

# **Toward Improved Contextualization and Acuity in SCP Strategy:**

Challenges in Hungary and the need for a greater  
ecumenical missiology

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## **Abstract**

This paper is an attempt to examine the current strategy of SCP in Hungary by taking into account both the particular constellation of social, political, and religious characteristics of this Eastern European context, as well as the criticism of expatriate missionary involvement that has arisen from other missiologists here. Interacting with issues such as secularization, nationalism, ecumenism and Christian credibility, this brief investigation suggests that the SCP strategy in Hungary, as is currently promulgated, will prove difficult to implement, and perhaps ultimately ineffectual in the effort to “re-evangelize” this region absent further missiological refinement and contextualization. The aim of this examination is to generate greater discussion and debate among practitioners of SCP, as well as prompt further dialogue with the leadership of the established churches, in the hopes of ultimately improving our effectiveness as missionaries in this region.

## Introduction

Like several other former Eastern-bloc countries, Christianity in Hungary is an interesting puzzle. Beginning with the coronation of Saint Stephen in 1000 A.D., Hungary has boasted over a millennium of Christian history. Yet, given the social and religious changes in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, what does it mean to call Hungary a “Christian” nation today? Depending on the set of statistics one employs, Hungary is either a country with only 15% of the 10 million inhabitants identifying themselves as ardent followers of *any* church or religion,<sup>1</sup> or alternatively, Hungary is a country that is astoundingly 92% Christian.<sup>2</sup>

The disparity between these two figures, however, is not the result of poor demographic analysis. Its root lies much deeper--embedded and interwoven with the historical development of Hungary as a nation, as well as the Christian churches within Hungary. Throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries, the word ‘Christian’ began to take on a very different meaning than what it has traditionally denoted—namely, a group of people who share common religious beliefs. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the word ‘Christian’ had developed a *political, social, and racial* meaning, as opposed to a religious one.<sup>3</sup> It became a nationalist term; a term used to distinguish the ‘authentically Hungarian’ people from the Jews, Socialists, and Liberals living in Hungary.<sup>4</sup> Thus, although 92% of Hungarians designated themselves as “Christian” (either Roman Catholic or Protestant) on the recent national census, only a little over half (55%) of the population claimed to believe in the existence of God, a

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<sup>1</sup> Michael J. Jordan, “Now-secular Hungarians reluctant to return schools to church,” Christian Science Monitor 88, no. 199 (9 September 1996): 7.

<sup>2</sup> Patrick Johnstone and Jason Mandryk, *Operation World*, Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster USA (2001), 305. It is important to note that Johnstone and Mandryk would quickly point out that despite this significantly inflated figure, there are only 2.7% Evangelical Christians in Hungary, as is identified in their “trans-bloc groupings.”

<sup>3</sup> John Lukacs “The Church in Hungary Today,” America 165, no. 9 (1991): 220.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

supernatural being, or a creator—a belief traditionally regarded as foundational to Christian faith.<sup>5</sup> In other words, over one-third (37%) of the Hungarians who identified themselves as “Christian” are self-described atheists, creating an obvious challenge in interpreting statistical data pertaining to Christianity in Hungary.

As was argued in this author’s previous paper, “The Christian Church in Hungary,” it appears that the initial divisions created between Hungarian churches during the Protestant Reformation that occurred simultaneously with the Ottoman Conquest, were later strategically exacerbated by political forces, further weakening the strength and unity of the Christian Church, and ultimately exposing it to the influence of nationalism.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, instead of serving as a united moral voice and able to stand in opposition to social evils such as the Holocaust and the Soviet oppression, the now deeply divided churches infused with nationalism became in many ways political pawns, stripping the Church of one of its most significant charters—to defend the cause of the oppressed. Unfortunately, because of this intertwining of nationalism and Christianity, the Christian churches seem to have almost entirely lost their credibility with the Hungarian people, producing the kind of mass exodus from Christianity that has been evident in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

If this argument is true, what implications does it have on our strategies as missionaries, seeking to work with the existing Hungarian churches to reach the people of Hungary for Christ? This paper attempts to wrestle with that question by

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<sup>5</sup> Results from GfK survey commissioned by the Wall Street Journal, excerpted from Kossuth Radio, Budapest (in Hungarian) 17:00 GMT, 23 December 2004, in “Survey on Hungarians’ Attitude to Religion,” Financial Times Information, Global News Wire - Asia Africa Intelligence Wire, BBC Monitoring International Reports, 24 December 2004. Accessed via Lexis-Nexis.

<sup>6</sup> See John and Zsófi Wilson, “The Christian Church in Hungary: Lessons from History and the need for a greater Ecumenical Missiology,” *C.I.T. Research Paper*, 2005. Available at: [http://www.hungarywilsons.com/resources/Christian\\_Church\\_in\\_Hungary.pdf](http://www.hungarywilsons.com/resources/Christian_Church_in_Hungary.pdf)

sketching out what appear to be some significant missiological challenges to the re-evangelization of Hungary as well as some initial revisions that might need to be made to our current strategy of SCP in Hungary.

## Missiological Clash in Eastern Europe

*“We can conclude that in Hungary since 1989, as in most other East European countries, even though the conditions for more complete religious freedom have been established, Christian mission still faces some unsolved problems due not only to worldwide secularization but also to the hangovers of forty years of repressive state policies. The slow but steady development of Christian mission is clearly unthinkable without discussions of all related problems. From this angle, both ecumenism and dialogue are of crucial importance. Thus, one of the most important tasks of those concerned with mission seems to be the gradual overcoming of the obstacles that stand in the way of effective ecumenism and dialogue.” —Tamás Földesi*

Ever since the fall of Communism in 1989, waves of evangelical missionaries flooded Eastern Europe with little or no background knowledge of language and culture, but with a desire to ‘bring Jesus’ to Eastern Europe. However, falsely assuming that the Communists had completely destroyed the existing Christian witness within these countries, many of the evangelical missionaries perceive themselves to be ‘starting from zero.’<sup>7</sup> This, unfortunately, seems to be a grave missiological error. Eastern Europe is not un-Christian, or devoid of a Christian witness; rather it is ‘post-Christian’ or ‘de-churched,’ where many nominal Christians have been ‘immunized’ against the gospel.<sup>8</sup> As Volf points out,

In Eastern Europe, Jesus Christ has been not only present but also worshiped by millions of people for centuries. Maybe he was worshiped in a wrong way, maybe only half-heartedly, maybe even only with lips. Yet he was there, and he was worshiped. Jesus does not need to be brought to Eastern Europe. What we need to do is to wash the face of Jesus, that beautiful face that has been dirtied not only by Communist propaganda but also by so many compromises our churches—both the

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<sup>7</sup> John Lukács, “The Church in Hungary Today,” *America* 165, no. 9 (1991): 220.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

established and evangelical—have made through the centuries.<sup>9</sup>

In which case, traditional methods of evangelism or church-planting that assume the targeted audiences have never heard the gospel, nor take into account the issues that caused their inoculation against Christianity in the first place, are incommensurate with the task of reaching Eastern Europe for Christ. In order for evangelism and church-planting to succeed, the relevance and credibility of Christianity to the now secularized societies must first be addressed.

### *Nationalism, Ecumenism, and Christian Credibility*

Among the many current challenges to the mission of the Christian Church in Hungary is the continuance of nationalism. Speaking about the Reformed Church, Pasztor writes:

In political life it has been relatively easy to swap the horse of communism for that of nationalism...Hatred, which is the source of that kind of thinking and behavior, can be detected in certain circles of Hungarian church and society. Unfortunately this kind of extreme nationalism coupled with hatred has found its way into our church...

As a result some regard the Reformed Church in Hungary as in its totality accepting and promoting an intolerant, aggressive, racist attitude against other nations. This state of affairs has rendered a very serious obstacle in presenting the Gospel in our society.<sup>10</sup>

Instead of diminishing with time, the mixture of nationalism and Christianity in some of the Hungarian churches continues to compromise the Church's credibility to the non-believing public.

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<sup>9</sup> Miroslav Volf, "Fishing in the Neighbor's Pond: Mission and Proselytism in Eastern Europe," International Bulletin of Missionary Research 20, no. 1 (January 1996): 23.

<sup>10</sup> János Pasztor, "What Does it Mean to be a Missionary Church Today?" Religion in Eastern Europe 24, no. 4 (2004): 39 f.

Another major obstacle to re-evangelization appears to be a serious lack of unity among Christian churches and traditions. Already alienated from each other due to ethnic composition<sup>11</sup> and theological disagreement, the divisions within the Protestant churches were further exacerbated and exploited through the Communist government's strategy "to purposefully create mistrust and divisions between denominations and within the Christian congregations by spreading rumors and creating fear."<sup>12</sup> Additionally, the few instances of ecumenism that did exist were monitored and manipulated by the government, which resulted in a perception that the international ecumenical leaders and contacts favored the domestic church leaders who chose to collaborate with the Communist government.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, ecumenical movements were unwittingly manipulated by Soviet propaganda, and later when the churches were finally given religious freedom, many of the new church leaders repudiated any involvement with ecumenism.<sup>14</sup>

These new church leaders, who were largely elected as a protest against the old collaborationist leaders, often were people who had been exiled or imprisoned by the Communist government. Therefore, alongside their skepticism and cynicism towards ecumenism, the newly elected Christian leaders "neither know the other [domestic] church leaders nor do they trust them."<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, this constellation of fear and distrust among current church leaders has only further challenged the prospect for Christian unity.

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<sup>11</sup> See Anne-Marie Kool, *God Moves in a Mysterious Way: The Hungarian Protestant Foreign Mission Movement (1756-1951)*, (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 1993), pgs. 37-54 in particular.

<sup>12</sup> Anne-Marie Kool, "A Protestant Perspective on Mission in Eastern and Central Europe," *Religion in Eastern Europe* 20, no. 6 (December, 2000). Available at [http://www.georgefox.edu/academics/undergrad/departments/soc-swk/ree/kool\\_app.doc](http://www.georgefox.edu/academics/undergrad/departments/soc-swk/ree/kool_app.doc); accessed on 20 April 2005.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Mojzes, "The Cold War between Religions," *Religion in Eastern Europe*, Editorial. Available at <http://www.georgefox.edu/academics/undergrad/departments/soc-swk/ree/CHURCHWA.MOJ.doc>; accessed on 20 April 2005.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

Implicit in the preceding analysis is the assumption that greater Christian unity and ecumenism is something both positive and necessary for the re-evangelization of Hungary. In an article analyzing the conditions and challenges facing modern mission in Hungary, Tamás Földesi argues:

We can conclude that in Hungary since 1989, as in most other East European countries, even though the conditions for more complete religious freedom have been established, Christian mission still faces some unsolved problems due not only to worldwide secularization but also to the hangovers of forty years of repressive state policies. The slow but steady development of Christian mission is clearly unthinkable without discussions of all related problems. From this angle, both ecumenism and dialogue are of crucial importance. Thus, one of the most important tasks of those concerned with mission seems to be the gradual overcoming of the obstacles that stand in the way of effective ecumenism and dialogue.<sup>16</sup>

The framework for this dialogue as well as the nature and extent of the requisite ecumenism are open questions that warrant significant further debate. However, according to Földesi, without beginning to bridge these barriers to unity among Christians, the Church will remain largely impotent in addressing many of the fundamental problems that have disillusioned modern Hungarians with Christianity. Churches that remain independent of, and antagonistic toward other parts of the Christian body, especially when infused with nationalism, will most likely continue to lose credibility.

### *Criticism of Current Expatriate Missionary Involvement*

Over fifteen years have passed since the massive influx of foreign missionaries began in 1989. However, some notable European missiologists have begun asking whether or not this help from the ‘expatriate contingent’ of missionaries

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<sup>16</sup> Földesi.

has been effective, and whether or not there might be better ways of working together with the established churches.<sup>17</sup> As a result, several significant challenges to effective expatriate missionary involvement were identified, three of which have significant implications in light of the preceding analysis of this paper.

The first challenge identified is that most Western missionaries often do not understand the reasons behind the existing churches' negative reactions to their often good-intentioned activities. Quoting Paul Mojzes, Dr. Kool writes:

Most of the countries in Central and Eastern Europe are still in the nation building stage, focusing on national unification. Religion plays an important role in affirming this collective identity, often in the form of the dominant historic religion, which was marginalized for so long. Because the missionaries belong to heterodox (interdenominational) religious communities, either from abroad, or from the country itself, they are considered to be 'obstacles in the process toward maximal homogenization,' and for that reason, their activities give rise to great resistance from both national political and traditional religious leaders.<sup>18</sup>

Focusing on international and interdenominational themes such as salvation and truth, these ex-patriot missionaries are out of step with the national churches, which along with other social and political institutions are focusing on re-establishing a collective national identity, and preserving it over and against the rising tide of globalization. Therefore, unaware of why they are viewed as threatening, these missionaries promoting a trans-cultural message and set of values are oftentimes lumped together into a negatively perceived group and rejected as alien.<sup>19</sup>

A second major challenge to effective missionary involvement that was identified concerns their differing perspectives on what constitutes a Christian, and its

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<sup>17</sup> Kool, "A Protestant Perspective," 11.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

implication for what the target group of evangelism should be. Miroslav Volf comments that evangelical missionaries generally classified most members of the established churches as non-Christian, and therefore valid targets for evangelization.<sup>20</sup> Volf continues delineating the differing perspectives on what it means to be a Christian by saying,

Established churches are like mothers who embrace all children born to them—that is, all who were baptized. There are various degrees of belonging to the church. There is a place for saints, and there is a place for sinners; all are welcome. Protestants, however, are like stern fathers, and accept only those who behave—who actively believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord and act in accordance to their belief. Hence, for Protestants, all those who do not “behave”—believe and act—are legitimate objects of evangelization. Moreover, they ought to be encouraged to leave the places where they are not challenged to behave and join the communities of behavers—the true believers.<sup>21</sup>

This perspective of the evangelical missionaries, however, often produces a negative reaction from the historic churches, which, in turn, only reinforces the evangelicals’ belief that the members of the established churches need to be evangelized.<sup>22</sup>

Additionally, an unfortunate side effect of targeting members of another church for evangelism is that it further entrenches the still lingering communist attitude in Hungarian society that regards someone with an opposing opinion as the enemy.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, instead of resolving one of the barriers to effective re-evangelization, this attitude only serves to intensify the Us/Them mentality, one of the factors that weakened the influence of the Christian churches in the first place.

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<sup>20</sup> Volf, 26.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 27. This is an interesting observation, given the emphasis of grace over works for most of these evangelical missionaries.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 26.

<sup>23</sup> Pasztor, 43.

A third, and particularly troubling critique of the expatriate missionary activity in Eastern Europe, is in regards to their strong focus on church planting. Dr. Kool makes the following argument:

The problem of proselytism is aggravated by the strong focus by the evangelical missionaries on planting new churches even in countries where the established Protestant churches are relatively strong. (Hungary has more than 1500 Protestant churches all over the country.) Many argue that the incentive for the priority to planting new churches in these countries is given with the statistical fact that hardly any 'viable' churches are available, which can reproduce them. So instead of working on the revitalization of the existing churches they chose to give priority to starting new ones.<sup>24</sup>

Dr. Kool continues with an example of one of the missionaries working in Hungary:

Underlining an "attitude and ignorance of the missions situation in Hungary" a mission leader involved in church planting in Hungary recently articulated his vision with the importance "to acknowledge that we need more churches in Hungary. I estimate that the church buildings in Hungary could not hold more than 30% of the population and the current pastoral structure could not hold more than 20% of the population and that most of the churches in Hungary would not know what to do with new Christians but God wants 100% of Hungarians to have New Life in Christ so we better plant churches." He called on the Reformed Church in Hungary to "repent of their pride and be humble enough to think that they do not own the world and control God." He added, "I love the Reformed Church in Hungary, but God is able to work without it also."<sup>25</sup>

This quotation by Dr. Kool is troubling because the negative interpretive frame she presents elucidates well the disjunction between the missiology employed by the expatriate missionaries and that employed by the national church leaders, as well as the tensions that have arisen thereof.

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<sup>24</sup> Kool, "A Protestant Perspective," 15.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 16.

Additionally, Juraj Kusnierik deepens the critique by asking some provocative questions about the contextual effectiveness of Saturation Church Planting (SCP) in particular. Arguing that although ‘saturating’ a country with churches might be a positive goal in itself, the spiritual impact of “reproducing small, closed, theologically superficial and culturally irrelevant communities” might turn out to be quite marginal, especially since there are already Protestant churches available in every geographical area of Hungary.<sup>26</sup> Kusnierik concedes that these many of these churches have significant problems and are largely nominal, but questions whether or not the alternative churches reproduced through SCP will work any better. Highlighting the tendency of SCP to focus more on quantitative growth rather than qualitative growth, he is concerned that instead of transforming “the existing churches into communities that are culturally relevant and might have a greater spiritual impact on society,” we are merely creating more introverted churches.<sup>27</sup>

On the other hand, the SCP advocate would surely point out that there is no logical necessity for the churches planted through an SCP movement to be small, closed, theologically superficial, or culturally irrelevant communities. In fact, the stated goal of SCP is to reproduce vibrant, biblical, disciple-making churches that transform society for God’s glory. In addition, the existing Protestant churches that Kusnierik offers as an alternative to reproducing ‘new’ churches, are largely just nominal, with little or no spiritual impact themselves. Furthermore, it is unclear whether a viable renewal movement would ever be efficacious in transforming these existing churches.

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<sup>26</sup> Kusnierik, Juraj, and Marsh Moyle, “Trends - Ten Years On. A Sen Study Paper Describing Major Trends in Central European Church and Society 10 Years after the Fall of Communism.” *SEN Research Paper*, (Bratislava, 1999): 27. Quoted in Kool, “A Protestant Perspective,” 16.

<sup>27</sup> Kool, “A Protestant Perspective,” 17.

Ultimately, the missiological debate between Kusnierik and the SCP advocate appears irresolvable and boils down to a matter of where one places his/her faith. Kusnierik does not seem to have much faith in the viability and efficacy of Saturation Church Planting in terms of reproducing quality churches that will have a significant social impact; instead, he places his faith in the prospects of reforming and renewing the multitude of existing churches within Hungary. On the other hand, the SCP advocate does not seem to have much faith in the viability and efficacy of initiating significant reform and renewal within the existing churches, but instead places his/her faith in the SCP movement's ability to reproduce quality and spiritually significant churches. Nonetheless, Kusnierik's question is a haunting one. If the underlying issues that ultimately produced the current state of affairs in the church—as well as the broader Hungarian culture's disillusionment with the church—are not addressed and resolved, what makes us think that by reproducing a bunch of new churches, these new churches will turn out to be any better than the 1500 churches already there?

## Conclusion

Whichever missiological strategy we adopt for the future, the need for greater ecumenical dialogue is becoming increasingly self-evident. Theological dispute, division, ethnic identification and nationalism have marked the history of Christianity in Hungary and as a result, instead of ecumenism, belligerent attitudes and interdenominational conflict ensued.<sup>28</sup> Consequently,

There is a great need for well-equipped leaders in the churches of Eastern Europe, able to deal with the burning issues...like the churches' response to nationalism and ethnicity, revitalization of the churches for local and global mission, how to communicate the Gospel in a relevant way to the secularized de-churched (nominal) and un-churched people of the former communist countries, and how to move towards reconciliation in church and society."<sup>29</sup>

Thus, the need for a new *modus operandi* has become vital to the future success of mission in Hungary today.

Recently, there have also been some initial positive steps towards greater ecumenical missiology. Throughout the previous few years, missiologists in Central and Eastern Europe have been meeting together at various conferences. One of the first fruits of these conferences has been the realization that,

[Eastern European missiologists] all face more or less the same struggles in formulating and addressing the missiological issues of our 'post-communist' contexts and in introducing a new discipline in the theological curriculum: missiology. It also became clear, that we

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<sup>28</sup> Földesi.

<sup>29</sup> Kool, "A Protestant Perspective," 11.

hardly know of what each of us is doing in the area of research, teaching and publications.<sup>30</sup>

Consequently, in November 2002, the Central and Eastern European Association for Mission Studies (CEEAMS) was officially inaugurated at the Protestant Institute for Mission Studies in Budapest, Hungary.

The establishment of CEEAMS is a positive first step; however, much more Christian thinking and missiological refinement is still needed. As Kool suggests:

The re-evangelization of Europe and the revitalization of its churches poses for us new missiological issues: The issue of reaching out to de-churched people, 'nominal Christians,' the issue of how to cooperate with the mainline churches in true partnership, as well as the issue of church renewal versus church planting, to mention just a few, all require profound study.<sup>31</sup>

My hope is that the resultant missiological development of this association as well as others to come will commence a new era in Hungary Church history, where missionary cooperation with existing churches, as well as a new kind of interrelatedness among the existing Christian churches, will gradually begin to reverse the tide of indifference and disillusionment within Hungary toward Christianity.

The question remains, however: Are expatriate missionaries still needed and/or are there missiological adjustments that we need to make to SCP to become more effective in this region? Despite being critical of current foreign missionary activity in Eastern Europe, Kusnierik and others suggest that foreign missionaries *can* be important and needed agents of change:

Big visions are often missing.... A foreign missionary is in a good position to question some of the old habits,

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<sup>30</sup> A.M. Kool, "Report on the Central and Eastern European Association of Mission Studies (CEEAMS)," Report presented to the International Association of Mission Studies (IAMS) in Malaysia, 31 July – 4 August 2004.

<sup>31</sup> Kool, "A Protestant Perspective," 23.

break notorious taboos, and show new and creative ways in encouraging a healthy diversity in an otherwise quite uniform environment.<sup>32</sup>

If this assessment is correct, expatriate missionaries *do* have an important role to play in the re-evangelization of Eastern Europe. Many church leaders have received a stimulus from the exposure to other models, as well as from exposure to the missionaries themselves, particularly in the area of focusing on the future instead of the past, as well as proper planning and management.<sup>33</sup> However, Kool argues that for foreign missionary involvement to make a significant impact on the Christian landscape in Hungary, “a radical refocusing is needed away from independent church planting efforts towards partnering with local churches in working towards their revitalization.”<sup>34</sup>

Whether or not foreign missionaries need to abandon independent church planting efforts and radically refocus on the revitalization of existing churches is a question that warrants further debate. Perhaps, the two ostensibly opposing strategies of SCP and church renewal will prove to be a false dichotomy, and some permutation of the two will gain traction. Whatever the case may be, one thing is clear: pursuing the present course of an SCP strategy without further examination and serious debate will only continue to drive a wedge between the foreign missionaries (and the churches spawned by them) and the leaders of the established churches. Given the historical context above, this increasing disunity will simply exacerbate the already widening chasm between the Church and the disillusioned world outside, ultimately precluding the very end SCP desires to achieve.

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<sup>32</sup> Kusnierik and Moyle, 25. Quoted in Kool, “A Protestant Perspective,” 17.

<sup>33</sup> Kool, “A Protestant Perspective,” 17.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 21.