

Evangelical Review of Theology

GENERAL EDITOR: THOMAS SCHIRRMACHER

Volume 37 · Number 3 · July 2013

Articles and book reviews reflecting global evangelical
theology for the purpose of discerning the obedience of faith

Published by



for
WORLD EVANGELICAL
ALLIANCE
Theological Commission

Contextualization, the Bible, and Games: What I Learned about Theology from The Settlers of Catan

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KEYWORDS: *Narrative, mission, contextualization, hermeneutics, mission strategy, biblical authority, rules, strategy*

I Introduction

Having spent much of my adult life in Germany, my family became well acquainted with the popular board game *The Settlers of Catan* (original German *Die Siedler von Catan*). First released in 1995, the game quickly became a raging success and has since been translated into some 30 languages, and by 2009 had sold 15 million copies worldwide.¹

One of the secrets to *Settlers*' success is that the game board is not a

fixed board, as with chess or Monopoly, but is composed of numerous hexagonal pieces that are arranged randomly each time the game is played. This means that each time one plays, the board configuration must be carefully studied so as to determine a new winning strategy. The goal, rules and general principles for winning remain the same, but the specific strategy must be adapted to the given layout of the playing field in order to win.

The parallel struck me that the task of biblical contextualization might be compared to playing *The Settlers of Catan*. Though the goal and basic means of Christian mission remain the same everywhere, Christian mission is 'played out' on different cultural playing fields which demand fresh contextual strategies to attain the goal while abiding by the rules. Furthermore, the analogy can be applied to the hermeneutical task of interpreting the contextual 'playing strategies' revealed in biblical texts and learning from them

1 Andrew Curry, 'Monopoly Killer: Perfect German Board Game Redefines Genre', *Wired Magazine* 17.04 http://www.wired.com/gaming/gamingreviews/magazine/17-04/mf_settlers accessed on September 11, 2012.

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to discern strategies for contemporary contexts.

The great challenge of the Christian life in general, and of contextualization in particular, is discerning just how we can apply biblical teachings in contemporary settings that are so different from the world of the Bible. To use the game metaphor: how do we discern the universal 'rules' as taught in scripture, and what strategies most appropriately apply those rules in the quest to reach the goal to which Christ calls us? Popular approaches to biblical hermeneutics among western evangelicals often attempt to extract from the specifics of the biblical context universal, culturally neutral, abstract principles, which are then applied in a new context.²

This approach, however, faces numerous difficulties. The impression can easily be given that really important truths are the naked timeless abstractions (principles), to which the cultural or situational elements of the biblical narrative or discourse are merely incidental. Furthermore, in the words of Krikor Halebian, 'To separate the content of the gospel from its cultural forms is similar to peeling an onion in order to find its core. What is urgently needed is a method that can sidestep kernel-versus-husk type questions.'³

2 For example Grant R. Osborne seeks to determine the 'supracultural' (*The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 2nd edition, Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006, 422) and William J. Webb speaks of 'cultural components' versus 'transcultural components' of biblical texts (*Slaves, Women and Homosexuals*, Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001).

3 Krikor Halebian, 'The Problem of Contextualization', *Missiology* 11 no 1 (Jan 1983):95-111, 102. See also D. A. Carson, 'A Sketch of the Factors Determining Current Hermeneuti-

As Paul Hiebert has pointed out, the relationship between form and meaning is a complex one, where form is often integrally bound with meaning.⁴

Attempting to extract a theological kernel from the narrative which is then discarded as so much chaff is unjustified according to Michael Goldberg on two counts,

First, it wrongly regards narrative as a kind of intellectual crutch needed by the less perceptive. Second and perhaps more serious, it tends to view all narratives as fables, i.e. as stories with detachable meanings. But there *are* narratives whose meaning cannot be stated apart from the story, whose meaning *is* the story.⁵

The challenge is in understanding the implications of those meanings without, in the words of John Howard Yoder, leaving the story behind.⁶

Many interpreters, especially in the majority world, are uncomfortable with extractionist hermeneutics.⁷ The proposal here explores an alternative model of biblical interpretation and

cal Debate in Cross-Cultural Contexts' in *Biblical Interpretation and the Church*, edited by D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 19-20.

4 Paul G. Hiebert, 'Form and Meaning' in *The Word Among Us*, 101-120, edited by Dean S. Gilliland, (Dallas: Word, 1989).

5 Michael Goldberg, *Theology and Narrative: A Critical Introduction* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982), 242.

6 John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 25.

7 See for example Larry W Caldwell, 'Towards the New Discipline of Ethnohermeneutics: Questioning the Relevancy of Western Hermeneutical Methods in the Asian Context', *Journal of Asian Mission* vol. 1, no. 1 (1999), 21-43.

contextualization using the conceptual framework of games.⁸ The game metaphor can potentially provide an aid to understanding how biblical texts, especially narratives, can afford insight into strategies for living and contextualization.

Game hermeneutics on the one hand allows for more intuitive access to biblical meanings, and on the other hand provides reasonable guidelines to protect against unrestrained subjectivity. Because games are a universal phenomenon in human cultures,⁹ they have the potential of providing a model of contextualization that is accessible and plausible in many different contexts.

A few preliminary clarifications are in order to avoid potential misunderstanding. First, by comparing Christian life and mission to a game, I am in no way trivializing what is at stake or suggesting something that is merely playful, simulated, or disconnected from reality. Games in fact often perform many important social functions.¹⁰

Second, many people associate games with both individualism and competition. However, team sports are by nature a collective activity and many games and sports are non-competitive. For example, I may play golf to improve my own handicap, not to defeat an opponent. Or I may play table tennis with a child not competitively to defeat her, but cooperatively to see how many times we can get the ball back and forth over the net.¹¹

Third, game logic as used here is not to be confused with mathematical 'game theory', used in analysis of decision making and human rationality applied to economics, marketing strategy, conflict resolution, and political theory.¹² Steven Brams has proposed a 'game-theoretic exegesis' based upon mathematical game theory.¹³

I am not using games in this manner whatsoever. Rather, I seek to use the inner logic of games and how they are played as a conceptual model for Christian life and contextualization. To avoid confusion, in this essay I will speak of game logic, not game theory.

Finally, using game logic as an interpretative model needs not undermine biblical authority or universal truth claims of the Bible. Though there is a sense in which the biblical game is a self-contained system with inter-

8 Wm. McClendon Jr. in *Ethics: Systematic Theology*, vol. 1. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986, 162-66) and Bryan Stone in *Evangelism after Christendom* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007, 32) briefly draw upon Bernard Suits' *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia*. Robert H. Stein uses the concept of games differently in *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible: Playing by the Rules*. 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994).

9 On the universality of games in all cultures see J.M. Roberts, M. J. Arth, and R. R. Bush, 'Games in Culture', *American Anthropologist* 61:4 (Aug 1959), 597-605, and Noel Dyck, ed. *Games, Sports and Cultures* (New York: Berg, 2000).

10 See Dyck, *Games, Sports and Cultures*, and Allen Gutmann *From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports* (New York: Columbia University, 1978), and Roberts, Arth, and Bush,

'Games in Culture', 598.

11 Bernard Suits call this an 'open game' (*The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia*, Toronto: University of Toronto, 1978, 130-138).

12 See Ken Binmore, *Game Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2007).

13 Steven J. Brams, *Biblical Games: Game Theory and the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2003).

nal coherence, this does not mean that that system is on equal footing with competing systems, worldviews, or truth claims. The Bible provides an authoritative guide to playing the game of life in general and participation in God's mission in particular.

By understanding biblical events and teachings in terms of how a game is being played in various settings and circumstances, we are given, as it were, a divinely inspired playbook with many instructive examples of how the game is played well or poorly. By examining the game strategy depicted in a biblical text, we need not attempt the dubious task of stripping the text of its 'cultural clothing' in order to grasp its authoritative meaning and implications for contemporary contexts.

II The Nature of Games

As noted above, games are universally familiar and a feature of every human society. They have very ancient origins,¹⁴ and may come in the shape of sports, board games, card and dice games, role playing, and more recently, computer games.¹⁵ Except for games based upon pure chance (e.g. roulette) or solely upon physical skill (e.g. dart-

throwing), most games require a playing strategy to be played well. Games of strategy, such as Mankala in Sub-Saharan Africa, are familiar even in traditional societies with little sociopolitical complexity and among most classifications of societies.¹⁶

When speaking of games in this article, games involving strategy are in view. Such games are most like life itself. To live well we must have a 'strategy' for wise living and attaining one's goals under constraints over which we have little control.

I will draw upon Bernard Suits' understanding of the four essential elements of games: (1) an end or goal, (2) the means, (3) rules, and (4) right attitude,¹⁷ adding a fifth element (5) strategy. I will briefly describe each of these elements before explaining how they can be helpful for contextualization.

1. Essential Elements of a Game

The Goal or objective of a game. A game must have a goal or end in view which one attempts to achieve. In golf the goal is hitting a ball with a stick into a hole in the ground with as few hits as possible. Without a clearly defined goal or end, the activity may be entertaining, instructive, playful, or good for one's health, but it is not a game. The game objective often *only* makes sense within the parameters of the game itself. There are of course many better

¹⁴ For example, a 5,000 year old board game was found in ancient Egypt. See H.J.R. Murray, *A History of Board Games other than Chess* (Oxford: Oxbow, 2002 [1952]); Peter A. Piccione, 'In Search of the Meaning of Senate' *Archaeology* 33:4 (Jul/Aug 1980):55-58, and Kendall Blanchard *The Anthropology of Sport* (Westport: Bergin & Garvey, 1995), 95-127.

¹⁵ Games can be considered to be a subset of play, games being more structured and defined and having other purposes than play in general. See Blanchard, *Anthropology of Sport*, 50-51.

¹⁶ Philip Townshend, 'Games of Strategy: A New Look at Correlates and Cross-Cultural Methods' in *Play and Culture*, 217-225, edited by Helen B. Schwartzman (West Point, NY: Leisure, 1980).

¹⁷ See Suits, *The Grasshopper*.

ways to get a ball in a hole than by hitting it with a club. Indeed what utility would there be in even getting a ball in a hole apart from the game?

The means of playing a game. In golf one needs a ball, at least one club (though a variety of clubs is better), and a playing field; the golf course. Though the basic materials of a game usually remain the same (a ball, a deck of cards, etc.) the specific playing conditions may change, affecting play. One golf course is laid out differently from another; the board configuration of *Settlers of Catan* is different each time played.

The rules of a game. A game must also have rules which determine allowable ways by which the means will be used to attain the goal. For golf the rules stipulate that the means of getting the ball into the hole is hitting it with a club. One may not throw or carry the ball. Rules do not predetermine the outcome of the game, but only set parameters, allowing a level of freedom as to how one plays the game.

Rules not only give structure to how the game is played but more importantly, they are essential to the very nature of a game. They are *constitutive* of the game. For example, it would be more efficient and quicker to simply carry the golf ball to the hole and drop it in the cup, but no one would call that 'playing golf'. Suits points out, that unlike other situations in real life, where one might justifiably break a rule to attain a goal (for example, breaking a 'no trespassing' law in order to save a life), 'in a game the end and the rules do not admit such disjunction. It is impossible to win a game and at the same time to

break one of its rules.'¹⁸

The proper playing disposition. The disposition of the player is also essential to truly playing a game, which Suits calls a 'lusory' attitude.¹⁹ In other words it is possible to go through the motions of playing a game, but not really *play* it, if one does not play with the right attitude.

Suits names *triflers*, *cheaters*, and *spoilsports* as examples of not being real players.²⁰ We would not say that one truly played golf if he went to the golf course and trifled by hitting the ball in *any* direction, not even trying to get the ball into the hole.²¹ Cheaters, if caught, are normally disqualified from playing or punished in some manner. Spoilsports disrupt games by quitting or making it impossible for others to play or enjoy the game.

2. The Importance of Strategy to Game Outcomes

Most games require some kind of strategy to be played well. The rules set parameters, but usually allow some level of freedom so that the players must make choices about how they play the game. The logic of how those decisions are made is the playing strategy. The strategy provides an algorithm for playing the game and attaining the objective, guiding decisions for each individual move or playing choice. One

¹⁸ Suits, *The Grasshopper*, 25.

¹⁹ Suits, *The Grasshopper*, 5, 38.

²⁰ Suits, *The Grasshopper*, 44-48.

²¹ In the 2012 Olympic Games four Badminton teams were disqualified, not for cheating, but for deliberately losing matches in hopes of attaining advantageous placement in later playoff rounds.

can of course play a game without a strategy, but will seldom attain the goal without a strategy. No one would win a card game by playing the cards randomly.

There are two types of strategy for most games: *general strategies* and *situational strategies*. A *general strategy* is not a formal rule of play, but what might be called a rule of thumb that applies to attaining the goal nearly every time one plays, irrespective of the players or the circumstances. General strategies apply universally because they are inherently linked to the logic of the game. Failing to adopt them normally leads to consistent failure to attain the goal. A general strategy for playing 'hearts' would be to void one's hand of a suit.

Situational strategies are strategies that are helpful in attaining the objective in light of the specific conditions each time the game is played, taking into consideration the changing variables. These variables will have direct implications for the situational playing strategy. For example, a specific playing strategy must be considered for each hand of cards one is dealt in 'hearts'.

The playing board layout in *Settlers of Catan* changes with each game, requiring a new playing strategy for *that* board. Furthermore, situational strategies may be adapted and changed over the course of the game, based upon on-going developments in the playing of the game. In this regard playing strategies are not static, but dynamic, while at the same time always crafted towards attaining the same end goal.

3. Games Involving Teams

Many games involve teams whereby

typically two or more groups of people compete against each other in some way, as, for example, in sports such as basketball, and in card games such as contract bridge. Team games have the added dimension that to play well the players must somehow coordinate their efforts to attain the goal. Cooperation or coordination among the diverse teammates is essential to an effective strategy. One cannot play the game well in an individualistic manner that disregards the importance and contributions of other teammates. The playing strategy must be a *team* strategy.

Furthermore, to play team games effectively an additional playing disposition is necessary that is not required of non-team games. We might call it team spirit or selflessness. Individual team members must often be prepared to surrender individual performance or 'glory', so as to enhance the overall team performance. Individual personal goals must be subordinated to the overall team strategy and goals.

4. Game as Simulation and Alternative World

It is not difficult to see parallels between playing games and living life in general. People normally have life goals they seek to achieve; certain means are necessary to attain those goals (resources, relationships, security, education, skills, etc.), and not everyone is born with equal access to or endowment with them. Both formal law and informal social norms are the rules that guide how life goals can be rightly attained.

We also know that attitude or disposition is a key to living well, namely

having a positive disposition and a spirit of love and kindness. Wisdom might be defined as strategy for living the game of life well within socially defined boundaries.

Yet there is a sense in which a game creates an alternative world; a closed system making sense only within itself. In the words of Johan Huizinga, play creates order, play *is* order.²² Games are based upon rules and objectives that are usually defined and operate independently of the normal contingencies of real life.

The player enters a space where this alternative set of goals and rules applies. The rules of play may be contrary to common sense or efficiency (e.g. hitting a ball with a club instead of carrying or throwing it to attain the objective of getting it in a hole), and sometimes deliberately impose otherwise unnecessary challenges or hindrances (e.g. sand traps).

Playing a game involves a willingness to accept the playing parameters as a condition of play that make perfect sense within the game, but little sense outside of the game. Nevertheless, once one enters play, the goal of the game takes over and is the only objective in the world of the game.

III Games and the Bible

How then does this understanding of games relate to interpreting biblical texts and contextualization? In the Bible we see the game of life being played

out and described from the divine perspective. We can identify divinely appointed objectives, rules, means, attitudes, and strategies as the biblical characters play the game of life and as biblical authors report, instruct, and/or interpret the play.

In reading the Bible we also begin to identify a worldview and value system rooted in the person and purposes of God that stand in contrast to human systems; an alternative world so to speak, that often makes little sense apart from faith. Let us now re-examine each element of game logic and see how it can offer a useful framework for biblical interpretation and contextualization.

1. The Goal

Various themes have been proposed in the attempt to capture the overall thrust of the biblical story and God's purposes for his people. For the sake of our discussion I will use the theme of the *missio Dei*. (One may choose a different unifying theme, but the general principle will be the same.) God is a missionary God who throughout the biblical story has called his people to participate in his mission,²³ thus I will rather uncreatively call this game 'The Mission' which we as the people of God are called to play.

The broad goal of The Mission as spelled out in Scripture is the faithful participation in God's redemptive purposes and the advancement of his kingdom. Throughout salvation history

²² Johan Huizinga argues that play is prior to culture (animals play), and that culture is derived from play (*Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*. Boston; Beacon, 1955), 10.

²³ See Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006) as an example of a missional hermeneutic.

we observe in scripture God's people living in pursuit of this goal. At times they succeed, and at times they fail. They live in different epochs and under different covenants, but the broad purposes remain the same as history progresses towards the ultimate victory of God and the consummation of his purposes with the fullness of the coming of the kingdom.

It can be said that this goal makes sense only within the parameters of the game. Just as the goal of getting a ball in a hole using only a club is a worthy goal only if one has chosen to play golf, so too participation in God's mission makes sense as a worthy goal only to those who have chosen to enter God's kingdom.

Of course the fundamental difference is that the game of God's mission is the ultimate reality, rooted in the reality of God himself as creator and sustainer of all things. All other human objectives, rules, and alternate games are at best a shadow of that reality, at worst a perversion of it.

2. The Rules

Scripture also spells out certain rules for the game. 2 Timothy 2:5 makes the analogy explicit: 'if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not receive the victor's crown unless he competes according to the rules.' These are the covenantal standards by which this game is to be played. The rules of many games may seem arbitrary or impractical apart from the game.

Much like the goal, the rules of God's mission often appear foolish to those outside the kingdom, but rules in The Mission are not arbitrary. As we shall see below, they reflect the very

character and purposes of God and are thus perfectly logical from within the game.

We saw that in games the rules are constitutive of the very nature of the game. One plays by the rules, or one is not really playing the game. Those who consistently violate the rules are disqualified from playing. Of course no person or church plays perfectly by the rules, but Paul exhorts, 'Run in such a way as to get the prize' (1 Cor. 9:24). How we run is as important as the goal to which we run.

So too God's commands and ethical standards define The Mission and how the goal is to be achieved. To violate God's rules in pursuit of God's mission is to forfeit the mission altogether. In this sense the rules of the mission are inseparable from the goal of the mission, though the two are not identical. Indeed, in The Mission the means reflect the very nature of the end: the restoration of God's rule, the law of love, justice, reconciliation, the freeing power of truth.

There are two related dimensions to the rules of The Mission. One is the moral or ethical, the other is relational or covenantal. The Ten Commandments might be considered an example of ethical playing rules. Micah 6:8 summarizes:

He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.

Jesus claimed that all the law and the prophets can be summarized in the two commands to love God and to love one's neighbour as oneself (Mt. 22:36-40).

The relational dimension of the rules defines the larger context of how the game is played within the covenantal relationship between God and his people. Idolatry and other loyalties are 'out of bounds'. To violate the covenant is to incur judgment. More positively, it is in relationship with the Triune God that one is enabled and empowered to play. To switch metaphors, Jesus said, 'If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing' (Jn. 15:5b).

These rules are universal and they apply wherever and whenever the game is played. One of the hermeneutical difficulties is discerning which biblical injunctions are 'rules' with universal validity, and which are situational strategies that are not universally binding but examples of how the game is played under certain circumstances—a question we will return to later.

3. The Means

The most important means of the game The Mission are the Word of God, the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit, and various gifts—spiritual or natural—endowed to us collectively as the players. Various gifts are given to the church to assist in attaining the goal: individual talents, institutions, educational resources, finances, technology, etc.

The *charismata* are given to members of the church to build the body of Christ and strengthen it for its mission. They must be employed consistently within the rules, in character with the gospel, in the power of the Holy Spirit, and with intentionality towards the

end.²⁴ The 'playing field' is the social and cultural context where the missionary church finds itself.

4. Playing Disposition and Attitude

The proper playing disposition for this game is also clearly spelled out for us in scripture. At the most fundamental level, the Christian must want to become an agent of the *missio Dei*, and be willing to act and not merely theorize. We do not trifle with being Christians.

Furthermore, Christians are to be people who act in love, for without this disposition we are but a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal; we are nothing and gain nothing (1 Cor. 13:1-3). We are to 'do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit'. Rather, we are to value others above ourselves, having the mind of Christ, becoming humble servants (Phil. 2:1-9).

A faith relationship with God is fundamental for 'without faith it is impossible to please God' (Heb. 11:6). Overarching all else we are exhorted: 'whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God' (1 Cor. 10:31). As with games, the right spiritual disposition is essential for carrying out The Mission. An inappropriate disposition, compromises the mission itself as much as a spoilsport, cheater or trifler compromises the playing of a game.

5. Strategy

The value of game logic for contextu-

²⁴ For example the church in Corinth violated the 'playing rule' of love, exercising spiritual gifts for self-glorification instead of for the edification of others (1 Cor. 12:7; 14).

alization becomes most intriguing and fruitful when we consider the matter of game strategy. Each biblical text reveals in some manner the way in which The Mission is being played in the given biblical context. Not only the goal, rules, means and dispositions are evident, but playing strategies are revealed. For example, the apostle Paul preached differently to different audiences as reported in the Book of Acts.

The rules and goal did not change, but the strategy did. Dean Flemming has demonstrated that not merely isolated texts, but the entire New Testament is a collection of contextual documents illustrating how the gospel engages culture, addressing various audiences and cultural challenges in the emerging mission churches.²⁵

This approach may help us to resolve seemingly conflicting exhortations or reports in scripture. For example, why women are prohibited from speaking or teaching in the church in some passages, but we see women prophesying in the church in others. Different playing conditions call for different strategies while reaching the same goal and following the same rules.

In some cases more than one strategy may be acceptable. For example, the prohibition of adultery can be easily identified as a rule, but Paul's recommendation of celibacy can be considered a strategy, not binding for all and not excluding other possible strategies such as marriage (1 Cor. 7:8-9).

Many games have different phases, such as Pinochle (bidding and trick-taking phases), and *Settlers of Catan*

(an initial piece placement phase followed by the dice rolling phase). Each phase is governed by a subset of rules, necessitating different strategies, yet each stage contributes to the overall game objective.

The Mission also as played out in scripture has developed in phases over the course of salvation history. The overarching goal has not changed and the ground rules have not changed, but the specific tactics and strategies have changed, based upon the conditions and progress of the game. We must thus discern in each scriptural episode how the game is being played in light of that text's salvation-historical location.

6. Team Play

In a real sense, The Mission is a team game. Various talents and gifts are to be coordinated in mutual interdependence towards fulfilling the objective of the game. Each player is important (1 Cor. 12). God has consistently chosen a *people* as agents of his purposes (e.g. Ex. 19:5-6; 1 Pet. 2:9-10). Team dynamics are also important to biblical interpretation. Theologians, especially missiologists, speak of the necessity of a hermeneutical community.²⁶

The hermeneutical community is not merely a matter of an individual interpreter engaging various herme-

²⁵ Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2005).

²⁶ See for example Paul G. Hiebert, *The Missiological Implications of Epistemological Shifts* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1999), 94-95; 'Critical Contextualization' (in *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, 75-92. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), and John Howard Yoder, 'The Hermeneutics of Peoplehood' in *The Priestly Kingdom* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1984), 22-34.

neutical traditions found throughout church history, but should include the voices of the contemporary global church.²⁷ The Spirit is present and at work in the collective mind of believers as they reflect together on the meaning of scripture and its implications for their given context.

7. The Self-contained System of the Game

As described above, games are a self-contained system or alternative world based upon objectives and rules that players voluntarily accept, though these rules may have little to do with 'real life' or common sense. The game The Mission is based upon the alternative goals, value system, and rules of the kingdom of God.

Those values and rules are at many points contrary to the norms and values of any given culture of 'this world'. This is particularly illustrated in the Sermon on the Mount. Indeed many of these rules would seem to be hindrances to attaining one's goals in life, highlighting that this game (participation in God's redemptive purposes) makes little sense to those outside the game and are desirable only within the logic of the game.

Playing The Mission entails, as with the playing of any game, a voluntary submission to the logic of the game, suspending other logics, embracing the alternative reality of the game. In The Mission this new reality is described as a 'new creation' in Christ (2 Cor.

5:17), setting our minds on the things above, not earthly things (Col. 3:2), and not being conformed to the pattern of this world, but transformed by the renewing of our mind, 'able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will' (Rom. 12:3).

Furthermore, one must actually enter into the playing of the game to begin to truly understand both the game as a whole, as well as specific biblical texts describing the game. John Driver speaks of an 'epistemology of obedience' as integral to the interpretive process.²⁸ 'If anyone chooses to do God's will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own' (Jn. 7:17).

IV Learning to Play a Game and Contextualization

If I have never played a certain card game I could learn how to play in several ways.

Explanation: Someone explains to me the objective, the rules, and perhaps some basic strategies for winning. Alternatively, I might just read the instructions that come with the game or a rulebook.

Observation: I may observe other players while they repeatedly play the game and I begin to get a feel for the rules and game logic. As I note what players do who frequently win, I may gradually discern the strategies behind their winning ways. I may also identify recurrent mistakes made by poor players. Observation will be one of the best

²⁷ See for example, Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland, eds. *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006).

²⁸ John Driver, *Understanding the Atonement for the Mission of the Church* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1986), 36.

ways to learn effective game strategies.

Participation: I simply play the game numerous times and attempt to learn by trial and error. By experience I can gradually discover good playing strategies. It is the most painful way to learn, as I will make many mistakes along the way.

Formal instruction: I may take lessons or engage an expert player to coach me. I would not only receive verbal explanation, but I would also receive supervised practice and direct feedback on how to improve my play.

The Bible provides us with the first two aids in learning The Mission. Didactic biblical texts provide the reader with *explanation* and explain the rules. However, even didactic texts and imperatives are given in a specific context, and may reflect situational strategies and not necessarily universal playing rules.

Through narrative biblical texts we learn by *observation*. The reader observes in the narrative how biblical characters have played the game. By repeated observation of what makes for effective and ineffective play, we begin to discern the underlying playing strategies and logic of The Mission. The Psalms especially give insight into the disposition of players, including attitudes, prayers, songs, motivation, and inspiration. The reader observes the inner life of the players, and is invited to reflect upon and identify with such dispositions.

But this is not all. The Holy Spirit acts as a coach who instructs, guides, and imparts skills for the game. Jesus promised the Spirit to his disciples to guide them into all truth (Jn. 14:26, 16:13). The Spirit reveals the deep

things of God (1 Cor. 2:9-13). The Spirit enables the keeping of the rules and playing with the right disposition (Ezek. 36:27; Acts 1:8; Rom. 8:5-17; Gal. 5:22-25). The Spirit creates, equips, and guides the missional community (e.g. 1 Cor. 12; Acts 16:6-10). In this way the Spirit aids the church in understanding scripture and developing playing strategies for various contexts. Indeed, it is the Spirit who brings the game of God's mission to its victorious end.

V Playing Strategy and Contextualization

Game logic offers an aid to biblical contextualization by unpacking the relationship of goal, rules, and strategy in a given context of the biblical narrative or injunction. Recall that in playing games, while goals and rules do not change, playing strategies do. In a card game my playing strategy must be adapted to the specific hand of cards that I am dealt. In *Settlers of Catan* the playing board changes from game to game, demanding careful study of the game board and crafting a fresh strategy in order to win on *that* playing board.

So too as the gospel moves from one cultural context to the next, from one 'playing field' to the next, new strategies must be forged to achieve the same goal. As we seek to understand the implications of a specific biblical passage for a contemporary context, we are in essence changing playing fields. Though the goal and rules do not change, the playing field does, and this means that the specific strategy effective in the original biblical context may not be an effective strategy in the

contemporary context.

Studying the Bible we discern the interrelationship of the ways in which the biblical strategies related to the specifics of the various biblical contexts in attaining the goal (or why a particular strategy was ineffective). We begin to acquire a feel for the game logic. In the same way in which repeated observation of experienced players playing a game helps the novice to understand game strategies, so too the numerous biblical narratives provide the reader with numerous opportunities to observe The Mission being played.

Understanding the logic of the strategies described in scripture is more important than imitating the specific actions. Mimicking the individual moves of the winning card player observed playing one hand will not win another round of play unless the exact same hand is dealt and play proceeds identically in both games, which is never the case. So too, merely mimicking features of biblical events will not lead to playing well because the contemporary circumstances are never identical to the biblical situation.

How then does one discern what a playing rule is (universally binding), and what is merely a playing strategy (thus variable in application) in any given biblical text? This will not always be obvious. I might observe actions or exhortations in scripture that seem to be universal rules, but are in fact only situational strategies.

The key to identifying the rules lies not in sorting out which commands are universal and which are not, but rather in understanding how rules are constitutive of a game, whereas strategies are not. In The Mission rules are constitutive of accomplishing the ob-

jective, namely God's redemptive purposes.²⁹ The rules are not arbitrary, but can be identified as follows:

- *Rules reflect the character of God.* Humans are created in God's image and redemption restores that image marred by the fall.³⁰ Because the redemptive plan of God is to bring humanity back into relationship with himself under his gracious and righteous rule, rules are by necessity congruent with his character.
- *Rules are essential to our covenantal relationship with God.* Faithfulness, submission, devotion and obedience to God are essential to the covenant. To serve other gods, to compromise God's truth, or to dishonour him is to violate the covenant, thus violating that which is constitutive to the game. Our mission is dependent upon and grows out of that covenantal relationship.
- *Rules are a necessary condition to fulfilling the mission.* To be agents of God's redemptive purposes, we must both communicate the message of redemption and in some measure exemplify what it means to live as a redeemed people; a people characterized by forgiveness, healing, restoration, justice, and above all love, for this is the fruit of God's redemptive work.
- *Rules are foundational to God's cre-*

²⁹ William J. Webb helpfully suggests discerning the 'redemptive-movement' of a given passage as a key to contemporary application (*Slaves, Women and Homosexuals*, 30-66).

³⁰ Gen. 1:26-27; Col. 3:10; 1 Jn. 3:2.

ation order. God is a God of order, and his creation is to be ordered in a way to promote human well-being. God ordained marriage and family. He ordained human government to curb evil, to care for the disadvantaged, to provide just and fair treatment of all, and to structure social life. Creation care both honours God's creation and preserves conditions for life. Apart from such order human life becomes chaos and God's own beauty, justice and harmony are violated.

Such rules can be traced, sometimes explicitly and sometimes implicitly, throughout scripture. They are the underlying foundation of every command, guideline or action of scripture. They frame the general and specific playing strategies described in the Bible and should frame contemporary contextual strategies. Jesus points to such an underlying rule when he taught that all the Law and Prophets depend upon the dual commands to love God and to love neighbour (Mt. 22:37-40); an understanding echoed in the epistles of Paul (e.g. Rom. 13:10; Gal. 5:14).

VI Playing the Game

God's people are called to be *players* of The Mission, not merely observers or commentators. Games exist to be played, and they do not play themselves. A football and field do not constitute the game of football. A game really comes into being only when it is played. The divine game has been played throughout biblical history by specially called servants and God's elect people. It is the calling of the church today to continue to play and

continue the mission under the parameters of the game as defined by its creator, God.

As already noted, games are created as their own world, with their own goals, means, and rules (which are often counterintuitive). Game players are the actors who enter the world of the game and bring the game to life, adopting that new reality in order to play. Once the player enters the game, he must take the terms of the game seriously, voluntarily submitting to the conditions of the game. In Gadamer's words, the play has primacy over the consciousness of the player.³¹ Rudolf Bernet describes it in this way:

The player thus only participates in a process whose unfolding and logic are imposed on him. He allows himself to be born away by the game, and even when he actively participates in a football game or a ceremony, he enters into the game's service in order to ensure its success.³²

Is this not an appropriate analogy for Christians individually and for the church collectively entering into the service of God? We serve (or play) as instruments of God's mission (the game objective), in that process abiding by the game rules in a spirit of faith, integrity, humility, and loving, worshipful submission (playing disposition).

Just as the logic of a game only makes sense in its own context, so

³¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed. (Translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall) (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 104.

³² Rudolf Bernet, 'Gadamer on the Subject's Participation in the Game of Truth', *Review of Metaphysics*, 58 (June 2005), 785-814, 790.

too the logic of the kingdom of God is rightly comprehended only by playing the game, submitting to it, becoming like a child (Mt. 18:3), taking on a new citizenship (Phil. 3:20), and walking by faith not sight (2 Cor. 5:7).

It is this experience or participation in the game that opens the logic of the biblical world to the interpreter. There is a subjective identification with those meanings by voluntarily entering that frame of reference. However, this does not allow the interpreter to define the game or import his own meanings.

The message and meaning of scripture remain authoritative. Furthermore, particularly in sports, the players submit to the coach who directs the strategy. The church functions as a collective, interdependent body under the headship of Christ and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Kevin J. Vanhoozer has developed the idea of *theodrama* that has numerous parallels with game hermeneutics. In *theodrama* the interpreter is called upon not merely to interpret, but also to *perform* scripture as an actor would perform in a play.³³ Similarly, in game hermeneutics the interpreter's goal is not to merely observe the game being played in scripture and remain a game analyst or commentator. Our calling is to play that game, living and serving in faithfulness, losing ourselves in the process, determined to play well, gladly embracing the goal and parameters.

The servant of God adopts the purposes of God, joyfully selling all to purchase that field (Mt. 13:44), in love obeying his commands (Jn. 14:15), tak-

ing up the cross for the privilege of following (Lk. 14:27), dying to self and all other rivals to life in God (Rom. 6), having been transferred into the new reality of the kingdom of the Son (Col. 1:13). The player is immersed in the new reality of the game. Other realities have no influence or authority in the world of the game.

And yet each generation and each new context presents unique challenges and circumstances (new playing fields) that demand fresh contextualized approaches and creative solutions (new situational playing strategies) as we seek to give faithful expression to the gospel. And so we must ask ourselves: Are we continuing to serve (play) not with identical actions (playing moves) that we read of in the New Testament, but in the trajectory of that service as we see it in the New Testament, ever moving towards that same goal?

This brings us to a final point, worthy of much more reflection than can be given here: *God is creator, player and judge of the game*. The revelation of God's purposes and actions in scripture locate him as the creator who stands above the game. It is he who has determined the rules and objective of the game. Of Christ we are told, 'For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together' (Col. 1:16-17). The *missio Dei* is indeed *God's mission*. It is he who elects, guides, and empowers his people to be agents of that mission.

Yet God is also a player in this game, actively engaged in bringing play to its

³³ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005).

determined end, bringing his mission to fulfilment. History is God's history and God is not a passive observer. 'The first premise of evangelical theology is that God can enter and has entered into relationship with the world.'³⁴

Ultimately God enters the game in the most tangible way imaginable. With the incarnation, God the Son steps onto the playing field. The same Christ, who is creator, sustainer, and end of all things, submits himself to the parameters of play, surrendering his divine position, taking on the form of a servant even unto death (Phil. 2:6-8).

The life, death and resurrection of the incarnate Christ, Jesus of Nazareth, is the source and foundation of all redemptive action. He accomplishes the ultimate victory over sin, Satan and evil. He is the ultimate player and victor. All play must now be oriented on the person of Christ. The sending of the church is based upon the sending of the Son: the work of the Son creates the church, the message of the Son is proclaimed by the church, the life of the Son is embodied in the church, and the obedience and submission of the Son to the Father is imitated by the church.

The disciples are sent into the world as the Son was sent (Jn. 17:18; 20:21), 'who, in complete dependence and perfect obedience to his sender, fulfils the purpose for which the Father sent him'.³⁵ With the sending of the Holy Spirit, God continues to actively transform, empower and guide the church to

fulfil the purpose for which it has been sent.

Finally, God is also the judge or 'referee' of the game. At the consummation God himself is the righteous, omniscient, and impartial judge before whom all players will stand and give account. His judgments are perfect. There will be no need for video replay. There will be no contested calls. There will be no unseen fouls, infractions or cheating. He will not only bring history to its foreordained end, but he will punish the wicked, and reward the just with the victor's crown of righteousness, glory, and life itself (2 Tim. 4:8; Jas. 1:12; 1 Pet. 5:4; Rev. 2:10). The outcome of the game is determined and sure.

VII Conclusion

The approach described here seeks to offer a fresh perspective, a new framing of the hermeneutical process and contextualization that will hopefully help interpreters to greater appreciation of biblical teaching and greater faithfulness in living it out. Game hermeneutics provides an alternative logic for the challenge of contextualization.

The goal of biblical interpretation cannot be to disembodify truth from the accidents of the biblical record to arrive at an abstract 'timeless meaning'. Those accidents are the field upon which the divine purposes are played out. Truth is revealed in the concrete actions of God and exemplified in the lived responses of God's people in specific historical and cultural contexts. God's mission is carried out on specific playing fields, ever moving in the trajectory of his eschatological and teleological purposes through salvation

34 Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 40.

35 Andreas J. Köstenberger, *The Missions of Jesus and the Disciples According to the Fourth Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 203.

history.

Game hermeneutics frames that process in terms of the logic of games. As the interpreter grasps the logic of that game, he more willingly submits to the game parameters and is better situated to become a faithful player on the playing field upon which God has placed him. He seeks to understand the biblical dynamic and then re-enact it, live it out, and incarnate it in new settings.

Several advantages to game hermeneutics can be envisioned. First, it might provide a more plausible basis for discerning the universal rules that guide the specific commands and narratives in scripture. We seek to understand their logic as situational strategies appropriate to the given context and salvation-historical location. Game hermeneutics thus resists an overly literalistic application of biblical passages, while at the same time retaining their pedagogical and revelatory authority.

Second, game hermeneutics provides a more intuitive way to understand and apply narrative texts. Narrative texts present a special challenge to the extractionist approach to hermeneutics. As one observes and interprets the game being played in the narrative, one can identify how the details and actions relate to the larger goal and rules. Narratives become lessons in game strategy and how contextual factors impinge upon the playing of the game. The key to understanding the passage and its application is in grasping the interface of biblical commands and contextual factors in pursuit of God's mission.

Third, game hermeneutics can help to discern questions of contextualiza-

tion. As the gospel enters new contexts or as cultures change, the playing field changes and new playing strategies become necessary. Game hermeneutics helps us understand the nature of how God's purposes are manifested and lived out in various settings as we find them in scripture.

As we encounter new settings and new challenges, that often have very little in common with biblical situations, we are encouraged to transfer the logic of those strategies and develop similar or new situational strategies to face the challenges of the new context. We seek to live in the trajectory of the biblical story towards the telos of redemptive history.

Finally, game hermeneutics calls the interpreter to be not merely an analyst or spectator, but to become a proficient and faithful player. In a real sense, we are *all* game players and the only question is which game, or better, *whose* game we choose to play: a game of human invention or of divine calling? As we read scripture we increasingly come to understand God's game from God's own perspective.

We must make a choice. To choose to become children of the kingdom, is to choose to live in the world of God's reality, which, like the alternative world of games, operates according to its own values and objectives quite unlike those of other worlds with which we are familiar.

To be good players, we must willingly embrace the parameters of that new reality and play with the right disposition. Yet unlike games, this new reality is God's ultimate reality, and every other competing 'reality' is but a distortion, distraction or mirage.