocal Scriptural support. He cites Biblical examples of both and notes: "... the proper way is not always the shortest distance between two persons. It sometimes appears that if a person gets too quickly to the heart of the matter, he completely fails to make contact." This writer is in essential agreement with Bavinck and would affirm that this question is to some degree contextually determined.

Bavinck (1960:125) insists that we as communicators of the gospel must go to great lengths to see (understand) the person with whom we are dealing: "... we must seek to see through a person's name, position, reasons, and arguments, and try to reach his real life's problems." He also insists that this communication must happen within a context of love and grace, where there are no attitudes of superiority. This is of utmost importance in South Africa, given this country's legacy of apartheid and deeply entrenched prejudices.

Bavinck makes the critique that preachers tend to see themselves more as delivery men than as ambassadors. He states that we live too much under the illusion that the gospel has been preached if we have repeated the good news. While affirming the importance of the word, Bavinck says that

49 J.H. Bavinck (1895–1964), a Dutch Reformed pastor-theologian (nephew of Herman Bavinck, who was professor of Dogmatics at the theological school in Kampen), trained in Amsterdam and in Germany. Like Kraemer, he spent time on the Indonesian mission field. In his later years he held professorships at Amsterdam University and Kampen.

the task is tougher than we probably imagined at first. “There are many more walls to knock down, and many more obstacles to be removed than we are inclined to think” (1960:128–129).

Bavinck (1960:132–152) defines and describes the merits of both the direct and indirect approaches. In the indirect approach, one begins with what is already known and understood by the audience. He cites the following advantages:

- Pedagogically, there are advantages in arousing and engaging the listeners’ attention first.
- This approach ensures that the gospel is not “set in a vacuum”, nor has it fallen out of a strange world.
- Writing in the 1960s (yet still very pertinent), Bavinck spoke of hostility and suspicion against everything Western. By beginning with the listeners, this suspicion is somewhat reduced.

Yet Bavinck cautions against a simple movement from past or present belief systems to the gospel. He affirms the importance of general revelation, for God “has not left himself without a witness” (Acts 14:17). Bavinck insists that we are to speak to the “heathen as to those with whom God has already been concerned for a long time...” (1960:136). Yet he cautions that it is a tricky, difficult approach. He warns (1960:136): “There is no direct uninterrupted path from the darkness of paganism to the light of the gospel.” Again, he cautions (1960:140): “From a strictly theological point of view there is no point within pagan thought which offers an unripe truth that can be simply taken over and utilised as a basis for our Christian witness.”

But, he says, in practice, we cannot avoid making frequent “contact”; no other way is open (1960:140). He insists that the call to repentance may never be omitted.

Bavinck believes that under certain conditions the direct method (where we restrict ourselves to the direct proclamation of the message of the Bible) is a suitable approach. He says that this does not escape the problem of a point of contact, for we must still use the language of the people. He also affirms the inevitability of contextualization and, like Keller, gives Christian communicators a reality check: “In fact the danger of misunderstanding increases in proportion to our ignorance of what we are unavoidably doing. A purely direct method is actually impossible” (1960:142). He sees the major advantage of this approach in that it speaks more directly from the Bible, and consequently from the outset it is clear that we bring a new message. We must note that he is not advocating a “hit and run” ministry strategy. Bavinck insists that this approach is only possible if

there is already an existing sympathetic interest that has been aroused by the lifestyle of the missionary or church. Again, he insists that this approach must be built on *agapē* love through an incarnational life.

Thus, for Bavinck, the best way of approach is at least to some degree contextually determined. But he affirms that all gospel preaching, “whether direct or polemic... must retain the character of... a confrontation” (1960:149).

So, while Bavinck does not use the term “contextualization”, he certainly pays much attention to the concept. He uses the term “accommodation” (1960:169–190), though he much prefers the term “*possessio*”, to take in possession (1960:178). Emphasizing the lordship of Jesus Christ, Bavinck (1960:179) writes:

The Christian life does not accommodate or adapt itself to heathen forms of life, but it takes the latter in possession and thereby makes them new... Christ takes the life of a people in his hands, he renews and re-establishes the distorted and deteriorated; he fills each thing, each word, and each practice with a new meaning and gives it a new direction... It is in essence the legitimate taking possession of something by him to whom all power is given in heaven and on earth.

There is substantial overlap with Keller’s model. The differences are a matter of degree, emphasis and nuance. Bavinck does seem to stress confrontation slightly more than Keller.

4.2.3 Michael Goheen⁵⁰

Goheen (2014:331–369), in his chapter “A Missionary Encounter with World Religions”, also advocates the “subversive fulfilment” model and approach. Arguing from the theological affirmations in Romans 1 (concerning general revelation and universal depravity), Goheen essentially calls for affirmation, confrontation and subversive fulfilment. He writes (2014:355–35): “If God is revealing himself to all people, the longings and cravings of the heart need to be heard; and if God’s revelation is repressed and exchanged for idolatry, the expression of these longings needs critique.” He calls for having both a “sympathetic, insider approach” (which

50 Goheen is currently Director of Theological Education at Missional Training Center, Phoenix and is Professor of Missiology at Calvin Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids. Now a prolific author, he spent his earlier years as a church planter in the Vancouver area. He is considered to be a leading scholar on the thought of Lesslie Newbigin.

requires us to sympathetically enter their world and feel their longings, needs and aspirations) and a “critical, outsider approach”. Because suppression and idolatrous exchange are the default human impulse, sympathetic affirmation cannot be the only course of action. “The light of the gospel affirms the religious longing but challenges and critiques the form this longing takes” (2014:357). A critical outsider approach also recognises that a spiritual battle is taking place for all of human life, that includes our religious convictions.

Goheen follows Kraemer in arguing that these two emphases can be brought together and integrated in what may be termed “subversive” or “contradictive fulfilment”. We noted that J.H. Bavinck calls his very similar approach “*possessio*”. Goheen speaks of continuity and discontinuity. Behind continuity are common grace and general revelation; behind discontinuity are universal sin and idolatry. Goheen argues that the longings and desires and insights of those of other religions and worldviews are often authentic and true. He says that there is a certain continuity between the Christian faith and other religions, in that the gospel fulfils each of these insights and longings. He argues that religions’ understandings of God are not merely incomplete and in need of fulfilment, but they represent fundamental misunderstandings of God and salvation. “These conceptions are the vinegar of idolatry that has transformed the wine of God’s revelation” (2014:360). So the gospel challenges and subverts each of these notions as it offers Christ as the true answer to the religious longing. The gospel both fulfils religious longing and subverts its twisted expression. “It ‘possesses’ the true religious insight, prying it loose from its idolatrous religious framework and offering fulfilment in Jesus Christ” (2014:361).

Goheen proceeds to make some insightful observations about the point of contact with the nonbelieving world, especially in the context of religious pluralism (2014:362–364). He defines a point of contact as “that place which people from different religious traditions have in common that makes possible true communication” (2014:362). He contends that the first point of contact is our attitude and disposition. Our approach will make the gospel either attractive or unattractive. Furthermore, our communication will also need to present the gospel in ways that are understandable and offer good news where people need to hear it. We must scratch where they itch. There must be relevance and challenge, sensitivity and a call to repentance, because the gospel answers those deep longings yet challenges the very way they are understood.

Goheen (2014:363) quotes Kraemer (1938:139):

... points of contact in the real, deep sense of the word can only be found by antithesis. This means by discovering in the revealing light of Christ the

fundamental misdirection that dominates all religious life and at the same time the groping for God which throbs in this misdirection and finds an unsuspected divine solution in Christ.

Goheen helpfully points out that it is the universal, common, mundane problems that we face every day that provide fruitful points for witness. Consequently, he calls for the gospel to be related to all of life – including the daily grind – and he asserts that it is often in the more trivial details of our lives that we find the gospel to be most relevant.

4.2.4 Daniel Strange⁵¹

4.2.4.1 Strange’s theology and praxis of contextualization

In his *Their Rock Is Not Like Our Rock* (2014), Strange posits his theology of religions. He defines contextualization as the “the goal of a process whereby the universal good news of Jesus Christ is authentically experienced in the particularities of a local context” (2014:279).

One of the fundamental questions he endeavours to answer is: What are non-Christian religions, and why do they exist? His basic thesis statement (2014:41–42) is:

From the presupposition of an epistemologically authoritative biblical revelation, non-Christian religions are sovereignly directed, variegated and dynamic, collective human idolatrous responses to divine revelation behind which stand deceiving demonic forces. Being antithetically against yet parasitically dependent upon the truth of the Christian worldview, non-Christian religions are ‘subversively fulfilled’ in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In chapter 6, “The perilous exchange: the idolatry of the religious other in the New Testament” (2014:214–236), Strange unpacks the seminal text, Rom 1:18–32. Strange leans heavily on J.H. Bavinck and makes the following points:

- There is a clear and present revelation: this revelation is dynamic, universal, personal and relational.

51 Strange is Academic Vice Principal at Oak Hill Theological College, London. He obtained his PhD from Bristol University in 2000; the title of his dissertation was *The Possibility of Salvation Among the Unevangelised*.

- There is a “perilous exchange”. Humanity’s subjective response to this revelation is twofold:
 - Suppression: Strange argues that “κατεχόντων” (Rom 1:18) carries the idea of violently holding down. The sinner constantly suppresses general revelation and is therefore without excuse. Strange stresses the ongoing, almost violent nature of this suppression.
 - Substitution: Strange contends that general revelation is not obliterated. Rather, the empty space that results from suppression needs to be filled. These suppressions and exchanges are our futile efforts to flee from the living God of the Bible. Strange’s central idea is that human religion is an idolatrous response to divine revelation.

In chapter 7, “‘For Their Rock Is Not as Our Rock’: The gospel as the ‘subversive fulfilment’ of the religious other” (2014:237–273), Strange strongly affirms the radical difference between Christianity and other religions. Though showing a thorough appreciation of general revelation, he is very cautious to speak of “goodness” and “truth” in other religions. He argues (following Kraemer and J.H. Bavinck) that every part of a religion’s dogma or ritual is so related to the whole that it is dangerous to isolate one part, pronounce it good and true, and use it as a springboard to connect with non-Christian culture.

Strange (2014:268–273) describes the overall relationship between the revelation of the Christian gospel of Christ and the idolatrous response of religions as one of “subversive fulfilment”, which he borrows from Hendrik Kraemer.

Strange states that the truth about Jesus Christ stands as the “subversion, antithetical contradiction, confrontation and crisis” (2014:268) of all other religions. The universal sinful suppression and substitution of our knowledge of God means that even the most contextualized communication of the gospel must issue in an appeal and a call for repentance. He (2014:270) argues convincingly that because

we are metaphysically all made in God’s image, because of God’s variegated common grace, because idols are parasites and counterfeits of *the* God... perennial metaphysical, epistemological and ethical questions that other religions all ask but cannot ultimately answer, *are* answered by the self-contained ontological triune Creator and Saviour.

He affirms that, biblically speaking, "... the cracked cisterns of idolatry that bring only disillusionment, despair and unfulfilled desires are wonderfully fulfilled and surpassed in the fount of living water, Jesus Christ the Lord." Strange writes that this means that there is always a point of contact: "This is the only chink in the Goliath armour of pseudo-religion, where the shepherd boy with his stone – if God guides his hand – can hit people" (2014:270).

Positively, we are able to show that, compared to all other religions, the gospel of Jesus Christ is worthy of our hope and desire. We are able to persuade adherents of other religions that the gospel of Jesus Christ, while confrontational, costly and sacrificial, is wonderful enough, trustworthy enough to exchange old desires and hopes for new ones because these new ones are the originals from which all others are but smudged and ripped copies. (2014:271)

Strange concludes (2014:300–301) by highlighting the role of the church as a subversive-fulfilment community. He stresses that subversive fulfilment "must have an embodied, ecclesial presence that recognizes the centrality of witness of the Christian community, and can be an antidote to those Enlightenment idols Christians can often unwittingly bow down to: rationalism and individualism." The Church of Jesus Christ ought to embody the sort of life that non-Christians long for. Strange states that Christian community is the ultimate apologetic, and he affirms Newbigin's (1989:222–231) maxim: "The church is the hermeneutic of the gospel."

Strange contends that "fulfilling subversion" captures better than any other model the relationship between the gospel of Jesus Christ and other religions. It demonstrates both continuity and discontinuity, coheres well with the complex theological anthropology of human beings and shows suitable recognition of the nature and anatomy of idolatry.

The contemporary Reformed apologist K.S. Oliphint takes a similar approach to Keller and Strange. He writes (2013:52): "Suppression of the truth, like the depravity of sin, is total but not absolute. Thus, every unbelieving position will necessarily have within it ideas, concepts, notions, and the like that it has taken and wrenched from their true Christian context." This researcher deems this statement from Oliphint (2013:225) particularly helpful: "There is... in false religion, by definition, a *parody* or errant *copy* of Christianity at work."

4.2.4.2 Strange's critique of Keller

In his critique of Keller, Daniel Strange⁵² (2016:89–103) makes the following key points:

- Strange is fundamentally appreciative and affirming of Keller's approach. This is not because it is new or innovative, but precisely because it is *not*. He contends that Keller is fundamentally solidly Reformed, orthodox and traditional. Provocatively, Strange asserts that Keller's exposition of contextualization is not balanced at all. By this he means that Keller is very tradition specific and confessional. He is Reformed theologically and employs a presuppositional apologetic. Making use of Keller's own metaphor, he writes: "Keller's model of contextualization can only float on a raft of Reformed logs" (2016:94).
- Strange is candid about his own constituency: he is a confessionally conservative evangelical. Like Keller, Strange helpfully engages those who think that contextualization lessens the power of the gospel in that it promotes easy-believism or false conversions. Like Keller, he points out the irony that underadapting (reacting to a perceived syncretism) results in a cultural fundamentalism, which can be worldly, syncretistic, accommodating and culturally relativizing. Playing it safe is not a credible, biblically responsible option. Consequently, it is best to reflect intentionally and transparently. He says that underadapting is overadapting. "This is an important point for us conservative evangelicals who claim to resist contextualization but who actually have been blown about by philosophical winds, usually those of modernity" (2016:91).
- Strange credits Keller as one of very few people who bridge disciplines in order to bring greater depth and clarity to Christian mission. In an age of specialization and compartmentalization, where theological disciplines are "often hermetically sealed" (2016:92), Keller is multidisciplinary in approach and has managed to bridge a couple of disciplines in order to bring greater depth and focus to the Christian mission. He is a pastor, preacher, theologian, missiologist and apologist. This writer is in complete agreement with Strange when he writes that one of Keller's lasting contributions will be to "have brought a cross-cultural, missiological mentality and missiological tools into a conservative church

52 In 2016, Keller's *Center Church* was republished in three books, with each book including engagement with and critique from other authors. Strange's critique of Keller (*Reflections on Gospel Contextualization*) and Keller's subsequent response to Strange are found in the second book, republished as *Loving the City* (Keller, 2016).

context that has viewed missiology suspiciously as a somewhat exotic and peripheral discipline” (2016:93).

- He affirms that Keller’s model shares the same fundamental characteristics as his own model of “subversive fulfillment”. Strange’s methodology of cultural engagement and gospel communication shows similarities to Keller’s. Strange (2016:306n8) posits his own model, highlighting four key aspects:
 - “Enter: Step into the worldview and discern the story.
 - Explore: Search for elements of grace and the idols attached to them.
 - Expose: Show up the idols as destructive frauds.
 - Evangelize: Show off the gospel as ‘subversive fulfillment.’ ”

However, Strange does ask some questions of Keller’s model and proposes some fine tuning:

- While agreeing with Keller on the mixed nature of all cultures, Strange (2016:96) poses this question: “... I wonder whether the nature of suppressed truth (Rom 1:18) and the totalizing, all-infecting, assimilating nature of idolatry lead to a slightly more confrontational and challenging stance to non-Christian culture than Keller takes.” He asks whether the full implications of the stark discontinuity between the gospel and idolatrous culture is sufficiently evidenced in Keller’s approach.
- While commenting on Paul’s address to the Athenians (Acts 17:16ff), Strange (2016:97–98) highlights Paul’s revulsion and righteous indignation at the brazen idolatry in the city. While Strange affirms that idolatry is a helpful category for understanding sin and the damage it causes to ourselves and our relationships, it is the damage it causes in our relationship with God that is always primary. Strange argues that the present demonstration of the wrath of God (Rom 1:18) is a “shadow” of “the coming wrath” (1 Thess 1:10), which is brought forward into the present. He contends that part of contextualized communication is to start with the “felt wrath” that unbelievers experience in many ways every day, and to show how these warning signs point to a greater, coming reality of the fullness of God’s wrath poured out in undiluted form. Similarly, God’s present goodness to all (“sunbeams”) points to God himself, the source of all goodness. Strange warns that while we must utilize the category of general revelation (both the goodness and brokenness) in gospel proclamation, we must use them to point to that which they signify.

- Strange also contends that the pastor or missionary needs to be careful with an unqualified acceptance of Keller’s “A” doctrines. Strange affirms that though common grace serves as a point of contact, Paul’s opening statement to the “religious” Athenians and their “unknown God” is not a straightforward commendation and affirmation of their religiosity. Rather, it is a description of their idolatrous and ignorant searching and speculation. It is not so much the “contact of a warm handshake but rather more the contact of a wrestle” (2016:98). It must be noted that Strange does not prove this point exegetically. While we must recognize the existence of “A” doctrines, we should not atomize them from the overall idolatrous structure in which they are inextricably associated.

4.2.4.3 Keller’s counter-response to Strange

Fundamentally, Keller (2016:104–109) sees Strange’s concerns and recommendations as improvements, not as an attempt to change the overall model.

On the matter of taking a more confrontational approach to non-Christian culture, Keller counters: What this would look like? How would it show? Is it about tone and disposition or about the length of time in which the listeners are challenged? Keller (2016:107) states that he wants his readers to be “more willing to engage nonbelieving culture in a less condescending and insensitive way than they usually do.”

Keller strongly agrees that we should not lose our distress over all that is dark and warped. He also realizes and affirms the danger in emphasizing that the gospel only fulfils one’s deepest longings, thereby possibly giving listeners the impression that sin only hurts them, and does not grieve and dishonour God and bring about his wrath. Keller cites examples where he has done this. He states that we must show how sin not only harms us, but how it warrants God’s wrath. We should also find ways to show nonbelievers evidences of God’s judgement in their lives.

On the issue of “A” doctrines, Keller would agree theoretically with Kraemer, J.H. Bavinck and Strange that “A” doctrines do not actually exist in the sense of nonbelievers having a proper grasp of these contact points, because these beliefs are substantially idolatrous. But he cites the example and writing of Bavinck, who said there is no alternative route forward in gospel proclamation and ministry.

There is substantial overlap and agreement between the models of Keller and Strange. The differences are matters of nuance and degree. The main point of tension would be the degree and

severity of confrontation employed by the gospel communicator. While both argue from Paul's Areopagus sermon in Acts 17, Strange contends for a slightly greater intensity of confrontation.⁵³

4.2.5 Steve Timmis

Timmis⁵⁴ argues for what he terms "principled contextualization", which is driven by the gospel and its priorities (2017:3). He affirms both the inevitability of contextualization and the need for careful forethought, saying we cannot just rush in.

Commenting on 1 Cor 9:20, Timmis points out Paul's apparently strange comment: "To the Jews I became as a Jew." Paul the Jew became a Jew. How could this be? It is because his identity in Christ superseded his cultural heritage. The gospel does not abolish culture, but it relativizes culture. The reason why Paul could be so "incredibly flexible in cultural issues was because his status as a Christian, his new citizenship, broke the power of his own cultural taboos" (2017:10).

In chapter 6, "Understanding Your Neighbourhood" (2017:36–43), Timmis stresses the necessity of missional living in this post-Christian era. He argues that, rather than being distant observers of our neighbourhood, we should be active participants. He continues to say that all people have a "gospel" story: their own version of personal salvation. Echoing Keller, he argues that we should be familiar with other "gospel" stories. He uses and proposes that the framework of creation, fall, redemption and consummation be utilized to indicate where people's stories intersect with the gospel story.

Timmis also endorses the "subversive fulfilment" model (2017:51). He affirms Strange's definition of the nature of non-Christian religions. Non-Christians have knowledge of God, but they respond with suppression and exchange (Rom 1:18–32). The extent of this suppression varies in depth and expression. Because of general revelation and common grace, other religions contain

53 Gert Noort is the only pastor-theologian from a Reformed perspective who argues that Keller should actually make *more* of common grace and general revelation. In *Centrum Kerk*, which is the Dutch translation of *Center Church*, Gert Noort (2014:123–130) responds to Keller's theology and model of contextualization in an article called "Contextualisatie als verwarrende ontmoeting" (Contextualization is like a confusing encounter). While expressing praise for Keller's approach, Noort argues that theology is contextual by definition and that contextualization is a messy process that is both a social and a missionary task. While noting both continuity and discontinuity, Noort claims that Keller's model sets the bar too high and that his method will fail to prevent syncretism. Noort claims that Keller's radical rejection of syncretism clashes with missional and social realities. This writer remains a little perplexed by Noort's critique. As a consequence of sin, syncretism will always to some degree be present in every Christian church in this age between the already and the not yet. This is not reason or licence for apathy, but cause for watchfulness and ongoing reformation.

54 Timmis is a British pastor-theologian and co-founder of Crowded House, a church-planting initiative in Sheffield, UK. He wrote the syllabus *Engaging with Context* for the Crosslands Seminary in 2017.

truth, but they twist and distort that truth. So Timmis maintains that there is both “principle discontinuity” and “practical continuity” between Christianity and other religions. Thus, the gospel both confronts alternative religious worldviews and offers appealing answers to the questions that the other religions cannot themselves answer.

He asserts that the concept of “subversive fulfilment” is a helpful way to understand culture. What are the hopes, desires and longings in the culture? How are they a distorted version of right hopes and right desires and right longings? This will indicate what repentance means for the people, but also what good news means for the people.

Timmis (2017:54) proposes the following helpful practical exercise. Supposing you were to write a gospel for the people where you minister:

- Where would you start?
- How would you explain sin?
- How would you explain Jesus?
- What about Jesus’ life and teaching would they resonate with and struggle with the most? Why?

Timmis helpfully stresses that it is imperative to ask, “What does repentance mean in this culture?” So contextualization is not simply about being “cool” and trendy. It is not simply about connecting; it is about ensuring that the gospel has “bite” in the culture (2017:55). As an example, he contends that it is vital in Western culture to speak regularly about sex. Most unbelievers are sinning in this area as a matter of course, and Christian ethics seem bizarre to them. So unbelievers need to hear the positive Christian message on sexuality; the biblical view of sex needs to be presented in a way that is good news.

Timmis (2017:55) speaks of discovering cultural bridges and barriers. Bridges are behaviours, beliefs, attitudes and circumstances that offer opportunities for the gospel. Personal brokenness is a bridge to the gospel as people are willing to admit their need. Barriers are those things which make it difficult for people to connect with Christ: these things differ from place to place, but it may be prejudice against the church, a preoccupation with the present, and so on.

Following Keller, Timmis also affirms the value of identifying “defeater beliefs” (2017:56). Sceptics should realize that the objections to the Christian faith are culturally relative. Each culture has its own subset of culturally based doubt generators which people call “objections” to Christianity.

Significantly, Timmis (2017:58) also states that understanding our context does not require us to understand only the culture outside the church, but also the culture and resources within the church. The resources and capacities of the church will also shape what you do.

4.2.6 Keller and Augustine: Clear similarities in theology and style of engagement

Though completely out of historical sequence, it is worth noting the considerable overlap in engagement method and style between Keller and Augustine of Hippo (354–430). Australian pastor-theologian Scott Harrower (2005:42–57) contends that Augustine’s theological points of engagement with his culture and his methodology of engagement are instructive for us in the twenty-first century. Significantly, Keller’s name is not mentioned in the article, yet the overlap between Keller and Augustine in terms of engagement methodology and style is marked and significant.

Harrower points out significant similarities between Augustine’s context and the mood of our time. He specifically cites these commonalities: the subjective individualism, the pluralistic and multifaith context, and how contemporary Christians run the risk of being considered irrelevant, silenced and marginalized, as they did in Augustine’s day.

Augustine created a framework for engagement in which the uniqueness of Christ could be positively stated within a multifaith and relativistic environment. According to Harrower, these are the main theological building blocks of his engagement:

- There exists a close relationship between humanity and God. The Creator has made us to worship him; therefore, at our most fundamental level, we are worshippers. We should recognize this work of God in the heart of all people. Augustine’s words from his *Confessions* are highly memorable: “... for Thou madest us for Thyself, and our heart is restless, until it repose in Thee.”⁵⁵ This approach shows suitable respect and takes non-Christians seriously because they are human beings created by God and for God. Consequently, our relationship to those we reach with the gospel is not an adversarial relationship.
- A generous view of general revelation. His high view of general revelation is the natural outworking of the previous point. Augustine welcomes the knowledge of the Creator that other faith systems share because of general revelation. Augustine took time to familiarize

55 Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.1.1.

himself with the writings of the Platonists, rather than dismissing them outright. Yet he is clear about the limits of general revelation. General revelation is not salvific, for it is only through the incarnation that we see what God really looks like.

- Pride is the centre of sin and humanity's fundamental problem. Sounding Kellersque, Harrower (2005:47) argues that "pride" can be used today for "sin" and that the word is in fact more helpful in a postmodern and pluralist context. Augustine is helpful when he exposes the outworking of pride in other belief systems. He gives us a helpful contact point with non-Christians when he encourages us to frame pride in terms of our relationship with God, and therefore our need of Christ. Pride is a good starting point today because the close relationship between pride, anxiety and low self-esteem provides a platform with non-Christians.
- Grace as the context for self-knowledge and the knowledge of God. He contends that the central theme in all of Augustine's writings is the sovereign grace of God and the God of sovereign grace. Augustine proposed grace as the context in which we should establish the uniqueness of Christ. Harrower proceeds to say that grace is a warm and engaging doctrine which invites the pluralist and the postmodern person into discussion. Grace initially invites rather than rejects. It transforms the view that God is distant and unloving. Keller's warning against simply railing against the sins of contemporary society is echoed here.
- The need for confession and "being real". Our theological engagement with postmodernism must deal with people "being real" with God. Augustinian theology asserts that people want to be known by God and to know him. At the point of "being real" with God, the acknowledgement of pride converges with humanity's basic desire to know God. This writer notes that terms such as "authenticity" and "transparency" are very prevalent today. If God is at work in people's lives, the reality of sin and pride will become apparent when people are open and honest in the light of Jesus Christ. This is extremely challenging. Yet people should not be discouraged but need to be persuaded of the goodness and grace of God in the gospel. This point again echoes Keller's dictum (2011b:48): "We are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe, and yet at the very same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope." It is a theology of grace that is needed to move a person beyond the realization of pride.

Harrower (2005:53–56) continues to describe the Augustinian manner of engagement:

- Augustine advocates a winsome life, marked by integrity and grace, which commends the gospel to others.
- He affirms the necessity of prayer before entering into discussions about the gospel.
- Augustine believes that we should be expectant and persevering.
- He calls Christians to offer Scripture positively, for he believes that the aim of Scripture is to move people beyond their pride into a loving relationship with God.
- We should be confident in Scripture (God’s words) as God’s means for conversion.

We note a strong Augustinian “flavour” in the theology and approach of Keller. This further enhances his credibility.

4.3 Concluding evaluation

Having outlined and discussed the salient features of Keller’s methodology of contextualization, and having compared it with other theologians, we are now in a position to make some concluding points in the form of an assessment.

- While the verbs which capture the essence of Keller’s model – *enter and adapt, challenge and confront, appeal and console* – seem simple and straightforward, we must note that the task of contextualization is far from simple. All the writers quoted in this chapter warn that it is fraught with complexities and challenges. Nevertheless, this writer would affirm that these verbs are an accurate summary of the process. Furthermore, the three-stage process outlined above is very helpful (as a kind of checklist) for Christian pastors and missionaries in all contexts.
- From a Reformed missiological point of view, there appears to be nothing hugely questionable nor innovative concerning Keller’s theology and methodology of contextualization. We have noted how his model of “active contextualization” shows significant overlap with Kraemer’s “subversive fulfilment” model and J.H. Bavinck’s “*possessio*” approach. Furthermore, we noted that three contemporary writers appear to be very Kellersque in their theology and methodology of contextualization.
- In terms of similarities, all the writers insist on a deep level of engagement: what could be termed an ongoing incarnational approach. They all point out that the attitude and disposition of the Christian communicator, and the quality of the community life of the

church, are absolutely key. The first point of contact is the missionary or pastor. Christian communicators must not only go to great lengths to understand the people they are seeking to reach, but they must be self-aware – aware of their own cultural baggage and bias.

- The theological categories of general revelation (common grace) and universal sin (depravity) form the basis of contextualization. It is essential, therefore, that the Christian communicator have a biblically sound and theologically robust understanding of both these critical doctrines. This requires a robust theology of general revelation which clearly affirms its scope and value as well as its limitations and inadequacies. The Christian communicator must similarly have a thorough grasp of the doctrine of sin and the fall and its effects. Giving due consideration to both these realities forms a critical part of sound contextualization. This writer is satisfied that Keller has a thorough appreciation of both these doctrines and gives appropriate recognition to each in his model of contextualization.
- The mixed nature of culture means that the pastor must both connect with culture and confront culture. Both are essential. All the authors under consideration bore testimony to the inevitability of utilizing points of contacts (or bridges) to engage the recipient culture. All the writers caution both of the inevitability of contextualization and the complexities involved. The two older Dutch Reformed missiologists and Dan Strange have cautioned that, while utilizing points of contact, the Christian communicator must be careful not to give credibility to the whole fallen system out of which the point of contact is taken. This writer considers this a valid caution which must always be heeded.
- There is consensus among the writers that all communication must ultimately point to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and include a call to faith and repentance. The storyline of the Bible, with its richly variegated and interwoven canonical themes, provides ample material to connect with any culture and consequently to point to its fulfilment in Christ. It is the death of the holy Son of God in the place of sinners, and his triumphant resurrection from the grave, which is the ultimate in both confrontation and consolation.
- There are no essential, substantial differences between the models. The small discrepancies are a matter of balance, nuance and degree. While connecting and affirming are essential, the issue is far from straightforward. The issues of continuity and discontinuity are complex and to some degree will themselves be contextually determined. The radical newness of the gospel has to be evident.

- Part of Keller's value is that he brings what has traditionally been considered the sole domain of exotic foreign missions into pastoral ministry in the West. This researcher is convinced that Keller's model is both suitable and helpful for all contexts, urban South Africa included. However, it is imperative that we differentiate between his basic model of contextualization and the application of that model – including his own application of his model. His basic model is very useful and suitable, but what Keller has been doing in Manhattan cannot simply be replicated in urban South Africa. This would amount to a spectacular failure in contextualization and would amount to a denial of his own model. We turn now to consider the features, characteristics and demographics of urban South Africa and the application of Keller's model in this context.

CHAPTER 5 KELLER’S MODEL IN URBAN SOUTH AFRICA

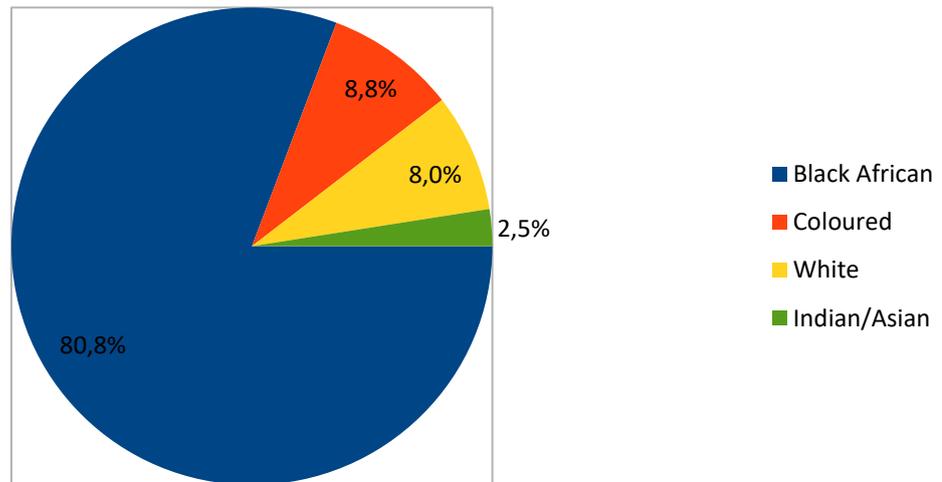
Having examined and critiqued Keller’s theological credentials, as well as his theology and model of contextualization, we must now consider the context in which his model could be applied: urban South Africa. The aim is to outline the salient features of urban South Africa, especially as they apply to Christian ministry. The problems and challenges facing urban South Africans will also be noted. We shall also outline the religious and spiritual features of South Africa, noting the state of the evangelical church and the most prevalent worldviews. A study of how Reformed evangelicals are actually proceeding with contextualization is also included. This chapter concludes with a summary of the most salient points and their implications.

5.1 A bird’s-eye view of the South African urban landscape

5.1.1 Urban South Africa: Fast facts

- According to figures from the 2011 census (the most recent reputable figures), South Africa’s population in 2011 was 51,7 million people. This amounts to an increase of 8,2% since the 2007 census. The 2011 census showed the following racial demographics: black African 79,2%; coloured 8,9%; white 8,9%; and 2,5% Indian/Asian (Statistics South Africa, 2012:21).
- Statistics South Africa (2016:2–4) estimated the 2016 mid-year population at 56,52 million, with the following demographic composition: black African 45,7 million (80,8%); coloured 5 million (8,8%); white 4,5 million (8,0%); and Indian/Asian 1,4 million (2,5%). The declining white population is noteworthy.

South African population 2016: racial demographics



- The South African population had a median age of 25 in the 2011 census, up from 24 in the 2007 census (Statistics South Africa, 2012:27–28) with following breakdown: black African 24; coloured 27; Indian/Asian 32; white 39. The median age of all the race groups has climbed since the 2001 census.
- South Africa has eleven official languages. While the languages are formally equal, the three most-spoken languages are Zulu (22,7%), Xhosa (16,0%) and Afrikaans (13,5%). Though English is the language of commerce and science, it ranks fourth and was spoken by only 9,6% of South Africans as a first language (Statistics South Africa, 2012:28–29).
- Life expectancy at birth for 2016 was estimated at 61,2 years for males and 66,7 years for females (Statistics South Africa, 2016:3).
- According to Statistics South Africa (2016:3), 12,57% of all those living in South African are living with HIV, amounting to 7,06% million. An estimated 18% of those aged between 15 and 49 are HIV-positive.
- Gauteng comprises the largest share of the South African population. According to figures from Statistics South Africa (2016:4), approximately 14,3 million people (25,3%) live in this province. KwaZulu-Natal is the province with the second-largest population, with 11,1 million people (19,6%).
- According to World Population Review (2018), South Africa has 5 cities of over a million residents, 50 cities between 100 000 and 1 million, and 159 towns between 10 000 and 100 000.

- According to the above source, the most populous cities are as follows:
 - Cape Town: 3,43 million
 - eThekweni (Durban): 3,1 million
 - Johannesburg: 2,02 million
 - Soweto: 1,69 million
 - Tshwane (Pretoria): 1,61 million.⁵⁶
- The Gauteng City Region is clearly the country’s economic heartland, with Johannesburg, Tshwane and Ekurhuleni accounting for 31,9% of national economic activity. Cape Town (10,9%) and eThekweni (8,7%) are also significant economic drivers (South African Cities Network, 2016:94⁵⁷).
- According to Statistics South Africa 2016 mid-year estimates (2016:3), 29,6% of the population are aged younger than 15 years, and approximately 8,1% (4,60 million) are 60 years or older. The youth (age 15–34) constitute 36,2% of the population. The proportion of elderly persons aged 60 and older is increasing over time. This shows that South Africa has a youthful (but slowly ageing) median population.
- According to the 2011 census figures (Statistics South Africa, 2012:39–40), 19,1% of the total population aged 15 or older had no schooling or a highest level of education less than grade 7. Of black Africans, 26,9% had completed grade 12, compared with 39,5% of whites. Only 8,3% of the black African population had tertiary education, compared to 36,5% of the white population. As many as 10,5% of black Africans had received no schooling, compared with 0,6% of the white population.

5.1.2 Features of urban South Africa

Christian writers point out the importance of the church getting to grips with urbanization. In his article “The Challenge of the Cities”, Greenway (2009:559) contends that cities are the new frontiers of Christian missions. He argues that to neglect cities would be strategically short-sighted, because “as the cities go, the world goes.” Cities are centres of political power, economic activity,

56 Johannesburg, Soweto, Tshwane and Ekurhuleni (Benoni) are often grouped together and regarded as a megalopolis called the Gauteng City region.

57 The State of Our Cities 2016 Report is an exhaustive document dealing with all issues relating to the nine biggest cities in South Africa, namely, Buffalo City, Cape Town, Ekurhuleni, eThekweni, Johannesburg, Manguang, Msunduzi, Nelson Mandela Bay and Tshwane. It also investigates trends and demographics in the major towns and service centres.

communication, scientific research, academic institutions, and moral and religious influence. In terms of urbanization, South Africa is ahead of the global curve. According to the State of our Cities Report (South African Cities Network, 2016:32–33), South Africa is two-thirds urbanized.⁵⁸ Bakke (2002:29) points out that our generation is “living in the largest migration in history”, and he adds that the evangelical church is generally poorly prepared for it. We are facing hyper-urbanization. In view of these staggering realities, the Christian church ought to understand the unique challenges of urban ministry and emphasize and support relevant urban ministry.

Al Mohler (a leading Reformed Baptist from the USA) warns: “If the Christian church does not learn new models of urban, ministry we will find ourselves on the outside looking in” (Mohler, 2010:1). He proceeds to say that there really is no choice – the gospel must call a new generation of committed Christians into the teeming cities. Our ministry models must become increasingly urbanized. This is a considerable challenge, for a biblical urbanized gospel ministry must be a contextualized ministry.

Although there tends to be a middle-class bias against the city (as discussed in Keller, 2012a:158–160), urbanization should not be discounted as bad news. This researcher contends that it should be understood *theologically* (under the providence of God, he is bringing the nations to the cities) and *missiologically* (we have a unique opportunity and responsibility for mission right where most of us are living). Keller points out that there are a number of people groups who are generally difficult to reach and would be most effectively reached in cities. This would include younger people (who are attracted to the rhythms of urban life), the cultural elites (movers and shakers), foreigners and poor people.

This overview is by no means exhaustive. The aim is to identify and briefly discuss the main realities of South African urbanization that impact gospel ministry.

5.1.2.1 A growing urban population

South Africa has an urbanizing and youthful population. This nation is slightly ahead of the global average in terms of urbanization, and this is projected to reach over 70% by 2030 (South African Cities Network, 2016:83).

Cities and towns play a major role in housing South Africa’s population. An estimated 78% of South Africa’s population live in cities and towns in both urban and rural areas. Only 14% of the

58 See <http://www.southafrica.info/news/urbanisation-240113> Date of access: 14 Mar. 2017.

population live more than 20 kilometres from a town or city (South African Cities Network, 2016:32). In addition to the contribution by the city regions of approximately 57% of the formal economy, these areas also play an important role as economic engines and job baskets of South Africa by housing significant parts of the informal economy and large numbers of small businesses.

Secondary cities (such as Polokwane, Mbombela and Richards Bay), service towns (like Newcastle and Modimolle) and regional service centres (such as George / Knysna) are also growing rapidly (South African Cities Network, 2016:33).

Yet almost half (46%) of the population is concentrated in the metros and surrounds. In 2011, just four city-regions (Gauteng, Cape Town, eThekweni and Nelson Mandela Bay) accounted for 42% of South Africa's population (South African Cities Network, 2016:34).

Although there is population growth in major towns, the most rapid growth is occurring in the major cities. Much of this is in former black townships and informal settlements, because they are the first recipients of migrants looking for work. Backyarding (the erection of informal living structures in township backyards) has also increased substantially (South African Cities Network, 2016:37).

While the actual urban populations are increasing, family size decreased from 4.5 to 3.6 between 1996 and 2011, putting extra demands on housing, employment and basic services (South African Cities Network, 2016:29).

The poor and working classes continue to be largely marginalized. Most low-income housing is located on the periphery of cities, and residents of these areas suffer poor access to centres of employment and amenities. Consequently, there are higher transport costs, difficulty in accessing good schooling, and long times of travel between home and work.

Disease, mortality and fertility rates affect the rate of population growth. South Africa is simultaneously affected by four epidemics, referred to as the "quadruple burden of disease" (South African Cities Network, 2016:80):

- HIV/AIDS
- injury, both accidental and non-accidental
- infectious diseases, such as tuberculosis, diarrhoea and pneumonia
- lifestyle diseases, such as diabetes and obesity.

5.1.2.2 Migrants and migration

South African cities offer the migrant worker access to employment, infrastructure and services that are not always available in the rural areas. There are two types of migration within South Africa: permanent migration and labour (or circular) migration. “The patterns of urbanisation in South Africa are complex because circular migration under apartheid has led to an intricate relationship between rural and urban areas” (South African Cities Network, 2016:84). Labour migrants usually move on their own and form one-person households in their new locations, whereas permanent migrants will move with their entire households. This leads to households often having a rural as well as an urban base and an individual number of the household who moves back and forth between the two. A characteristic of urban life in South Africa is that people move and then move again (South African Cities Network, 2016:35).

Pieterse et al. (2014:4) highlight three key issues in addressing the issue of internal migration within the Gauteng city region:

- Though poverty is perceived as a rural issue, this is not the case. Urbanization is occurring on a large scale within city regions. Gauteng in particular is dealing with an enormous influx of poor people.
- The attractiveness of city regions has caused a substantial increase in the proportion of young people and work seekers. We could speak of the urbanization of the poor and young in South Africa.
- The biggest proportion of migration is occurring within city regions – migration is not simply a move from a rural to an urban location, as previously believed. Furthermore, migration to urban areas is often non-permanent.

As far as foreign migrants are concerned, there exists no accurate means to count intentional migrants in South Africa, as “many migrants live below the radar and move regularly between South Africa and their country of origin” (South African Cities Network, 2016:82). Mandryk (2010:761) estimates the number of immigrants in South Africa to be in the region of five million, though he points out that some estimates are as high as 18 million.

5.1.2.3 Townships and informal settlements

Home to about 18 million people, townships and informal settlements are the fastest-growing settlement areas in South Africa’s larger cities. Included in this classification is what the

government has termed RDP housing.⁵⁹ During apartheid, townships were dormitory towns that provided cheap, unskilled labour for industry, with limited social and economic infrastructure. These settlements are often poorly located on the periphery of cities and very distant from economic activity and other opportunities. These neighbourhoods have become poverty and unemployment traps for large numbers of people (South African Cities Network, 2016:116–117).

While South African townships are not homogenous, they all lack a critical threshold of amenities and economic infrastructure necessary for developing cohesive communities and vibrant economies. They continue to function mainly as dormitory towns, with their residents spending significant time and money on commuting daily. Some township residents undertake small-scale and often marginal economic activities within their local neighbourhoods (South African Cities Network, 2016:117–121). Most job-seeking migrants moving to cities first live in informal settlements, which are an affordable entry into the city. Many migrants cannot break into the urban labour market and find it difficult to move out of shacks into more formal accommodation. The average residence period within informal settlements has increased from between two and four years in the early 1990s to ten years in 2011.

Two main features are associated with collective violence in urban South Africa, particularly in townships: strike action or protest violence, and xenophobic violence. Strike action results in loss of life and damage to property. Most often, the strike action is related to municipal services or maladministration (South African Cities Network, 2016:128).

5.1.2.4 The economy, poverty and unemployment

Over the past two decades, South Africa's economy has become increasingly geographically concentrated. The nine big cities account for 58,7% of South Africa's gross value added (GVA). The Gauteng City Region is the country's economic heartland, with Johannesburg, Tshwane and Ekurhuleni accounting for almost a third (31,9%) of national economic activity (GVA). The average per capita gross income (2013) was highest in Tshwane (R62 939) and lowest in Msunduzi / Pietermaritzburg (R36 316). The average per capita income overall in South Africa in 2011 was R34 299 (South African Cities Network, 2016:93–95).

The Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) report (Pieterse et al., 2014:15) cites a study done by the Bureau of Market Research (BMR) in 2013 that investigated household income

59 The national government's Reconstruction and Development Programme.

and expenditure patterns. The poor category is defined as those whose income is between R0 and R54 344 annually. In Gauteng, the number of households living in poverty has tripled in only 15 years.

The 2008 economic downturn had severe effects on the labour market. The formal employment participation rate declined from 35,5% in 2007 to 34,6% in 2008 and continued to fall, reaching 31,3% by 2013. The five largest cities account for almost half (43%) of all employment in South Africa. Young black people account for two thirds of the unemployed below the age of 35.

“If youths fail to get a job by 24, they are unlikely to ever get formal employment. This trend poses the greatest risk to social stability” (South African Cities Network, 2016:85). In an online BizNews article (14 February 2017), Graham and de Lannoy argue that approximately 48% of South Africans between 15 and 35 were unemployed in the third quarter of 2016. This situation causes a plethora of other serious social problems and contributes to an ongoing cycle of chronic unemployment and poverty. Another disturbing trend they cite is the increasing number of young people who have stopped looking for work.

The urbanization of poverty has often been blamed on rural poverty pushing people to migrate, but even as rural poverty has declined, urbanization has continued, and urban poverty has increased. People living in urban areas are generally more dependent on cash incomes, and the cost of living is appreciably higher.

The South African Cities Network (2016:85) predicts a bleak economic future for the country: “South Africa is heading for an economic storm. The economy is performing far below its potential, as evidenced by slow economic growth (not even reaching 2% a year) and mounting job losses.” The largest metropolitan municipalities have been growing faster than the rest of the country and are estimated to generate over 70% of the country’s GDP (South African Cities Network, 2016:29).

South Africa is unique in having a relatively small informal economy despite its high unemployment. The informal economy contributes only about 7–10% to the country’s GDP but forms an important part of city economies, particularly within townships and low-income neighbourhoods (South African Cities Network, 2016:85).

5.1.3 Other critical issues facing urban South Africans

These are noted because they are not merely deep-rooted problems that impact millions of South Africans, but because they are opportunities for holistic gospel witness.

Light (2012:319–394) cites and discusses the following problems facing South Africa:

- the legacy of apartheid
- always blaming the West
- a failing education system
- laziness
- the need for development
- greed, corruption and crime. (Light [2012:335] points out that in December 2011, South Africa coined a new word: *tenderpreneurs*. These are government officials or politicians who abuse their power and influence to secure government tenders and contracts. The outcome is that huge amounts are not spent on the actual projects but line the pockets of these tenderpreneurs and their corrupt partners.)
- alcohol and other drug abuse
- HIV/AIDS
- racial and cultural tensions
- economic challenges
- poverty
- poor leadership
- a lack of morality.

Mandryk (2010:757–763) identifies the following issues as key:

- Economically, a vast gap exists between rich and poor.
- High unemployment.
- Land redistribution remains a very sensitive issue.
- Significant “brain drain” as many professionals (mostly white) leave the country.
- Government and leadership (Mandryk [2010:759], writes: “Corruption, cronyism and demagoguery are widespread.”)
- The legacy of apartheid continues to impact the nation: there is a long way to go in the quest for meaningful reconciliation between the races.
- Violent crime.

- HIV/AIDS.
- Conditions of urban dwellers in townships and squatter remain dire.
- Immigrants have streamed over South Africa's borders, resulting in anti-immigration sentiment and xenophobic violence.

Koning and Buys (2018:140–143) posed the following questions and elicited the following responses in their research among 53 Reformed pastors from four different groupings. The aim of the questions was to identify the key issues (as perceived by these pastors) facing urban South Africans and how their churches were addressing them. The questions put to the pastors are italicised.

- *What are the pressing social problems in the areas in which you serve?* (It was open-ended, and the participants could indicate any number of problems.) In descending order from the most-cited problems:
 - poverty
 - drug / alcohol abuse
 - unemployment
 - family problems (namely, divorce, domestic abuse, absentee parents)
 - materialism / greed
 - crime and corruption
 - educational problems and challenges
 - racism (including xenophobia)
 - anxiety and depression (including hopelessness)
 - teen pregnancy
 - pornography
 - abortion
 - housing
 - gangsterism.
- *Is your church addressing them? How?*

Three respondents indicated that their local church was not addressing the needs in the community. Another said his church was not at all effective in practical ministry: “There is a ‘benevolence’ ministry. But this amounts to little more than giving money away when especially necessary.”

A large component of pastors (33%) said that these issues are addressed from the pulpit or in Bible studies. A pastor responded: “Our church did a preaching series recently to address some of these issues.” Another commented similarly: “We have had a sermon series on most of them this year... The last series we had was on #Bringbacktheland, #Feesmustfall, #Menaretrash.” One Baptist pastor stated: “We preach the Word, seeking to be a sound, Biblical church; and strongly encouraging members to be salt and light to their neighbours & community. We are not attempting to address individual social problems with specialized social-reform problems.” Another stated: “(We) Preach the Word on Sundays, and live as Christians during the week.”

A minority of pastors indicated that their churches have put on special programmes to address these social needs. These include marriage enrichment courses, divorce recovery workshops and financial planning seminars. It is apparent that marriage and family issues are the most addressed. Other pastors mentioned their churches’ involvement with school readiness programmes or feeding schemes, supplying food parcels, partnering with poorer churches in the township, funding an HIV/AIDS worker in the township, partnering with existing NGOs, by starting their own NGO or by partnering with a university. A pastor said: “It’s a work in progress but a lot more can be done.”

- *What do you think are the most pressing issues facing urban South Africans?* In descending order from the most commonly cited:
 - family problems (including divorce, domestic abuse and absentee parents)
 - unemployment
 - crime (including corruption)
 - racism (including xenophobia)
 - materialism / greed
 - poverty
 - drugs/alcohol
 - economic disparity between rich and poor
 - sexual immorality
 - fear/stress about the future
 - housing
 - education
 - Two pastors mentioned overtly spiritual problems, that is, the pervasiveness of the “prosperity gospel” and deeply entrenched Christian nominalism.

There can be no doubt that South Africans face a wide variety of perplexing, deep-rooted challenges and problems. All the research indicates that South African society is understood to be broken and diseased at every level. What is immediately evident is that the problems listed are addressed so directly by the word of God and the gospel of grace. They are all issues that invite both a biblical, gospel-centred response and practical action. Speaking generally, the former is being done, but there appears to be a slowness with the latter. Many Reformed pastors have responded to the social ills and challenges of their contexts by preaching and teaching. While this is essential, it certainly does not exhaust the church's calling and responsibility. Furthermore, preaching and teaching on these matters are by definition helping the church, not engaging with the wider unchurched community. It seems that part of the issue is whether churches train and equip their members to function as individuals, or do the work as churches, or partner with existing agencies. This writer believes all three are legitimate and necessary – and that the context itself determines the approach. However, there is a tacit recognition that not enough is being done. There seems to be an underlying resistance to, and fear of, anything that can be construed as the “social gospel”.

Mandryk's comment (2010:760) remains true: “South Africa needs the Church to step even further into radical engagement with all the ills besetting society. The life-changing power of the Gospel can bring about change that no government policy ever will, but Christians must make sacrifices, take the risks and live out Christ's love in hard places. The temptation to withdraw to a safe, comfortable, but unengaged existence is ever present.” These problems and challenges present huge opportunities for holistic gospel ministry in South Africa, demanding both evangelistic fervour and social engagement: a fully orbed, comprehensive gospel ministry. Keller's holistic theology and his comprehensive contextualization could be utilized with substantial benefit in this context.

5.2 The religious complexion and demographics of South Africa

5.2.1 A bird's-eye view

South Africa is often referred to as the “rainbow nation”, which speaks of the country's incredible diversity. This is certainly true in the religious and spiritual realm. Hofmeyr, in his foreword (2017:ix) to Kevin Roy's useful book *The Story of the Church in South Africa*, writes that South Africa “has one of the most colourful, variegated, and bewildering arrays of Christian churches in the world.” In his postscript (2017:217), Roy affirms that there is one comment he can make with

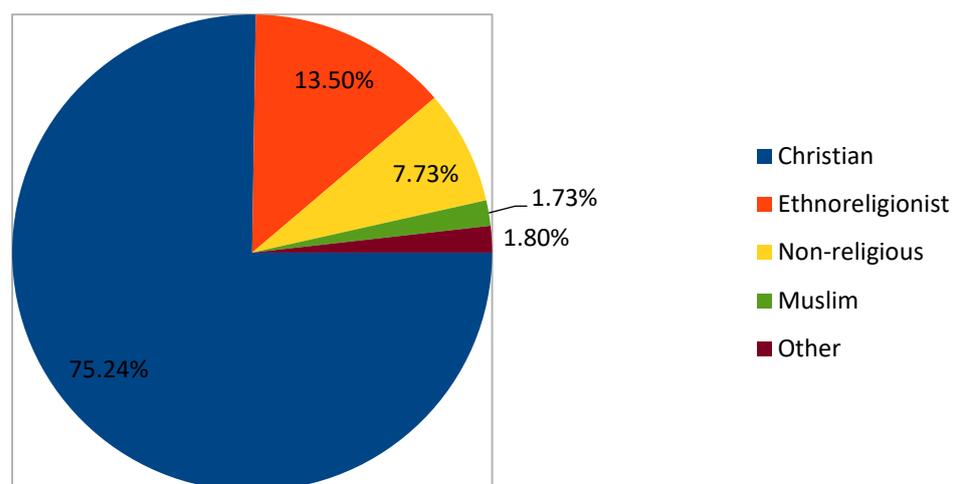
absolute conviction: that the Christian scene in South Africa has become even more complex and diverse.

Exactly accurate and up-to-date figures do not exist, for the last national census that asked detailed (but optional) questions about religious affiliation was in 2001. But there are observable trends.

Mandryk (2010:758) cites the following figures:

- Christian: 75,24% of the total population, representing annual growth of 0,9%.
- Ethnoreligionist: 13,5% of the total population, representing annual diminishing of 0,1%.
- Non-religious: 7,73% of the total population, representing annual growth of 3,6%.
- Muslim: 1,73 of the total population, representing annual growth of 2,8%
- Hindu, Baha'i, Jewish and Buddhist/Chinese traditional religion account for the remaining tiny fraction.

South African religious demographics



The broad picture of Christian groupings:

- Protestant: 15,21% of the population, with annual attrition of -0,2%
- Independent (including AICs): 39,82% of the population, with annual growth of 1,9%
- Catholic: 6,04% of the population, with annual attrition of -0,3%
- Orthodox: 0,1% of the population, with annual growth of 0,1%
- Unaffiliated: 10,6% of the population, with annual attrition of -0,6%

According to Mandryk (2010:758):

- Evangelicals constitute 21,1% of the population, with annual growth of 2,2%
- Charismatics constitute 24,4% of the population, with annual growth of 2,8%
- Pentecostals constitute 12,4% of the population, with annual growth of 3,8%

In his explanation of his statistics, Mandryk (2010:xxx–xxxi) indicates that these figures are not terribly helpful, as these three categories are not always separate entities. But they do indicate the numerical growth of the Charismatic churches and give something of the general picture. The Reformed evangelical constituency is a very small subset of the evangelical group.

5.2.2 The South African church post 1994

Roy (2017:3–4) outlines the main features of the post-1994⁶⁰ church in South Africa. He affirms that this modern period was characterized by significant growth and diversification in the church. He cites four factors that have shaped modern South African Christianity:

- The ongoing growth of the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements, which has mirrored the global trend.
- The rapid growth of African Instituted Churches (AICs).
- The ecumenical movement that has affected most mainline churches.
- The continuing struggle for equal social, political and human rights for all South Africans.

Roy (2017:3) states that 70 per cent of South Africans profess adherence to the Christian faith, and “claim some sort of connection, however tenuous, to particular churches.” In addition to traditional mainline churches, which still account for a significant proportion of South African Christianity, there are a number of new groupings and networks that had no existence prior to the twentieth century, including:

- The classical Pentecostal churches (such as Apostolic Faith Mission, Full Gospel Church and Assemblies of God), which grew out of the Pentecostal movement in America.
- Thousands of AICs, each autonomous but having certain family resemblances (and some exotic names, such as the Ethiopian African Church of Zion in South Africa).

60 The 1994 general elections marked the transition from white minority rule to black majority rule.

- New charismatic groupings (such as Vineyard, International Fellowship of Christian Churches, New Covenant Fellowship and His People).

“A newcomer to the South African Christian scene is likely to be overwhelmed by the confusing array and complex history of thousands of separate and widely different denominations” (Roy, 2017:4).

Roy (2017:214) notes the steady decline in the membership of mainline churches in the last decades of the twentieth century. He acknowledges that precision is difficult because of the dated reputable figures. However, he cites a 2012 WIN/Gallup poll indicating that the number of people describing themselves as “religious” declined from 83 per cent in 2005 to 64 per cent in 2012. He (2017:214–215) notes the following:

- The smaller and generally more theologically conservative churches are just maintaining, without significant growth. This research is focused on this constituency. This is cause for concern and is one of the primary motivations for this research. This writer conducted previous empirical research (Koning, 2016:2–7) among three South African Reformed groups.⁶¹ Responses to a questionnaire indicated that by far the majority of Reformed Baptist churches have had fewer than ten conversions over the last ten years. In view of population growth, this is alarming. Furthermore, many of those who are joining Reformed Baptist churches are joining as believers from other churches. Some are disillusioned with charismatic excess, others with theological liberalism, others by spiritual stagnation. While it is commendable that there are Reformed churches for these people to find a home in, this is not real kingdom growth. It is transfer growth – it is fundamentally a change of local church membership. And given the steep growth of urban centres, local congregations that are maintaining are actually losing. Similarly worrying tendencies were expressed by the Gereformeerde Kerk in Suid-Afrika (GKSA) pastors (Koning, 2016:50). Conversion growth among the GKSA group was reported to be the lowest.
- Roy points out that one of the major issues dividing the mainline Protestant churches is the matter of homosexual relations and same-sex marriage. This dialogue and debate largely mirrors the discussions in America and Europe.
- The classic or traditional Pentecostal churches have similarly held their numbers and seen some growth.

61 These three groups were Reformed Baptists, the Gereformeerde Kerke in Suid Afrika (GKSA) and Acts 29.

- Newer charismatic churches and networks have seen significant growth over the last two decades. Roy (2017:218) cautions that this growth is not without controversy and that there is a great diversity of doctrine and practice among these groups. He cites the impact of the “prosperity gospel” as highly problematic, though this is certainly not accepted doctrine in all these groups.
- African Instituted Churches (AICs) continue to see considerable growth. Accurate statistics are not available, “and the variety of religious teachings is legion” (Roy, 2017:219). The largest of these churches is the Zion Christian Church, which had 3,87 million members according to the 1996 census. Its membership had grown to 4,97 million by the 2001 census. There are thousands of Zionist churches, all of them in “a continual state of flux, division, growth or extinction, and with widely varying teaching and practices” (Roy, 2017:219).

There have been encouraging developments in the Reformed evangelical scene in South Africa. Conrad Mbewe (a Reformed pastor from Zambia with considerable international profile, and a regular visitor to South Africa) has written of the significant growth of Reformed theology in Africa among younger black people. In his blog post “The Young, Restless, and Reformed... In Africa” (2 August 2013), Mbewe wrote:

It seems that one country on the whole continent that is leading in this phenomenon is South Africa. Whereas previously the Reformed Faith in this robust form was almost a monopoly of the “white” South Africans and “blacks” shunned the R-word because of its associations with Apartheid, yet these “black” young adults love the R-word and are changing the demographics altogether.

5.2.3 The church in South Africa: Context and religious features

5.2.3.1 The impact of globalization

Bauckham (2005:6) states that “globalization describes the way the world is rapidly becoming a whole in which the parts interact and relate to each other, almost independently of geography.” He speaks of the “relentless universalization of commercialized American culture.” He (2005:6–8) cites the roles of the modern media and the new information technology as well the dominance of global capitalism as the main contributors. Goheen and Glanville (2009:7) similarly see globalization as one of the most powerful religious forces in the world today. There can be little doubt that globalization has impacted South African society at large and the church. Light

(2012:218–222) makes the point that globalization tends to lead to the homogenization of cultures and that much of our (South African) lifestyle is sourced in symbols and values that come from North America.

South Africa has been and continues to be affected by global realities. Speaking of religious developments post 1994, Hendriks and Erasmus make the following critical observation (2001:59): “Anyone who wants to understand something of South Africa’s transition needs to see and understand the bigger global picture.” They identify and discuss three contours of global change that have impacted and are impacting the church in South Africa:

- “The pulse of South Africa is beating to an urban rhythm” (2001:59). The mainline churches are struggling to adapt to this changing scene.
- The 1 500-year-old Christendom paradigm ended in 1994, according to these writers, though it ended earlier in other parts of the Western world. The paradigm where churches were granted favour and privilege, where Christianity was a cultural phenomenon, and where pastors were held in high esteem is largely over.
- There are global epistemological changes that have impacted South Africa. The way people conceive of authority and truth is shifting. The authors outline the shift from modernistic thinking to postmodern thinking in South Africa, emphasizing the prominence of the consumer and an experience-centred approach to life.

5.2.3.2 Understanding the postmodern religious climate in South Africa

Western society and culture is not homogenous; it defies an exact, simple and neat categorization. Yet there is very little doubt that we are increasingly post-Christian and postmodern. There is general consensus that, because of globalization, the West is substantially postmodern. Carson (1996:538) defines globalization as “the changes brought about in almost any discipline owing to the fact that the various parts of the world are demonstrably more interdependent than they have ever been...” He goes on to say that the combination of extraordinary worldwide mobility and almost instantaneous communication has shrunk our world (Carson, 1996:539). We have noted that South African culture and worldview cannot be isolated from the rest of the Western world.

Previous research (Koning, 2016:49–50) demonstrated that that the majority of Reformed evangelical pastors consider their South African context as substantially nominally Christian and postmodern. This is corroborated by research undertaken in 2018 (Koning & Buys, 2018:136–

139). South Africa is lagging behind the hardcore postmodernism of Europe, but there is no doubt that we are moving in the same direction. Through rapidly advancing technology (such as the Internet, with its access to masses of information), the popularity of TV and the immediacy of communication, we share fundamental characteristics with Western urban culture, particularly that of America.

Flemming (2006:315), a contemporary missiologist, writes:

The context for articulating and embodying the gospel, particularly in Western societies, is in the throes of a seismic shift. It is not only more global; it is also increasingly postmodern. One of the profound challenges facing the church in the current generation is how to come to grips with the transition from a twentieth-century world dominated by modernism, with its faith in radical individualism, rational and objective knowledge, and scientific progress, to a postmodern world that questions the entire project.

5.2.3.2.1 The salient features of religious postmodernism

Wells (2005:61) points out that there is a certain irony in trying to define postmodernism, for that in itself is a very un-postmodern thing to do. However, he gives the following underlying motifs of contemporary postmodernism in his important work *Above All Powers: Christ in a Postmodern World* (2005:61–164):

- The supreme place given to the autonomous self. In this respect, postmodernism follows modernity. Carson asserts the same point: “Postmodernism as a whole is characterised by astonishing hubris, by a focus on the self that is awesomely God-defying” (1996:133). There is no authority outside and above each person.
- A lack of any comprehensive worldview. It involves a radical fragmentation of life and a denial of any narrative that connects the events of life into a single form of meaning. Postmodernism is marked by a lack of coherence – there is no longer any centre to reality. Life’s meaning cannot really be evaluated, because meaning has disintegrated.
- Truth (that is, having an understanding of reality that corresponds to what is out there) is not possible, because human reason has its biases and presuppositions. This results in a rejection of all truth claims, a rejection of doctrine, and the rise of relativism. Truth claims are for the individual, not the public; truth is private, not for the universe. (Yet,

paradoxically, many Westerners still have a very high view of scientific knowledge – even though postmodern philosophy is sceptical of it.)

- There is no purpose. The belief that there is purpose written into creation has died with postmodernism. This results in nihilism, meaninglessness, and feelings of profound alienation and hopelessness.
- Despite this, many postmoderns are profoundly spiritual. Wells speaks of an “explosion of personalised spiritualities” (2005:109). He identifies a stream of spirituality that began taking place in the 1960s. It is anti-institutional and dismissive of doctrine and formal structures. Moreover, it is deeply privatized, incredibly individualistic and has a therapeutic modus operandi (2005:96). This writer has noted how many South Africans are labelling themselves “spiritual, but not religious”.

Wells (2005:152) summarizes postmodern spirituality in this manner:

With its individualism, its wholly privatised understanding, its therapeutic interest, its mystical bent, its experimental habits, its opposition to the truth as something which mediates the nature of an unchanging spiritual realm, its anti-institutional bias, its tilt towards the east, its construction of reality, its can-do spirit, it is something that is emerging from the very heart of the postmodern world. This is... the postmodern soul.

D.A. Carson (1996:557) argues that the fundamental characteristic of postmodernism is an absolute denial of objective truth (an absolute denial of absolutes!) and subsequently the impossibility of an objective stance on anything. Postmoderns are generally biblically ignorant and illiterate; they reject claims of absolute truth, and they are relativistic in outlook and engage happily with the pluralistic mood of the age. They are disparaging of propositional truth and tend to prefer narrative. Our Western culture is marked by consumerism, materialism, hedonism, technocracy, cynicism and individualism, contends Hastings (2012:47). Flemming (2006:316) identifies the lack of any unifying story, historical nostalgia, spiritual hunger, mystery and the glorification of doubt as some of the key characteristics of postmodern people.

5.2.3.2.2 The challenges and opportunities that postmodernism presents

Carson has written a very illuminating article entitled “The Dangers and Delights of Postmodernism”. He argues that Christians should not adopt either modern or postmodern

epistemology. Both make true claims; both are seriously flawed. Significantly, this accords with the doctrines of depravity and common grace. He lists the following strengths of postmodernism:

- Postmodernism tellingly criticizes modernism's autonomy and "checks its considerable arrogance" (2003:15).
- It is far more sensitive than modernism to the deep and undeniable differences that characterize people of different races, languages, cultures and genders.
- Postmodernism shows that there is more to knowing than rationality, proofs, evidences and linear thought. Postmoderns are usually more impressed by the authenticity of relationships than by the cleverness of linear argument.
- It is implicitly religiously pluralistic. Clearly this is not a Christian position. However, the point is that many of the NT documents speak much more immediately and prophetically to our situation than they did to Western Christians half a century ago.

Carson warns that we should not be naïve about postmodernism's deep and varied weaknesses:

- It greatly and habitually exaggerates the difficulties we have in communicating with each other.
- It pushes the claim that all knowing is subjective by regularly presenting a faulty and manipulative thesis: we can either know things fully, or we cannot know at all.
- When applied to doctrine and morals, "it does more to loosen the constraints of living with integrity and with self-denying concern for others... than any other single development in the past century" (2003:17). In its more radical form, it destroys the notion of objective truth.
- After correctly challenging the arrogance of modernist epistemology, postmodernism displays its own brand of "stunning arrogance" (2003:17).

Carson's point is that Christians should neither idolize nor demonize either modernism or postmodernism. Both are founded on profoundly idolatrous assumptions, and both make some valuable, helpful observations. This is a crucially important point. Reformational Christians, who are justifiably critical of imbibing postmodern assumptions and views, may not realize that their

own views have been deeply influenced by modernism – a system and worldview which is also deeply flawed.

Reformed evangelicals should appreciate that postmodernism also affords the church unique opportunities for ministry. Ravi Zacharias, a leading contemporary apologist, who visited South Africa in May 2018 on a speaking tour, says that postmodernism presents the Christian church with unique windows of opportunity to communicate the gospel (2000:26–28). He cites five positive opportunities that postmodernism presents to the church:

- Postmodernism has cleared the playing field in the sense that all disciplines, including the world of “empirical” science, have lost their final authority.
- Despite the failings of modernism and materialism, the yearning for spiritual meaning and experience is greater than ever.
- There is just enough of the modern worldview left that reason still has a point of entry. But this must be used cautiously.
- There is a tremendous search for community, which should culminate in the community of believers. It is the worshipping community that binds the diversity of our culture and backgrounds.
- Our time is marked by self-indulgent pleasure, yet people are grappling with a pervading sense of meaninglessness. Wells makes the same point, saying that “meaninglessness, bewilderment, nihilism and a pervasive sense of inner disorientation mark the postmodern spirit” (Wells, 2005:192–193). These five realities are excellent contact points for gospel truth that Reformed South African pastors should take careful note of.

Bauckham’s insight into the value of the biblical metanarrative is very illuminating. Bauckham (2005:90–94) points out that the biblical story is uniquely suited to address the postmodern context in that it is a “non-modern” metanarrative. He defines a modern metanarrative as a “totalizing theory which aims to subsume all events, all perspectives and all forms of knowledge in a comprehensive rational explanation.” Such a metanarrative is very neat and tidy. He argues that there is a sense in which the Bible does not have a single carefully plotted storyline, like a conventional novel. He contends that the Bible does have an overall story that encompasses all its other contents, “but this story is not a sort of straitjacket that reduces all else to a narrowly defined conformity” (2005:93). He points out that the Bible is a sprawling collection of narratives, along

with much nonnarrative material, some stretches are told several times, there are little stories in larger ones, some of the material is untidily arranged, and there are fragments that “seem to lead nowhere.” Though there is coherence, it is not a simple, straightforward coherence. In this sense, it is ideally suited to postmoderns, who understand diversity, tension and apparent contradiction.

Carson (2000:384–398) affirms the great importance of what could be termed worldview evangelism and biblical theology. He notes that up to just a couple of decades ago our evangelism (in the West) consisted of an intensive presentation of one small section of Scripture or one small segment of the biblical storyline. It presupposed that most unbelievers were familiar with the biblical storyline and basic content of the Bible. Things are very different now: Westerners are largely biblically illiterate and have imbibed postmodern worldviews. Carson (2000:386) argues that evangelism in this postmodern climate means “starting further back”. The good news is incoherent unless it is understood in the context of the grand narrative. A biblically faithful exposition of John 3:16 only makes sense in the broader context of the Bible’s plot line.

Koning (2016:91–92) has pointed out that there could be potential conflict here. “Reformed evangelicals put a high premium on expository preaching, which by definition involves the systematic, intense, verse-by-verse exposition of Scripture. Often only a couple of verses or a very small section of Scripture is covered at one time. But it must be noted that expository preaching and a worldview approach are not mutually exclusive. Carson himself is a strong proponent of expository preaching.⁶² It does mean that the preacher will have to go to great lengths to sketch the bigger picture. It also requires the speaker to be more creative and deliberately aim to put the little stories in the context of the grand story which culminates in Christ.”

It is very difficult to capture any one context with exactness. Context is multifaceted, complex and constantly on the run. One writer calls culture a “moving target” (Timmis, 2009:24). It is this researcher’s perception that East London, the city where he is involved in Christian ministry, is probably one of the most conservative, traditional cities in South Africa. There is still some semblance of Christian influence – there remains something of a Christian “holdover”. For example, Bible reading and Christian prayer are still permitted in some of the local schools, and the local newspapers afford prominence to stories relating to Christian seasons and holidays. However, younger people are hugely ignorant of the Bible and cynical of “organized religion”,

62 For example, see his November 2013 article on the TGC website, entitled “6 Reasons Not to Abandon Expository Preaching”: <http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/6-reasons-not-to-abandon-expository-preaching> Date of access: 5 May 2015.

and relativism and pluralism reign. This is borne out by local Christian schoolteachers who lament the moral laxity, biblical ignorance and existential angst of the young people. A local high school has had to come to terms with the pupils agitating for homosexual couples to be permitted at their matric farewell dance.

While South African urban cultures are not identical and monochrome, the prevailing worldview is thoroughly postmodern. However, South African postmodernism is unlike the hardcore postmodernism of Europe. Rather, it is more akin to the Bible-belt culture of the USA. There are pockets of Christian nominalism that have been hybridized with postmodernism thinking.

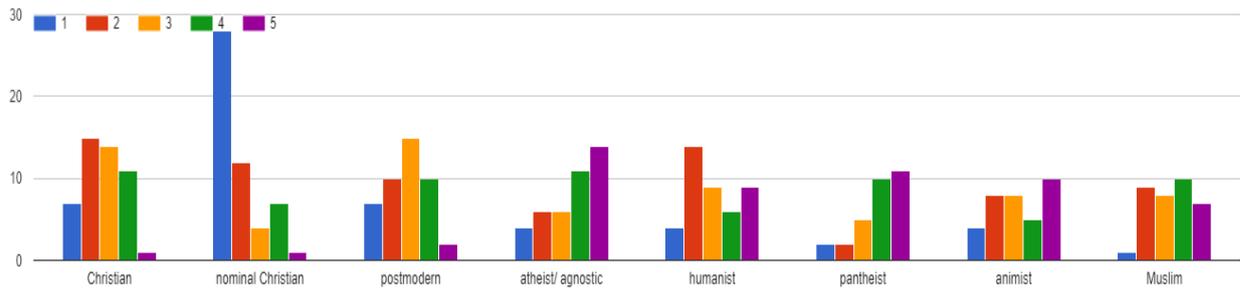
It is imperative that gospel communicators in South Africa come to understand and acquaint themselves with the salient features of postmodernism in order to effectively reach new, unchurched generations. Light (2012:42–54) includes a discussion on postmodernism in his book and writes: “Evangelicals working in Africa... will need to be cognizant of its underlying worldview and scepticism and be able to critique it in the light of the biblical worldview and the gospel” (2012:54). Keller’s two works on apologetics (*The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*, 2008 and *Making Sense of God: An Invitation to the Skeptical*, 2016) could be very helpful resources in the South African context.

5.2.3.4 South African pastors’ own understanding of their contexts

To determine how South African Reformed pastors understand their own urban contexts and prevailing worldviews, Koning and Buys (2018:125–146) posed the following questions and received the following responses from 53 pastors.

- *What are the prevailing worldviews or religious convictions of the people in your city or area of ministry? Christian, nominal Christian, postmodern, atheist/agnostic, humanist, pantheist, animist, Muslim.* (Respondents could indicate up to five worldviews. They used 1 to indicate the most prevalent, 2 for the second-most prevalent, and so on.)

What are the prevailing worldviews or religious convictions of the people in your city or area of ministry? You may indicate several. Use 1 for the most prevalent, 2 for the second most prevalent etc.



- *Would you regard the dominant culture of the people of your area as: Guilt–Innocence, Shame–Honour, Fear–Power, A combination – therefore difficult to say, I am not sure.*

22 A combination – therefore difficult to say.

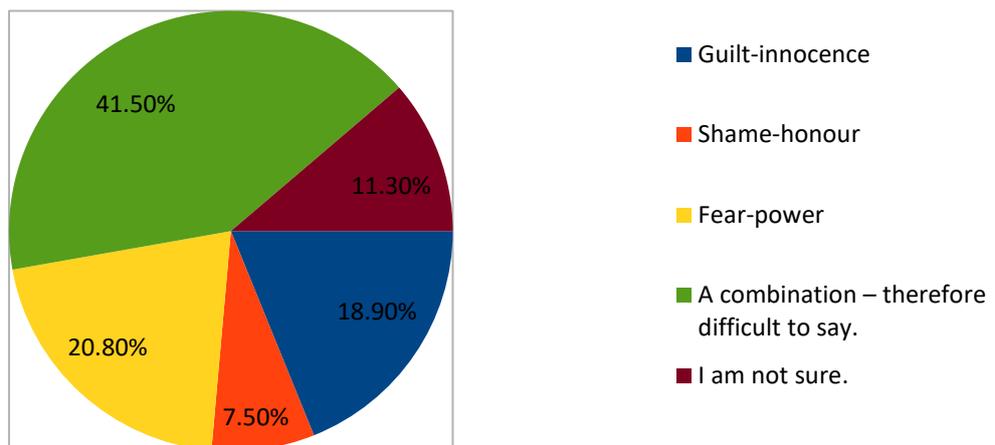
11 Fear–power

10 Guilt–innocence

4 Shame–honour

6 I am not sure

Would you regard the dominant culture of the people of your area of ministry as:



“Nominal Christian” is perceived to be by far the most prevalent worldview. This concurs with a previous study (Koning, 2016:52) that showed very similar findings. In this paper (Koning,

2016:50), it was argued that the South African urban context could be described as “nominal Christian – postmodern.” This researcher contends that even the designation “nominal Christian” differs from context to context. It will show very differently in a Xhosa context compared to an Afrikaans context, which in turn is quite different to a more progressive English context. The fundamental problem is syncretism, which manifests differently in different contexts. Attention should be given to understanding and engaging with nominal Christianity, or what some call “cultural Christianity”. Pastors, missionaries and church planters would need to be acutely aware of this. Christian pastors would also have to understand and critique postmodernism and secular agnosticism and humanism.

There is an anomaly in the findings evidenced in the graph above. More pastors (20,8%) perceived their context to be dominantly Fear–Power than Shame–Honour (7,5%). This is contrary to the literature on the subject,⁶³ which points out that, though there is some overlap between these categories, a collectivistic Shame–Honour worldview dominates in typical African culture. The Fear–Power worldview dominates in regions that are animistic. This researcher finds this anomaly curious, and his tentative explanation is that the respondents are mistaken in their understanding of the Fear–Power worldview.

The research indicates that there is no one obviously dominant culture in South Africa. Therefore, gospel workers should be conversant with the salient features of all of them and know how to present the grand story of redemption to each group in a relevant and compelling way. Pastors should understand the thinking patterns and idols of the nominal Christian; the dreams, hopes and sins of the affluent postmodern urbanite; and the fears and worldviews of the shack dweller.

This writer is in agreement with Light (2012:219) when he affirms that “we are better equipped for the modern world if we can operate comfortably in different cultures and in a multicultural context.”⁶⁴ He proceeds to say that there are very few contexts in South Africa (including rural contexts) that are strictly monocultural. Gospel faithfulness will require the church planter or pastor to understand a number of cultures and subcultures. For example, this researcher pastors a young church plant in the city of East London (total population about 475 000 people). The church has members and adherents who are Xhosa (by far the most populous group in the Eastern Cape), English-speaking whites, Afrikaans-speaking whites, Zulus, and black Africans from Zimbabwe

63 See the section on “Getting to grips with the shame-honour culture” (5.2.4.2 below) and the contributions of Georges, Wu and Stetzer.

64 Light is using the word “modern” to mean contemporary – he is not using it in the philosophical sense.

and Uganda. The language of preaching and teaching is English, though the church is gradually making progress in multilingual praise and worship. This kind of demographic seems fairly typical of ministry in South African urban centres.

Given the immense diversity of the South African religious scene, the urban pastor or church planter should be versatile and have a number of competencies. There are uniquely South African features – such as our painful and troubled political past, the background of African Traditional Religions (ATRs), the preponderance of AICs and the prevalence of the honour–shame culture in Africa. Then there is the reality of the Western postmodern, post-Christian secular climate and everything associated with it. A dual focus is required: the uniquely South African religious features and the more generic global religious features that have impacted great parts of the world both need to be understood.

This means that the South African pastor needs to be aware of three great realities:

- The generic, largely postmodern culture of the western world – which, because of globalization, is impacting the church in South Africa.
- The specifics of African traditions and culture in South Africa.
- The fact that these two realities are not sealed off from each other, but there is a mingling and merging of these realities.

5.2.4 Understanding the African features of the South African context

This discussion is by no means comprehensive, but serves as an introductory primer to highlight the critical issues.

5.2.4.1 African Traditional Religions

Vernon Light's book *Transforming the Church in Africa: A new contextually-relevant discipleship model* (2012) is pertinent and instructive. Light's immediate context is his long-term experience of theological (Reformed and evangelical) training in the city of Port Elizabeth among predominantly Xhosa people. It is very noteworthy that Light cites failure in contextualization as a critical problem in the church in South Africa. He demonstrates how under-contextualizing the gospel (by Western missionaries) and over-contextualizing the gospel (by many AIC leaders) have both led to an unhelpful syncretism. Light (2012:10) states that, from an evangelical perspective, the syncretism that results from a fusion of Christianity and African traditional beliefs is a sign either of spiritual immaturity or of no genuine conversion experience at all. He goes on to say that

the problem is particularly relevant, as the church in Africa goes back centuries, is numerically massive, and is growing fast and yet has failed to impact the continent significantly.

He continues to assert that in Africa, discipleship has been largely Eurocentric, theoretical in approach, and without adequate inculturation of the Christian life in African culture. He laments (2012:11), “The widespread weak, ineffective state of the Church in Africa indicates that this discipleship model is inadequate.” His thesis is that biblical Christianity, “relevantly taught and culturally applied, affirms African identity and effectively meets the needs of Africans in a traditional context” (2012:11–12).

Light (2012:128) affirms: “Africa’s traditions are alive and well. This is the reality evangelical Christians must face in the African continent. It cannot be denied or ignored.” Light attempts to show that Christianity is largely the continuation, fulfilment, enrichment and reinterpretation of African traditional religions – and therefore should strengthen rather than undermine African identity.

His chapter on ATRs (2012:82–128) is very instructive. Light argues that African culture and religion are interwoven. African culture is largely determined and dominated by ATR, which in turn is built on the underlying African worldview. “Certainly white evangelicals working in Africa need to be fully cognizant of ATR in order to be effective in ministry, especially in discipleship of converts...” (2012:83). Light lists (and discusses) the following as the core beliefs of ATR:

- belief in a Supreme Being, divinities, spirits and ancestors
- the interrelatedness of the physical and metaphysical/spiritual worlds
- life force and death
- diviners, doctors, mediums, witches, sorcerers, prophets, priests and kings
- “Ubuntu” – community is central.

Mbiti (1969:103) describes the core of the ATR worldview as “belief in God, existence of spirits, continuation of human life after death, magic and witchcraft.” He proceeds to declare that “historically Christianity is very much an African religion, but also that as a Christian faith, it is capable of being apprehended in African terms without undue difficulty.” This researcher finds this statement problematic. Mbiti overemphasizes continuity between biblical revelation and ATR, and he ignores sovereign grace. Apart from God’s prevenient grace and the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit, the gospel will remain foreign.

In his 2006 work *When African and Western Cultures Meet*, Van der Walt compares the unique features of a typical African culture with typical Western culture and makes these seven points:

- God: Africans believe that the creator god is very distant and not interested in them.
- Worldview: For the African, the physical world is determined by the spiritual world. All visible events have spiritual causes.
- Society: Africans are highly communalistic, as opposed to Western individualism.
- Time: Whereas Westerners think chronologically (in terms of clock time), Africans have an event-oriented vision of time.
- Ways of thinking: Africans think more holistically and synthetically, whereas Westerners are more analytically oriented.
- Communication: Africans choose a more indirect way of communicating and experience the direct way of communication of the West as rude.
- The idea of limited good: “Good” does not refer to material possessions, but to power, prestige, influence, health and good fortune. Van Rooy (1999:237) cites two consequences. Witchcraft is stimulated and confirmed by this concept. When a person prospers, he is almost automatically suspected of drawing away the life-force of someone else. This concept also explains the strong feeling of obligation to reciprocity, repaying benefits with other benefits, as is practised in customs of bride-price or in loans and gifts.

Light (2012:107–119) pays particular attention to African beliefs about ancestors because he contends that their role determines or influences “almost every other belief and custom in ATR” (2012:82). He affirms: “... the ancestral cult, directly or indirectly, influences the African’s inner psychology and also personal, communal, social, political, economic and religious behaviour.” He contends that evangelical leaders in Africa will need to better appreciate the role of ancestors in ATR and the challenge this presents. “My experience has found that teaching Christ as superior to, and the fulfilment and perfection of, African ancestors and animal sacrifices offered to them, is a most effective way to handle the questions of ancestors in relation to Christianity” (Light, 2012:404).

In his 1997 book *The Gods of Africa or the Gods of the Bible?*, Nyirongo argues that African religious belief cannot be a foundation or stepping stone for the presentation of the gospel. For Nyirongo (1997:1–15), this would be tantamount to denying the essence of the Christian faith. In his comparison between biblical Christianity and ATR (1997:25–201), Nyirongo continually emphasizes the marked discontinuity between the two. Whereas Mbiti overemphasizes continuity

and acceptance, this researcher believes that Nyirongo overemphasizes the discontinuity and confrontation. It is essential that the good news of Jesus Christ be seen as something entirely unique and new – not merely “the cherry on the top” – for anything less would amount to a terrible mangling of the biblical revelation. Yet the NT does record some measure of continuity between the recipient culture and the grand story of Jesus Christ. A comparison with the Apostle Paul’s gospel preaching to two pagan audiences is instructive. In Acts 14:8–20, Paul speaks to the local Lycaonian people, who were simple polytheistic country folk, according to Schnabel (2012:605). After a misunderstanding caused by a healing miracle, Paul begins challenging the locals *by appealing to truth within their own worldview* (Acts 14:15). From the framework of general revelation, he respectfully responds to their misunderstanding by appealing to a shared humanity. His presentation is thoroughly God centred, and there is a very clear call to these Gentiles to leave their idols and be converted to the one true God. In Acts 17:17–31, Paul presents the good news to a highly sophisticated pagan audience. Again he begins *within the framework of his listeners’ worldview*. He does not merely belittle their religious system, but recognizes that there was something genuine in their religious aspirations. But there is a definite limit to this common ground. The Athenians are not “anonymous Christians”. Paul presents a whole new worldview – he speaks of a personal Creator God who is transcendent and distinct, both Lord and judge. Paul then points his hearers to Christ, whom God raised from the dead, as Judge of the world, and calls the Athenians to repent of their idolatry.

In their article “Christianisation of ancestor veneration within African traditional religions: An evaluation”, Afeke and Verster (2004:47–61) conclude that sound biblical exegesis does not permit ancestor veneration or worship. They do state that respect for ancestors should be accepted. They argue that the important role ancestors play in the lives of Africans must be acknowledged and treated sensitively. Outright condemnation simply drives it underground, they argue (2004:59). They call for a theology to be put in place that presents Jesus Christ as utterly unique and that affirms his lordship, authority and sufficiency over all. Parallel with this, they call for clarity to “inform Africans that the practice of venerating ancestors as if they have influence on people on earth and are acting as mediators is against God’s commandment” (2004:59). This is an example of Keller’s (2012a:124–129) second stage of active contextualization: “Challenging and Confronting the Culture”. Confrontation is essential in faithfully contextualizing the gospel to those involved in traditional African ancestor worship. However, this confrontation cannot be in the form of simply condemning ancestor veneration as an outsider. It must be clear and firm but must come from an “insider” – someone who loves and understands the people, and who understands the issues at a deep level.

Light (2012:207–311) does a careful study of key Christian doctrines with parallel ATR beliefs and shows how there is both continuity (similarities) and discontinuity (contradiction) between ATRs and biblical revelation. He warns that, though there is substantial continuity in places, the discontinuity is also marked, and therefore warns against unconditionally accepting everything in ATR as preparatory for Christianity, as an *evangelico preparatio*. In this chapter we see Light wrestling with what Kraemar, Bavinck, Strange, Keller, Mbiti and Niyorongo also wrestled with – issues of continuity and discontinuity – getting from a partial, distorted revelation to the full complete revelation of Jesus Christ and his redemption. Light (2012:391) affirms: “General revelation and the Fall imply that ATR has both truth and error.” Sounding very Kellersesque, Light (2012:279) affirms, “Knowing the similarities well is important as they are means to establishing a non-threatening communicative base and entry into discussion of the differences.”

Light (2012:307) stresses that biblical Christianity can only flourish within the culture of the convert. For the gospel to be authentic and take root, it must meet the integrated needs of a particular people in a particular culture. “The missionaries and subsequent Western Christian leaders in Africa failed to take ATR seriously. They therefore did not thoroughly study the challenges it presents to evangelism and discipleship, especially in the spirit realm. Christianity was as a result thought by the converts to be helpless in dealing with the fears generated in ATR” (2012:307). Light insists that the only way to avoid syncretism is to ensure that the convert experiences the gospel as adequate for every dimension of life. “In Africa a whole Gospel for the whole person and his/her whole world needs to be preached and applied” (2012:284).

5.2.4.2 Getting to grips with the honour–shame culture

In understanding traditional African culture, the Christian pastor would also have to strive to understand the fundamentals of an honour–shame culture. In his book *The 3D Gospel: Ministry in Guilt, Shame, and Fear Cultures* (2016), Jayson Georges argues that there are fundamentally three types of culture:

- Guilt–innocence cultures (mostly Western): people who break the laws are guilty and seek justice or forgiveness to rectify the wrong.
- Shame–honour cultures (common in the East and large sections of Africa) are collectivistic, where people who are shamed for not fulfilling group expectations seek to restore their honour before the community.
- Fear–power cultures refer to animistic contexts (often tribal) where people afraid of evil and harm pursue power over the spirit world through magical rituals.

Georges (2016:11–12) shows how the letter to the Ephesians addresses all three types of culture. He cautions that, though there are three distinct cultural outlooks, no culture can be completely characterized by only one. These three cultural types overlap in all societies. He argues that each cultural worldview is a unique blend of guilt, shame and fear. Like all paradigms, the guilt–shame–fear trichotomy “simplifies complexities into categories for the sake of clarity” (2016:16). The gospel communicator in South Africa will have to be aware of and understand the three types, because they are all represented in this country. However, in traditional African culture, the honour–shame type is particularly strong. Georges (2016:20–24) makes the following points about this cultural type:

- Honour and shame function “like a social credit rating measuring one’s reputation” (2016:21).
- Honour comes from relationships – it is the person’s social worth in the eyes of the community. Honour is when people think well of you, resulting in harmonious social bonds in the community.
- Shame is a negative public rating – the community thinks badly of you, and you are disconnected from the group.
- Because honour and shame are inherently relational, such cultures are collectivistic. Members of shame–honour cultures are expected to maintain the social status of the group, often at the expense of personal desires.
- The social matrix of honour–shame cultures is designed around establishing and expanding a network of relationships. Whom you know and who knows you are very important. Saving face and keeping peace are vital.
- It is important to maintain a balance in obligations and to reciprocate lest one incur a “social debt” before peers.
- Family dynamics and leadership structures are usually more authoritarian.
- Every person has a proper role within the group, and people maintain honour by behaving according to that function.
- The group enforces morality externally. When faced with a choice, people will ask: “What is honourable?” or “What about my family’s reputation?”
- Shame–honour groups do believe in moral right and wrong but define morality not legally or abstractly, but relationally. What is best for the group is the right course.
- Identity is based more upon who you are than what you do.

Stetzer (2015:1–3) points out that honour–shame cultures are not monolithic and identifies five types of honour–shame cultures. He states that African honour–shame culture affords a high value to ancestry and has a very strong community orientation. Nyirongo (1997:102) agrees with Mbiti (1969:108) in asserting that the individual is not a person until he or she has been accepted by the community. Significantly, properly honouring the dead is a critical part of this cultural type, according to Stetzer (2015:2).

Georges (2016:37–41) proceeds to outline the shame–honour narrative of salvation: he convincingly unpacks the entire biblical storyline under the theme of shame and honour. He (2016:41–42) also helpfully cites key verses and biblical passages that fall under the shame–honour category and then (2016:59) lists all the community language found in the Bible. South African pastors who are inclined to explain the gospel solely in terms of the guilt–innocence paradigm (because that is how the gospel made sense to them and how they received it) should also seek to understand and present the gospel according to the shame–honour paradigm.

Missiologist Jackson Wu (2015:1–3) gives four keys to evangelism in honour–shame cultures:

- People: Focus more on who people are, not simply on what they do. Talk about their fundamental relationships. Discern their functional saviours.
- Praise: Find out whom it is the people most want to please and whose criticism they want to avoid the most.
- Power: To whom do the people give their allegiance? For whom do they generally conform? Since Jesus is king, the gospel challenges all other claims to power; yet the cross redefines power and honour.
- Practical: Show that the gospel makes a practical difference. This will mean being open about the cost of following Jesus, the joy of gaining a worldwide family, and the power to obey Christ.

In a 2017 article, “The Good News for Honor-Shame Cultures”, Georges (2017:3–5) makes the following suggestions for incorporating honour and shame into contemporary Christian mission:

- Evangelism: The gospel announces that all people stand ashamed before God, but Jesus Christ offers an honourable status via adoption into God’s family. People should abandon their pursuit of worldly honour and get their ‘face’ from God.

- Discipleship: Following the Lord Jesus means adopting God’s honour code for all areas of life. God’s imputed honour empowers Christians to resist cultural disgrace and live to the glory of God, even in the context of persecution.
- Peacemaking: Restoring honour is a prerequisite for reconciliation. Western approaches of justice can sometimes exacerbate shame by making an example of the perpetrator. The practice of restorative justice emphasizes reintegration back into community and so could be a more effective approach.
- Development and aid: Free handouts intensify humiliation. Asset-based community development (ABCD) affirms people’s honour by starting with their own assets.
- Partnerships: Westerners approach ministry partnerships in a businesslike manner, which is offensive in honour–shame cultures. Financial relationships must account for the dynamics of patronage.
- Church planting: Most people come to faith in Christ through a believing friend or the Christian community. Relationships (more than facts) guide life decisions. Following Jesus means transferring one’s allegiance and relational obligations to God’s community.

5.2.4.3 Africa Instituted (or Independent) Churches (AICs)

Zwane (2017:2–3) defines AICs as “churches formed and led by Africans, outside of the conventional denominations, and existing quite independently of any other religious structures.” Roy (2017:146) opines: “Any broad generalization or evaluation of these groups is really impossible, and there is not even a uniform self-evaluation emerging from within the movement.” Mandryk (2010:760) also points out the risk of overgeneralization when it comes to this huge group of churches. He affirms that they range “from evangelical/Pentecostal to highly syncretistic to barely Christian” and in the majority of cases are pastored by people with little or no formal theological training.

Roy (2017:102–108) shows how the “trickle of African independent churches quickly swelled to a torrent.” In 1904 there were only three independent groups with about 25 000 adherents. By 1925 the number was 130 separatist churches, which multiplied to 1 300 groups in 1946 with more than a million adherents. In 1982 about 3 000 groups had a combined membership of 3 million, and by 1997 the numbers had grown to over 10 million adherents in an estimated 6 000 churches.

Zwane (2017:6–9) posits a threefold typology of AICs:

- The “Ethiopian” churches,⁶⁵ which originated largely as a reaction against white-dominated churches in the nineteenth century. This group is nonprophetic and claims no special manifestations of the Spirit.
- The Messianic movement of AICs are often led by charismatic leaders who claim the gifts of healing and prophecy and hold to a hereditary leadership tradition. The leader is sometimes elevated to a messianic status. The Zion Christian Church (ZCC), the biggest single church in South Africa, is one such church. According to the 2001 census, this church had a membership of 4,97 million. The annual pilgrimage of ZCC members and adherents to Morija over every Easter has become a major event on the South African calendar, states Roy (2017:219).
- The Spirit-type movement of AICs. This group has its roots in American Pentecostalism. Their primary focus is experiential, rather than on preaching the Bible. This group has received public criticism for discouraging the use of Western medicines and for promoting indigenous medicines. Zwane (2017:22) contends that in both the Messianic and Spirit-type movements of AICs there is an emphasis on casting out demons, healing the sick, evil spirits, and bad luck that results in poverty.

Zwane (2017:4) also argues that AICs “contributed immensely” to the political emancipation of South Africa from white minority rule to a democratic dispensation.

Roy (2017:103–104) cites the following reasons for the prolific growth of the AICs and the fragmentation of the church in South Africa:

- The large number of European immigrants and the subsequent loss of land, power and status by African people led to a deep underlying resentment.
- The close association of all things Christian with the white colonial community led to considerable tension in the African soul, which was torn between a positive interest in the gospel and a negative reaction to the bearers of the gospel.

65 Psalm 68:31, “Ethiopia hastens to stretch out her hands to God”, featured prominently in the establishment of these churches during the colonial period.

- Paternalism and a lack of appreciation of African culture were prevalent among missionaries, leading to frustration and disenchantment among many black members of missionary-instituted churches.
- Excessive caution hindered the training, development and ordination of indigenous leaders.
- Many Africans desired a church that would fully reflect African culture and be governed by Africans.
- The fact that many different European missionary societies and groups arrived in South Africa and did not always enjoy harmonious working relationships provided African people with a poor model to follow.
- In African society there was a precedent of aspiring leaders breaking away from established chiefs to form a new tribe. This pattern transferred easily to the realm of the church.

This writer finds it very significant how many of these points relate to failure in responsible, biblical contextualization. This gives all the more reason for South African pastors to think seriously about biblical contextualization and to have a reputable model to follow.

Roy (2017:117) argues that the Zionist-type churches have grown mainly among the poor, dispossessed and marginalized. Moreover, because they have often been regarded as sectarian and heretical in their beliefs, the story of their churches has not been afforded the serious attention given to longer-established churches.

The above is merely a cursory introduction to ATR, AICs and the concept of honour–shame in the South African context. The point is that the faithful gospel minister in urban South Africa needs to go to great lengths to understand these realities. Keller’s first step in biblical contextualization, “Entering and Adapting to the Culture” (2012a:120–124), can be of immense practical help here.

5.3 South African Reformed evangelicals and their practice of contextualization

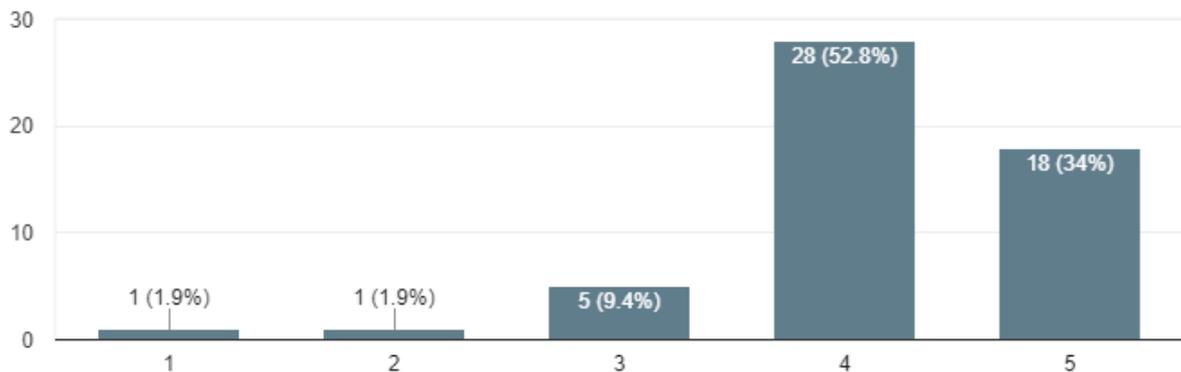
Koning and Buys (2018:134–135) conducted research among 53 pastors from four Reformed evangelical groups. The aim was to ascertain current Reformed practices of contextualization in South Africa. The survey questions follow in italics.

- *On a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being unimportant, 5 being vital), how important is biblical contextualization in your ministry right now?*

Twenty-eight respondents (52,8%) indicated a 4; 18 responded with a 5 (34.0%); the remaining seven pastors (13,2%) were 3 or less.

On a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being unimportant, 5 being vital) how important is biblical contextualization in your ministry right now?

53 responses



- *Have you conducted neighbourhood research in your city, town or suburb to try ascertain the spiritual and social demographics? What form did this research take?*

Ten respondents (18,9%) responded with a forthright “no”. A large group of pastors indicated that though they had not done formal research, they knew their neighbourhoods through informal and anecdotal research. This comes from “living in the context where I minister”, “keeping my eyes and ears open”, “through interactions with our gospel communities”, “through reading the newspaper”, “through frequent in-depth discussions with millennials” and “through listening and observing”. One pastor said: “I am in the process of talking to other men... they are helping me in knowing what is happening spiritually with Mamelodi.”

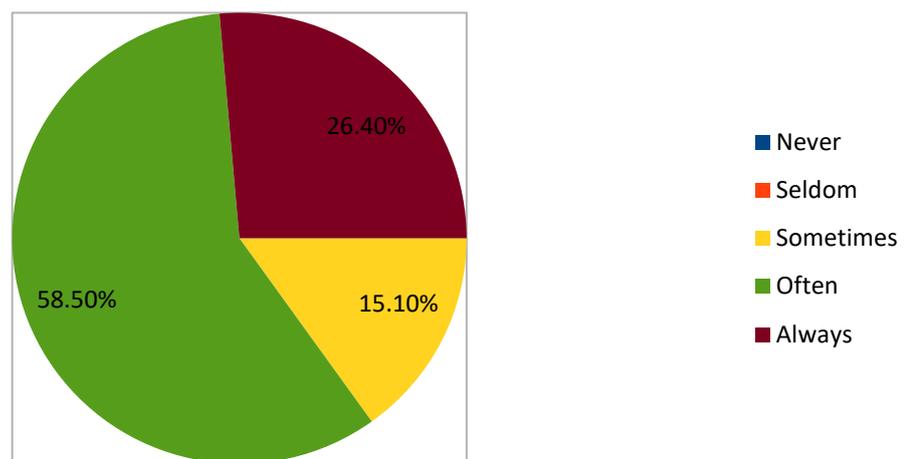
Seven (13,2%) respondents gave clear indications of having done more formal neighbourhood research. An Acts 29 church planter wrote: “... before launching our plant we met up with the Tshwane town planners. At seminary, I intentionally did theological papers about the Afrikaner history, theology and how it plays out in Pretoria post 1994.” Another pastor said that he had “looked at census stats and town planning info.” Two pastors had done door-to-door surveys.

Another wrote: “I’ve done basic demographic research to determine how many people live in my area, their gender, their religious views, their income bracket, etc.”

There appears to be a lethargy in doing robust, empirical research in understanding context. This is indicated by the high number of “no” answers and the low number of pastors who indicated that they had done formal research to understand the complexion of their neighbourhood. Informal and anecdotal research certainly has value. Yet the danger of misunderstanding the context is a reality – it cannot be taken for granted. It is cause for concern that six pastors did not appear to know the dominant worldviews of the people of their area.

- *Would you say that you intentionally give attention to the situation and predominant thought patterns of your listeners in preparing and preaching the Bible? Never, Seldom, Sometimes, Often, Always*

Of the pastors surveyed, 58,5% indicated “Often”, 26,4% “Always”, and 15,1% “Sometimes”.



- *Is there any difference in your pastoral counselling of people from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds in your ministry? Please describe briefly. (The idea here was to ascertain whether there was a commitment to comprehensive contextualization on the part of South African Reformed evangelical pastors. This was assessed by evaluating the respondents’ praxis of leadership training and pastoral counselling.)*

Of the respondents, 26 (49%) indicated that they pursued a clearly contextualized approach, 17 pastors (32%) were more tentative, and 10 (19%) indicated no difference in approach – but it must

be noted that 7 of those pastors perceived themselves to be ministering in completely homogeneous contexts.

Those who indicated that they clearly contextualized their counselling approach stated things like: “We are training our counsellors continually on cultural understanding and sensitivity. Family units, marriages and approaches to repentance are quite different in the different cultural groups reflected in our community.” Another pastor noted the differences between a fundamentally Western individualistic, therapeutic culture and African culture, which is far more community oriented and spiritual. A pastor spoke of being aware of a different view of respecting the elderly. Another pastor spoke of the challenge of being aware of “cultural Christians” when counselling Afrikaans-speaking people.

Typical of the “tentative approach” was “I try, but must admit I sometimes find it difficult to relate to a culture far removed from my own.” Another pastor said: “I try but I find contextualization in this area the most difficult.”

- *Is there any difference in your approach to leadership development of people from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds? Please describe briefly.*

Of the respondents, 21 (40%) indicated that they pursued a clearly contextualized approach to leadership training, 15 (28%) indicated a more tentative approach, and 17 (32%) indicated no difference in approach to different cultural groups. Of those who indicated a clearly contextualized approach: “Western Christians think church leadership is a climb up the ‘corporate ladder’. Others consider it an honour/shame responsibility.” Another said: “... the education and literacy levels have to make a difference in the way you train and even recruit people for ministry.” And yet another: “The white middle class have a systematic understanding of theology but lack a biblical theology. Conversely, black middle class have a biblical theology but lack a systematic understanding of theology.” A Cape Town pastor said: “In the postmodern, intellectual, middle-class City Bowl context I would be more willing to guide development through trial and error. On the Cape Flats, with a history of strong authoritarian rule, I tend to give clearer direction.”

Typical of the “tentative” response was this pastor’s remark: “When I engage with people from other surrounding cultures I consult with my colleagues.” Another said, “Not enough, but I need to do this.”

Of those that indicated no difference in approach, 7 (13%) indicated that the question was not applicable as they were ministering in a fundamentally homogeneous context. A pastor said: “I

use the same approach for everyone because I teach my leaders as a team.” A Baptist pastor said: “We teach a Christlike way of leading.” A GKSA pastor said: “I try to establish one Biblical pattern.” One pastor wrote: “I have not really thought about this topic.”

There seems to be a recognized need to contextualize both pastoral counselling and leadership training. However, there is an acknowledged gap between knowing and doing. It is significant that the respondents were more consciously committed to contextualizing the verbal proclamation of the Bible than to counselling and leadership training. Pastors who were deliberate and enthusiastic about contextualization in preaching seemed more reticent about contextualization in these other two important areas of ministry. This indicates a tendency for Reformed evangelicals to limit contextualization primarily to preaching and teaching.

Overall, it appears that South African Reformed pastors are not giving contextualization the same prominence as the NT (and Keller) does.

5.4 Concluding observations

These bullet points express some of the key findings of this chapter and their implications for Reformed evangelical churches and ministry in urban South Africa.

- South Africa is swiftly urbanizing, predominantly black African and youthful, and has huge numbers of people living in informal townships. Reformed evangelicals need to take note of these key realities.
- While the church scene in South Africa shows staggering (and even alarming) diversity, the Reformed evangelical constituency appears to be very small. There appear to be ageing congregations, spiritual stagnation, an insular mindset and dwindling numbers. Furthermore, Reformed evangelicals appear to be battling to reach new generations of urbanites effectively with the life-changing gospel of Jesus Christ. How the church needs times of renewal, refreshing and revival from the living God!
- South African urban culture is not homogeneous. Though there is a homogenizing tendency, it would be dangerous and very misleading to talk of a generic urban culture. A Reformed evangelical church in Sandton looks different and encounters different challenges to a Reformed evangelical Church in Khayelitsha, which in turn would be substantially different to an Afrikaans Reformed evangelical church in Pretoria. The

differences are not only in language, style and liturgy, but in the undergirding worldview of the people in the neighbourhood.

- Furthermore, it would be misleading to consider a local church in one urban centre as being completely monocultural. Due to the effects of globalization and immigration, this is rarely the case in South Africa. Though one could anticipate the townships being monocultural, this is not the case due to both local and international migration. This requires a certain versatility on the part of the church planter or pastor.
- Both African Traditional Religions and AICs have impacted and continue to impact millions of South Africans. Pastors and church planters need to be aware of the central tenets, dangers and opportunities that they pose. Due to globalization, South African church life has been deeply affected by global trends and developments. The shift from modernism to postmodernism and secularism needs to be appreciated, along with the dangers and opportunities that these poses.
- The history and impact of the Reformed church in South Africa could be observed in the category of contextualization “the good, the bad and the ugly”. Though this would be an oversimplification of the issues, contextualization (both under- and over-contextualization) has certainly impacted the church and continues to impact the church. Having a credible model of contextualization to follow becomes all the more urgent.
- There seems to be a tendency among some Reformed pastors to assume that they know and understand the culture and worldviews of the people in their neighbourhoods. This could be a very dangerous assumption. With increasing secularism, local migration and postmodernism, this is probably not the case at all. As with the men of Issachar (1 Chron 12:32), there is an urgent need for faithful pastors to understand the times and strategize accordingly. Reformed pastors would also do well to appreciate that knowing and loving the people calls for an ongoing commitment.
- South African evangelical churches need pastor-theologians who think deeply and engage deeply (not mere pragmatists who follow the latest fad), who love the gospel, who are cognisant of their own cultural baggage, who hold unashamedly to the authority of Scripture, who think and plan missiologically, who live sacrificially, who will contend for the faith and faithfully contextualize the gospel.

- While strongly advocating the use of Keller’s model of contextualization, it is very important that Keller’s model and methodology is not used in isolation from his underlying theology of contextualization. Keller’s robust theology of contextualization will prevent any subsequent methodology or practice from being purely pragmatic. Dan Strange (2017) lamented the fact that it seems that some pastors keen on reaching their neighbourhoods are utilizing certain aspects of Keller’s approach, but not from the basis of Keller’s own Reformed theological convictions. This author shares the same concern. The consequences of this could prove to be very harmful.
- It must be appreciated that the church planter or pastor is both the first point of contact, and a crucially important point of contact. His disposition is critical: his humility, grace and love will go a long way to compensating for possible shortcomings in his ministry. This needs to be understood, for there are certain elements in contextualization which may appeal to the flesh. While it may be considered trendy and sophisticated (“hip”) to do cultural exegesis among the postmoderns of Constantia or Sandton, connecting with the impoverished in Bonteheuwel or Langa will almost certainly not be held in the same regard. This requires self-examination: why is this so?
- Given the South African demographic realities and trends, the important matter of theological training should be reconsidered. First, theological training itself should be appropriately contextualized. Second, a robust biblical theology of contextualization needs to be taught (and modelled) in Reformed evangelical training institutions. This needs to be part of the mainline curriculum, not merely part of the “missions” modules; otherwise, it will send the message that contextualization is something that happens “there”, not “here”. It could then be that students are being taught to think and strategize with dangerously incorrect assumptions. Third, the model of training needs to be reconsidered. Conventional seminary training (which removes students from their home churches and cultures, which is full-time and expensive) is not viable for many students, especially those from the townships.
- The long-term impact of apartheid should not be underestimated. This reality has influenced and continues to influence millions at several levels. Meaningful reconciliation (not just toleration) between the races remains a huge challenge. At present, the issue of land expropriation without compensation is making the headlines and causing a furore. This is not a simple matter – but biblical justice issues will have to be considered by faithful

pastors.⁶⁶ These are ongoing, vexing problems, and they will need to be handled with grace.

- Given South Africa's well-documented urban problems, a holistic ministry approach is required. The gospel must be presented and lived in such a way as to demonstrate its immediate relevance to all dimensions of life and to reflect the lordship of Christ. Biblically sound and balanced theologies of work and development are critical in this context. This will generate hope in a context of hopelessness and poverty, as well as speak to the matter of an entitlement mindset and human rights.
- Most churches and denominations tend unwittingly to default to an insular mindset. The dangers of parochialism and spiritual myopia are real. Given the demographics of South Africa, there seems little doubt as to where prayerful strategic planning should lead: to the planting of many new robustly Reformed gospel-centred churches, especially in the townships. Mandryk (2010:760) suggested that South Africa needs 30 000 new churches planted. Though we may question how he arrived at that figure, his basic point is well made.
- Keller's model of active, balanced, comprehensive contextualization, used with care and discretion, can be of significant value as Reformed pastors and church planters endeavour to take the life-giving good news of Jesus Christ into the burgeoning urban centres of South Africa.

66 The Isiphambano Centre for Biblical Justice is doing good work in this area. See their webpage at: <https://www.isiphambano.com/>

CHAPTER 6 SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND POSSIBLE FURTHER RESEARCH

Considerable ground has been covered in the previous five chapters. The purpose of this final chapter is to summarize the main findings and evaluate the degree to which the central theoretical argument has been proven, as well as how adequately the stated goals and objectives have been met.

At this point it would be appropriate to restate the primary research question: To what extent is Dr Timothy Keller's model of deliberate, holistic contextualization relevant for Reformed evangelical churches and church planting in the urban contexts of South Africa? For the sake of clarity, the original goals and objectives, as articulated in chapter 1, will be italicized when quoted in this final chapter. The research project will conclude with the researcher identifying possible further areas of study arising from this investigation.

6.1 Summary and conclusions

Chapter 1 articulated the problem that this research seeks to address. Reformed evangelicals in South Africa appear to be battling to impact new generations with the gospel of Jesus Christ. One possible reason for this could be their faulty and inadequate views and praxis of biblical contextualization. While some pastors over-contextualize, and in so doing threaten the essence of the gospel, others who are suspicious of the concept may under-contextualize or default to a false position of perceived non-contextualization. Is there a reliable, orthodox model of biblical contextualization to follow? Dr Tim Keller's model of intentional, biblical contextualization was proposed as worthy of careful consideration.

The three major themes of the thesis were also introduced in this opening chapter:

- The salient features of urban South Africa and the current state of Reformed evangelical ministry within it.
- The vital importance of biblical contextualization in Christian ministry, as well as a discussion on its complexities and dangers.
- The features of Keller's model of contextualization, how his model compares with others, and its suitability in the urban South African context.

The writer's aim in chapter 2 was to define and delineate what is meant by the term "Reformed evangelical" and to ascertain whether this designation can be applied to Keller. This was done by

considering how important scholars, namely Noll (2014), Bebbington (1989), Murray (2001), Lints (1993), De Witt (1981) and Letham (1988), define the characteristics and describe the parameters of Reformed evangelicalism. A bird's-eye view of Keller's theological commitments and emphases was then presented, which clearly indicated his theological orthodoxy within the Reformed tradition. It was shown that Keller is strongly missional in his understanding of the church, and he is committed to and espouses a holistic, comprehensive approach to gospel ministry, which could be of particular significance in South Africa. Though he is not without his critics, it was demonstrated that the designation "Reformed evangelical" could safely be applied to Keller. Research presented in this chapter also indicated that Keller enjoys considerable profile among Reformed evangelical pastors in South Africa. This chapter adequately defined the stated objective of clarifying and delineating *what is meant by "Reformed" and "evangelical"*.

The main aim of chapter 3 was to introduce, describe and evaluate the key features of Keller's theology of contextualization. Keller's definition of faithful contextualization was stated, and his biblical-theological basis for contextualization was outlined. It was noted that Keller pays special attention to the mixed nature of culture (Rom 1 and 2) in his biblical basis for contextualization. He argues convincingly for a flexible approach toward culture (based on 1 Cor 9:19–23) and a balance between affirming and confronting (based on 1 Cor 1:22–25). Though he makes a compelling case for careful biblical contextualization, it was also noted that his biblical basis for contextualization is limited to Acts (where he highlights Paul's preaching to different audiences), Romans and 1 Corinthians. In his review of the evangelistic appeals of the Bible, Keller concluded that there is little doubt that the biblical authors employ a range of motivations when appealing to their readers to believe and obey the truth. The viewpoints of Keller's critics were also noted in this chapter. Keller's clear commitment to the authority of Scripture was observed, as well as his commitment to responsible hermeneutics and his sober epistemology, which are of particular importance in a postmodern context. Keller's theology also demonstrates a biblically balanced theology of culture, the priority of the gospel, an appreciation of the inevitability of contextualization, and an acknowledgement of the dangers involved. This researcher argued that all these factors constitute the key theological building blocks of a sound theology of contextualization.

Keller's theology of contextualization was then evaluated by comparing his central building blocks of contextualization with those of other conservative theologians and practitioners. It was noted that Keller's views are in substantial agreement with theirs. In terms of his assumptions, convictions and emphases, there appears to be nothing substantially peculiar or innovative

concerning Keller's theoretical understanding of contextualization. The researcher affirms that the goal *to identify and discuss the biblical-theological foundations of valid, orthodox contextualization* has been adequately achieved.

Keller's model of contextualization came under the spotlight in chapter 4. It was noted that his basic approach is to both connect with and confront culture. His three-step process (entering the culture, challenging the culture and appealing to the culture) was unpacked and critiqued in some detail. It was observed that, though the verbs may suggest a fairly straightforward process, in reality contextualization can be complex. Keller's model was then evaluated by employing his *own* criteria for sound contextualization. It was noted that Keller's model is framed within the parameters of biblical revelation, demonstrates the priority of the gospel, shows a great sensitivity to the hearers, and shows appropriate emphasis in both affirming and confronting the recipient group. The one area of criticism was that all Keller's examples and application were related to proclamation. Although he calls strongly for comprehensive contextualization, this burden was absent in this section. The stated goal *to describe and critically evaluate Keller's model of contextualization* was achieved in this chapter.

Having established its biblical and theological credibility, the rest of the chapter was devoted to comparing his model with those of other Reformed pastors and missionaries. It was noted that Keller's model showed substantial overlap with the work of two older Dutch Reformed missionaries, Hendrik Kraemer (from whom he gleaned the term "subversive fulfilment") and J.H. Bavinck. Keller's model was then compared with those of three more contemporary writers: Goheen, Strange and Timmis. We observed that there was a substantial degree of overlap between Keller and these writers, and that there was nothing substantially questionable or innovative in Keller's model. It is therefore quite legitimate to place Keller's model within the Reformed tradition. The small discrepancies or tensions are matters of balance, nuance and degree. All the writers called for a deep level of understanding and engagement with the recipient culture. We noted that the pastor or church planter needs a biblically sound and robust understanding of the critical doctrines of general revelation and universal sin. All the writers pointed out the inevitability of utilizing points of contact (or bridges) to engage the recipient culture. The stated aim from the opening chapter, *Keller's theology of contextualization will be compared and contrasted with those of other Reformed missiologists and pastors (both historical and contemporary), and its purpose, to provide criteria by which Keller's model can be evaluated and critiqued*, have been substantially met.

In chapter 5 we considered the potential utilization and application of Keller's model in urban South Africa. This demanded an appreciation of the urban scene in South Africa, as well as an understanding of the religious complexion of the country, together with an assessment of current Reformed witness in South Africa. It was observed that South Africa's population is predominantly black African, rapidly urbanizing and youthful. Factors such as migration, huge population density in informal settlements, poverty and unemployment are critical. Other vexing problems facing urban South Africans were noted. These problems afford the church huge opportunities for holistic gospel ministry and dovetail neatly with Keller's comprehensive approach. This writer believes that he has met the goal *to demonstrate that this comprehensive approach to contextualization could be ideally suited to ministry in contemporary urban South Africa.*

In assessing the religious complexion of South Africa, we noted a bewildering diversity of denominations and groupings. The Reformed evangelical constituency appears to be small and battling to reach new generations with the good news of Jesus Christ. Apart from the mainline evangelical denominations, the South African religious scene is characterized by AICs, which continue to grow rapidly, and the ongoing underlying influence of ATR. Faithful pastors will need to come to terms with their main teachings and the dangers and opportunities they pose. While South African urban cultures are not identical, evidence strongly suggests that the prevailing worldview is fundamentally nominal and postmodern. This demands a versatility on behalf of the faithful pastor. Research was presented concerning Reformed evangelicals and their practice of contextualization in South Africa. Evidence indicates that Reformed pastors in South Africa do not attach the same significance and importance to contextualization as Keller does. The stated goal from chapter 1 has been adequately achieved in this chapter: *To give an accurate analysis of the South African urban scene and the current state of Reformed evangelical ministry in it. Prevailing worldviews will be identified and discussed, and an analysis of the issues facing the unchurched and nominally churched in urban South Africa will be considered. The aim is to demonstrate what the Reformed pastor, church planter or missionary is facing in urban South Africa.*

The chapter closed with the key findings and their implications being highlighted, as well as suggestions and recommendations for Reformed evangelical churches and their ministry in South Africa. As such, the original goal *to highlight lessons and practical recommendations for Reformed Evangelicals engaged in Gospel ministry and church planting in urban South Africa* has been met.

Having considered Keller's theology and model of contextualization, and having examined the realities of urban South Africa and the state of Reformed evangelical churches within it, this researcher believes that the main research argument has been adequately substantiated. A strong case has been made in support of the central theoretical argument: *Keller's model and theology of comprehensive contextualization could be of substantial benefit to Reformed evangelical ministry in South Africa if utilized wisely.*

6.2 Possible further research and work projects arising from this research

The researcher will propose three possible areas of future study or work and will conclude this thesis by sharing one burden that has been growing during the course of this research project.

6.2.1 Write a user-friendly guide (with a workbook) on doing contextual analysis in urban South Africa

Step one in Keller's methodology of contextualization is connecting with context. We have noted that, whereas Keller attributes maximum importance to this, some Reformed pastors seem more lax, or they assume a knowledge of their people and neighbourhood that may not be accurate. It appears as if many pastors need help in this area. Researching, connecting with, and understanding context need not be terribly complicated.

In connecting with and learning the culture and underlying worldviews of the area, we would follow Keller's (2012a:120–124) strategy. The outline and chapter divisions of such a document would look something like this:

- A brief biblical justification for contextual analysis, including a motivation for pursuing it in urban South Africa. This would include a motivation for urban pastors to think, pray, live and strategize like cross-cultural missionaries.
- The vital importance of the pastor's attitude and disposition. While contextual analysis calls for the pastor to be something of a social scientist, it must be stressed that he is *more* than this. As he connects with people, listens to their stories, conducts interviews and reads literature, he is a herald and ambassador of Jesus Christ. As such, he must listen carefully, pray for the people, grow in his love for the people, seek to serve the people and live a winsome, sacrificial life among them. The practical application of the incarnational principle has to be unpacked.

- The place and value of an informal approach. The importance of spending time in the neighbourhood (conversing on the streets, at the “spaza” shops, in the restaurants, while fetching children from school, or in the gym) needs to be highlighted. As you walk the streets, what do you see, hear and observe? If and when appropriate, brief visits to workplaces can be very revealing and helpful. Seek to build meaningful relationships and not merely to regard people as targets. All social, religious, business, educational, recreational and economic features of the place and its people should be noted. Active listening and the use of appropriate questions are critical. Observe their interior lives, their worldviews, social contexts and religious commitments. All this should be noted down.
- The place and value of a more formal approach. Read literature on the history of the place and its people. Read local newspapers and magazines. Get crime statistics from the local police station. Doing pre-arranged interviews with selected people can be very helpful. Basic questionnaires, used sensitively and with discretion, can be very helpful. Guidance will be given on how to frame a questionnaire. Ethical guidelines will be given for conducting both interviews and utilizing questionnaires. (In a previous ministry context, this writer observed a marked disconnect between the demographics of the church and the demographics of the neighbourhood. This researcher noted a number of pre-schools and crèches in the neighbourhood around the church. He went about doing neighbourhood research by visiting all the pre-schools in a ten-kilometre radius and asking the principals for some information about their scholars. The motivation and purpose of the visit were made clear. The questionnaire included basic questions such as: How many scholars do you have? Where do your scholars live? What home language do they speak? What language are they taught in? How many parents owe school fees? Is there any spiritual nurture given? How could a church help your school or crèche? The principals were very helpful. The results came as a surprise to most of the people in the church.)
- The purpose and benefits of writing a “people profile”. All the information gained from informal and formal research should be used to write a people profile. Who are these people (in terms of their history, age, race, economics, education, language, religious commitments and culture type: guilt, shame or fear)? Is there one dominant type or grouping of people, or are there various groupings and subcultures? What are they? What is the life story of the typical person in this neighbourhood? What do they believe? What are their greatest desires? What are their greatest fears? What are their sins? How do they

spend their money? What are the greatest challenges they face? What are their “A” beliefs? What are their “B” beliefs?

- The purpose and benefits of writing a “gospel” for the people in your ministry context. Given the information that has been gleaned, how would you faithfully and effectively present the good news of Jesus Christ to these people? What “A” beliefs can be endorsed and utilized? How can their “B” beliefs be confronted? How would you connect these people and their stories with Christ’s work of substitutionary atonement at the cross? What might repentance look like for these people? How would you show that their legitimate desires are supremely fulfilled by Christ? Guidelines would be given on how to go about writing a gospel for the people in your urban area.
- Anticipate the implications for the overall ministry and functioning of the church. What would a biblically faithful, appropriately contextualized church look like for this place and these people? Given the types of people in the ministry context (their history, culture, language, worldview, ways of thinking, patterns of expression, idiosyncrasies, previous religious commitments), how should the overall ministry of the church be impacted? How would worship, counselling, discipleship training and mercy ministry look in this context?
- What could integrated, holistic Christian mission look like in your specific context, where Christians are salt and light so that people “may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matt 5:13–16)?
- The importance of living out the incarnational principle in an ongoing way. It should be stressed that contextual analysis is not merely an initial form of ministry orientation; the faithful pastor should continually and intentionally strive to grow in his understanding and love of the people.

6.2.2 Write a book (and perhaps include a workbook) that makes a comprehensive and compelling case for biblical contextualization

This writer has noted at several points that there is a certain amount of resistance (and even opposition) among some Reformed evangelicals to the concept of contextualization. There could be several reasons for this. But as Reformed believers, the remedy is to ask: What does the Bible teach on this matter? Our ultimate authority is the Bible. It is this researcher’s conviction that the biblical-theological basis for contextualization is both very substantial and compelling. There is

no possibility of taking the Bible seriously and being dismissive of contextualization. This substantial and compelling case for contextualization has to be made plain.

A number of Christian writers have made very useful contributions to the question of a biblical basis of contextualization. But this researcher has yet to find an author who makes a theologically compelling and systematic case based on *all of Scripture* (Old and New Testaments). Most writers emphasize the apostolic preaching and praxis in Acts in their biblical basis of contextualization. We noted that Keller's biblical basis for contextualization was gleaned from a couple of NT Epistles and Acts. Though Flemming (2006) has done an excellent job, his work is limited to the NT. This researcher has argued that we should start further back, using Calvin's idea of divine accommodation.

The proposed book would have the following chapter headings and explore the following main themes:

- Definition and history of the term. The initial usage of the term and links with the WCC would be explored. The overlap with terms such as enculturation, indigenization and accommodation would be explained.
- Divine accommodation, Revelation and Scripture. How does God reveal himself? Calvin's views on religion as a universal human phenomenon that must be explained as the effect of an innate *semen religionis* (seed of religion) and a *sensus divinitatis* (sense of divinity) would be investigated. His views on divine accommodation, condescension and the subsequent necessity of contextualization would be investigated and developed.
- Contextualization and the OT. The aim would be to show that the OT is an inspired, contextualized document, both as a whole and in its parts. The link between ANE suzerainty treaties and the covenant structure of the OT would be explored. The clear examples of contextualization in the Law, the Prophets, wisdom literature and historical writings would be identified and discussed.
- Contextualization and the NT. The aim would be to show that the NT is an inspired, clearly contextualized document, both as a whole and in its parts. The four Gospels and the Epistles will be shown to be clearly contextualized documents, and clear examples of contextualization will be identified and discussed.

- Contextualization and the great, pivotal events of the NT. The goal would be to show that the incarnation of Jesus Christ (John 1; Phil 2:5–11), his ministry, the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2), Peter’s ministry to Cornelius (Acts 10) and the Jerusalem council (Acts 15) all bear the marks of contextualization.
- Contextualization and the preaching and ministry of the apostle Paul. This is the only section that is very adequately covered by other writers.
- Conclusions and implications for faithful ministry.

6.2.3 Write a paper that describes and evaluates the current state of Reformed evangelical ministry in South Africa

Roy (2017) has done an excellent job in producing a warmly ecumenical history of the church in South Africa. However, during the course of this research it became clear that recent and reliable demographics of the Reformed evangelical church constituency in South Africa remain largely unknown and unrecorded. One of the challenges and frustrations of this research was working with vague generalities about the numbers and state of the Reformed evangelical constituency in South Africa. Mandryk’s work (2010) is a little dated, and he tends to favour the charismatic and independent church groupings. It is safe to say that the Reformed constituency is a very small part of the evangelical church. Though it appears to be battling, we noted that it is not all bad news: there is a growing appetite for Reformed truth, especially among the younger generation. But it would be helpful to have reliable statistics, along with an analysis and careful critique of the present state of things in Reformed evangelical churches. This would include all Reformed evangelicals of all languages and cultures in urban contexts in South Africa. Though this investigation needs to be done, this writer does not see himself as the one to do it. Allied with this, this writer proposes the possibility of a Reformed forum for cooperation, collaboration and fellowship. The very recent start-up (6 October 2018) of TGC Africa⁶⁷ in Johannesburg is an exciting new initiative which may fulfil this need to some extent.

⁶⁷ See <https://ruc.org.za/event/gospel-coalition-africa-launch/> for details concerning the launch in Johannesburg. Date of access: 29 Aug. 2018.

6.2.4 The vigorous planting of biblically healthy, Reformed churches, especially in the townships

This is not so much a specific research possibility, but more of a burden that has been further fuelled by the findings of this study. During the course of this investigation, the writer became increasingly burdened by the need for vigorous planting of Reformed evangelical churches in South Africa, especially in the townships. This is an urgent necessity, and it will require support and buy-in from established churches. The population demographics and the trends in urban South Africa (the declining white population, the steeply growing black population, and the masses of young people living in the townships) make this an obvious opportunity. This writer agrees with Mbewe (2013): "... this is not the time to quit. The work has only begun. It is a Macedonian call, summoning us to send out missionaries who will plant churches where these young men and women are and disciple them as they marry, raise families, and take up places of responsibility in their communities."

This researcher will use the opportunities, invitations, and connections he has to draw attention to and motivate the planting of biblically healthy, Reformed churches in urban centres in South Africa. He plans (DV) to write a short paper motivating the need for Reformed evangelicals to love the townships, understand the townships, get back into the townships and plant churches in the townships. The immense difficulties and challenges of this task should not be underestimated.

Yet our ultimate confidence is in the indestructible promise of the Lord Jesus Christ: "... I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt 16:18). While not wanting to fall prey to tacky triumphalism, this writer notes that gates are defensive, not offensive, structures. The import of this is that Christ's church will not merely survive the onslaught of the evil one, but rather that Christ's church will invade the kingdom of this world and be victorious. Jesus Christ reigns over all!

"Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen." (Eph 3:20–21)

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