

“A very timely and eminently engaging book for all those who care deeply about the church’s mission in our day. Again and again, I found myself nodding in agreement as the authors made a key point from Scripture or noted the missional relevance of a given biblical passage. I highly recommend this book, not just as food for thought, but more importantly, as a call to obedient, biblically informed action.”

—**Andreas Köstenberger**, Senior Professor of New Testament and Biblical Theology, Director of PhD Studies, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

“In what appears to be a growing tension over what the mission of the church encompasses, DeYoung and Gilbert bring a remarkably balanced book that can correct, restore, and help regardless of which way you lean or land on all things ‘missional.’ I found the chapters on social justice and our motivation in good works to be especially helpful. Whether you are actively engaging the people around you with the gospel and serving the least of these or you are hesitant of anything ‘missional,’ this book will help you rest in God’s plan to reconcile all things to himself in Christ.”

—**Matt Chandler**, Lead Pastor, The Village Church, Highland Village, Texas

“Christ is the greatest message in the world, and delivering it is the greatest mission. But are we losing our focus? Are we being distracted, sometimes even by good things? Zealous Christians disagree sharply today over the church’s proper ministry and mission. Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert bring us back to first things in an age of mission creep and distraction. Offering balanced wisdom, this book will give us not only encouragement but discomfort exactly where we all need it. It’s the kind of biblical sanity we need at this moment.”

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“Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert have written an important book on an important topic. Fair, keenly observant, startlingly honest, this book is replete with careful exegetical work. Verses are not merely cited; they are considered in context. The length of an idea is considered, all the way from its expression in the local church back to its source in Scripture. The result is a book that is nuanced and clear, useful and enjoyable to read, and that is no small gift from two young pastor-theologians who have already become reliable voices. Open this book and you’ll want to open your Bible and open your mind on everything from justice to capitalism, from mercy to love.”

—**Mark Dever**, Senior Pastor, Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Washington, DC

“DeYoung and Gilbert clear the fog that has settled over the nature of the church’s mission. Their tone is gracious, the style is accessible, but most importantly this book is marked by fidelity to biblical revelation and the gospel of Jesus Christ. The authors have succeeded in what they exhort us to do: they have kept the main thing as the main thing.”

—**Thomas R. Schreiner**, James Buchanan Harrison Professor
of New Testament Interpretation, The Southern Baptist
Theological Seminary

“Among the many books that have recently appeared on mission, this is the best one if you are looking for sensible definitions, clear thinking, readable writing, and the ability to handle the Bible in more than proof-texting ways. I pray that God will use it to bring many to a renewed grasp of what the gospel is and how that gospel relates, on the one hand, to biblical theology and, on the other, to what we are called to do.”

—**D. A. Carson**, Research Professor of New Testament,
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

“DeYoung and Gilbert provide clarity to some of the most complex contemporary issues facing the church. Focusing us squarely on the redemptive nature of the gospel, they ultimately point us not only to the church’s mission, but to practical ways to understand and live it. The result is a book that will be of great help to pastors, missiologists, theologians, and practitioners.”

—**M. David Sills**, Faye Stone Professor of Christian Missions and
Cultural Anthropology, Director of the Doctor of
Missiology Program and Great Commission Ministries,
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“DeYoung and Gilbert have put us in their debt with their clear, biblical, theological, and pastoral exposition of the mission of God’s people. That mission, which they rightly understand within the story line of the whole Bible, is summarized in the Great Commission and involves gospel proclamation and disciple making. This superb book will encourage its readers ‘to go into the world and make disciples by declaring the gospel of Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit and gathering these disciples into churches, that they might worship and obey Jesus Christ now and in eternity to the glory of God the Father.’”

—**Peter O’Brien**, Emeritus Faculty Member,
Moore College, Sydney, Australia

What Is the *Mission* of the Church?

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KEVIN DEYOUNG AND GREG GILBERT

 **CROSSWAY**
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thanks for sharpening us, laughing with us,
and sharing your Crazy Bread.

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PART 1

Understanding Our Mission

CHAPTER 1

A Common Word in Need of a Careful Definition

If everything is mission, nothing is mission.

—STEPHEN NEILL

IF YOU'RE READING THIS BOOK, you're probably a Christian. And if a Christian, you probably take some kind of interest in the church. And if you've been involved in a church, you've probably wondered from time to time, "What are we trying to accomplish anyway?" Maybe as a pastor you've asked yourself, "With everyone interested in their own program and passionate about their own cause, are we even aiming at the same thing?" Maybe as a Christian businessman or stay-at-home mom you've thought, "I know we are supposed to glorify God. But under that big umbrella, what does God want our church to be doing?"

At their root, these questions all ask the same thing: *What is the mission of the church?*

The question is deceptively complex and potentially divisive. For starters, what do we even mean by *mission*? And if that can be settled, we then face more difficult questions. Is the mission of the church *discipleship* or *good deeds* or both? Is the mission of the church the same as the mission of God? Is the mission of the church distinct from the responsibilities of individual Christians? Is the mission of the church a continuation of the mission of Jesus? If so, what was his mission anyway?

Related to these questions are others: What should be the church's role in pursuing *social justice*? Are we right to even use that phrase, and what do we mean by it? Does God expect the church to change the world, to be about the work of transforming its social structures? What about the *kingdom*? How do we build the kingdom of God? Or are we even capable of building the kingdom? How does the kingdom relate to the *gospel*? How does the gospel relate to *the whole story line of the Bible*? And how does all of this relate to *mission*?

Despite all these questions, there is a lot that evangelicals can agree on when it comes to mission: the gospel is, at the very least, the good news of Jesus's death and resurrection; proclamation is essential to the church's witness; heaven and hell are real; people are lost without Jesus; bodies matter as well as souls; and good deeds as the fruit of transformed lives are not optional. But if we are to find a lasting and robust agreement on mission praxis and mission priorities, we must move past generalities and build our theology of mission using the right categories and the right building blocks. In other words, as we grasp key concepts like kingdom, gospel, and social justice, we will be better able to articulate a careful, biblically faithful understanding of the mission of the church. And just as important, we'll be able to pursue obedience to Christ in a way that is more realistic, freeing, and, in the long run, fruitful.

What Is Mission?

Before going any further in answering the question posed in this book's title, we should acknowledge the difficulty in the question itself. A big part of the problem in defining the mission of the church is defining the word *mission*. Because *mission* is not a biblical word like *covenant* or *justification* or *gospel*, determining its meaning for believers is particularly difficult. We could do a study of the word *gospel* and come to some pretty firm biblical conclusions about "What is the Gospel?"—and we will, later in this book!¹ But *mission* is a bit trickier. On the one hand the Latin verb *mittere* corresponds to the Greek verb *apostellein*, which occurs 137 times in the New Testament. So mission is not exactly extrabiblical. But as a noun, *mission* does not occur in the Bible, which makes the question of this book more difficult.

The answer to the question, "What is the mission of the church?" depends, to a large degree, on what is meant by "mission." One could make a case that *glorifying God and enjoying him forever* is the mission of the church, because that is our chief end as redeemed believers. Someone else might argue that *loving God and loving neighbor* is the best description of our mission, because those are the greatest commandments. And someone else might borrow from the nineteenth-century hymn and argue that *trust and obey* is the essence of our mission, because that is the great call of the gospel message. In one sense we would be foolish to argue with any of these answers. If mission is simply a synonym for living a faithful Christian life, then there are dozens of ways to answer the question, "What is the mission of the church?"

But isn't it wise to aim for a more precise definition of such a common word? We've never met a Christian who was against mission. In fact, every church we've ever known would say they are passionate about mission. So shouldn't we try to be clear

¹See also Greg Gilbert, *What Is the Gospel?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), and D. A. Carson, "What Is the Gospel?—Revisited," in *For the Fame of God's Name: Essays in Honor of John Piper*, ed. Sam Storms and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 147–70.

what we are all for? Christians have long seen the importance of carefully defining other theological words like *Trinity*, *essence*, and *inerrancy*.² Theology will not go far without careful attention to distinctions and definitions. So why not work toward a definition of *mission*? Christians often talk about mission trips, mission fields, and mission work, so it would seem to be a good idea at least to attempt to define what we are talking about. Granted, word meanings can change, and it may not be possible to rein in the definition of *mission* after fifty years of expansion. But it seems to us that a more precise definition is necessary, if for no other reason than the conviction that Stephen Neill's quip is spot-on: "If everything is mission, nothing is mission."³

But where to start with a definition? In his influential book *Transforming Mission*, David Bosch rightly argues, "Since the 1950s there has been a remarkable escalation in the use of the word 'mission' among Christians. This went hand in hand with a significant broadening of the concept, at least in certain circles."⁴ It used to be that *mission* referred pretty narrowly to Christians sent out cross-culturally to convert non-Christians and plant churches. But now *mission* is understood much more broadly. Environmental stewardship is mission. Community renewal is mission. Blessing our neighbors is mission. Mission is here. Mission is there. Mission is everywhere. We are all missionaries. As Christopher Wright puts it, disagreeing with Stephen Neill's quote, "If everything is mission . . . *everything is mission*."⁵ The ambiguity of the term *mission* is only augmented

²Jonathan Edwards, in his famous treatise *The End for Which God Created the World*, went so far as to distinguish between a *chief* end, an *ultimate* end, an *inferior* end, and a *subordinate* end. See John Piper, *God's Passion for His Glory: Living the Vision of Jonathan Edwards* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006).

³Quoted in Keith Ferdinando, "Mission: A Problem of Definition," *Themelios* 33, no. 1; <http://thegospelcoalition.org/publications/33-1/mission-a-problem-of-definition>.

⁴David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 1.

⁵Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God's People: A Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 26; emphasis added. The disagreement, however, should not be exaggerated. Neill allows for a broad scope of Christian activities, but would place these within a correct theology of the *church* and a correct theology of

by the recent proliferation of terms like *missional* and *missio Dei*. It's no wonder Bosch concludes a few pages later, "Ultimately, mission remains undefinable."⁶

But perhaps a common definition is not yet a lost cause. Before giving up on a definition, Bosch acknowledges that *mission*, at least in traditional usage, "presupposes a sender, a person or persons sent by the sender, those to whom one is sent, and an assignment."⁷ Though his broader theology of mission is quite different from what we will propose in this book, and though he doesn't like many of the ways this traditional understanding was employed, Bosch is on to something here. At its most basic, the term *mission* implies two things to most people: (1) being sent and (2) being given a task. The first point makes sense because *mission* comes from a Latin word (*mittere*) meaning "to send." The second point is implied in the first. When sent on a mission, we are sent to *do something*—and not *everything*, either, but rather we are given a particular assignment. On a street level, people basically know what mission means. For example, the old TV show *Mission: Impossible* always involved a specific goal that Peter Graves was supposed to accomplish. Companies spend millions every year honing their "mission statements," and fast-food restaurants even post "Our Mission" on the wall to assure us they're fanatically focused on serving us the best burgers in town. Even in the world around us, everyone understands that a mission is that primary thing you set out to accomplish. Most every organization has *something*, as opposed to other things, that it does and must do, and it understands that thing to be its mission. We think the same is true of the church.

In his study of mission in John's Gospel, Andreas Köstenberger proposes a working definition along the same lines: "Mission is the specific task or purpose which a person or group seeks

ministry. In other words, mission is not everything, but that doesn't mean the church does only one thing. Thanks to David Reimer for drawing our attention to this point.

⁶Ibid., 9.

⁷Ibid., 1.

to accomplish.”⁸ Notice again the key concepts of being sent and being given a task. Likewise, John Stott has argued that mission is not everything the church does, but rather describes “everything the church is sent into the world to do.”⁹ We are convinced that if you ask most Christians, “What is the mission of the church?” they will hear you asking, “What is the specific task or purpose that the church is *sent into the world to accomplish?*” This is our working definition of *mission* and what we mean to ask with the title of this book.

A Correction to the Correction

Our sincere hope is that this book can be a positive contribution to the mission discussion so prevalent and so needed in the evangelical world. We want to be positive in tone. We want to build up rather than tear down. But inevitably, a fair amount of our work in these chapters will be corrective as well.

Some of what we want to correct is an overexpansive definition that understands mission to be just about every good thing a Christian could do as a partner with God in his mission to redeem the whole world.¹⁰ But we are *not* antimissional.¹¹ More and more, *missional* simply means being “on mission”—conscious of how everything we do should serve the mission of the church, being winsome and other-centered and Good Samaritan-like with those outside the community of faith, and having a sanctified strategy

⁸Andreas J. Köstenberger, *The Missions of Jesus and the Disciples according to the Fourth Gospel: With Implications for the Fourth Gospel's Purpose and the Mission of the Contemporary Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 199. The full quotation reads, “Mission is the specific task or purpose which a person or group seeks to accomplish, involving various modes of movement, be it sending or being sent, coming and going, descending and ascending, gathering by calling others to follow, or following.”

⁹John R. W. Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World: What the Church Should Be Doing Now!* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1975), 30.

¹⁰For example, Reggie McNeal says “the missional church is *the people of God partnering with God in his redemptive mission in the world.*” *Missional Renaissance: Changing the Scorecard for the Church* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 24.

¹¹We hope it goes without saying that we are not anti-our brothers in the Acts 29 and Redeemer networks. This book is not written to critique them, and we are confident they share our desire to make gospel proclamation and discipleship central in the mission of the church.

of being intentional and “attractual” for those who don’t know Christ. It is often shorthand for “get out of your holy huddle and go engage your community with the gospel.” We are all for that. Every Christian should be. We are not out to tar and feather any Christian who dares put *-al* on the end of *mission*. Even less do we want to cast aspersions on many of our friends who happily use the word and usually mean very good things by it.

Nevertheless, it is not wrong to probe the word *missional*. It’s a big trunk that can smuggle a great deal of unwanted baggage. Being suspicious of every mention of the word is bad, but raising concerns about how the word is sometimes used is simply wise.

With that in mind, we register a few concerns about how missional thinking has sometimes played out in the conversation about the church’s mission:

1. We are concerned that good behaviors are sometimes commended but in the wrong categories. For example, many good deeds are promoted under the term *social justice*, when we think “loving your neighbor” is often a better category. Or, folks will talk about transforming the world, when we think “faithful presence” is a better way to describe what we are trying to do and actually can do in the world. Or, sometimes well-meaning Christians talk about “building the kingdom” or “building *for* the kingdom,” when actually the verbs associated with the kingdom are almost always passive (*enter, receive, inherit*). We’d do better to speak of living as citizens of the kingdom, rather than telling our people that they build the kingdom.

2. We are concerned that in our newfound missional zeal we sometimes put hard “oughts” on Christians where there should be inviting “cans.” You *ought* to do something about human trafficking. You *ought* to do something about AIDS. You *ought* to do something about lack of good public education. When you say “ought,” you imply that if the church does not tackle these problems, we are being disobedient. We think it would be better to invite individual Christians, in keeping with their gifts and

calling, to try to solve these problems rather than indicting the church for “not caring.”

3. We are concerned that in all our passion for renewing the city or tackling social problems, we run the risk of marginalizing the one thing that makes Christian mission Christian: namely, making disciples of Jesus Christ.

Before we go any farther down the missional-corrective road, though, perhaps it would be helpful to make clear at the outset what we do and do not want to accomplish with this book.

We do *not* want:

- Christians to be indifferent toward the suffering around them and around the world
- Christians to think evangelism is the only thing in life that really counts
- Christians who risk their lives and sacrifice for the poor and disadvantaged to think their work is in any way suspect or is praiseworthy only if it results in conversions
- Christians to retreat into holy huddles or be blissfully unconcerned to work hard and make an impact in whatever field or career to which the Lord calls them
- Christians to stop dreaming of creative, courageous ways to love their neighbors and impact their cities

We want to underline all those bullet points, star them, mark them with highlighter, and write them on our hearts. It’s far too easy to get our heads right, but our hearts and hands wrong.

Having said all that, however, here’s some of what we *do* want:

- We want to make sure the gospel—the good news of Christ’s death for sin and subsequent resurrection—is of first importance in our churches.

- We want Christians freed from false guilt—from thinking the church is either responsible for most problems in the world or responsible to fix these problems.
- We want the crystal-clear and utterly unique task of the church—making disciples of Jesus Christ to the glory of God the Father—put front and center, not lost in a flurry of commendable concerns.
- We want Christians to understand the story line of the Bible and think more critically about specific texts within this story.
- We want the church to remember that there is something worse than death and something better than human flourishing. If we hope only for renewed cities and restored bodies in this life, we are of all people most to be pitied.

In correcting certain aspects of some missional thinking, we realize that missional thinking itself is striving to correct abuses of traditional missiology. Both corrections may be necessary at times. Hopefully no evangelical would say (or think), “Ah, let it all burn up. Who cares about food and water for the poor? Who gives a rip about HIV? Give ’em the gospel for the soul and ignore the needs of the body.” This is what missional thinking is *against*. And similarly, we hope no evangelical would say (or think) the opposite: “Sharing the gospel is offensive and to be avoided. As long as the poor have job training, health care, and education—that’s enough. The world needs more food, not more sermons.” This is what we trust missional thinking is *not for*.

A Prayer for Humility and Understanding

The truth is that both sides have some important things to say to one another, and we should be careful in our mutual correction not to overcompensate. At their best, missional thinkers

are warning the church against a careless, loveless indifference to the problems and potential opportunities all around us, a dualistic disregard for the whole person. On the other hand, a (usually) different group of Christians fears overly optimistic (and exhausting) utopian dreams, a loss of God-centeredness, and a diminishment of the church's urgent message of Christ crucified for hell-bound sinners.

Both are real dangers. We admit we are probably more sensitive to the second danger. And indeed one of the aims of this book is to guard the church from these errors. But we fully understand that many Christians, perhaps even the two of us, are often in danger of passing by the wounded man on the Jericho road. One of the challenges of this book—probably the biggest challenge—is that we may be seen as (or actually be!) two guys only paying lip service to good deeds. While we hope this book gives Christians a better handle on disputed texts and better categories for thinking of their service in the world, we would be disappointed to discover a year from now that our work did anything to discourage radical love and generosity for hurting people. Both of us, although far from perfect examples, have often given to hurting people and have supported organizations and individuals who work to alleviate suffering. Both our churches are involved in mercy ministry at home and abroad. All that to say, we want to be—and we want our congregants and all our readers to be—the sort of “just person” Tim Keller describes as living “a life of honesty, equity, and generosity in every aspect of his or her life.”¹²

And yet this book is not about “generous justice.” It is about the mission of the church. We want to help Christians articulate and live out their views on the mission of the church in ways that are more theologically faithful, exegetically careful, and personally sustainable.

¹²Timothy Keller, *Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes Us Just* (New York: Dutton, 2010), 17.

A Pastoral Approach

At the beginning of a book it is often helpful to understand what kind of work you are reading. This is not a book by and for biblical or theological scholars. We will deal with a lot of texts and interact with a lot of theology (and hopefully will do so responsibly), but we are not attempting a scholarly monograph on a biblical theology of mission. We are not trying to tell mission boards what to do or to instruct missionaries on how to do their work, though we would like to think this book might be helpful to both groups. We are pastors, writing for the “average” Christian and the “ordinary” pastor trying to make sense of a whole host of missiological questions. From many conversations in print, online, and in person our sense is that this whole issue of mission (along with related issues like kingdom, social justice, shalom, cultural mandate, and caring for the poor) is the most confusing, most discussed, most energizing, and most potentially divisive issue in the evangelical church today. It is certainly a likely fault line in the so-called young, restless, and Reformed movement.

In doing research for this book we read a number of blogs and articles and a big stack of books. From time to time we’ll cite these explicitly in order to interact with real people and their ideas. But we will leave a lot of our research in the background. We do this for two reasons: (1) so as not to distract the reader with gobs of footnotes, and (2) so as not to give any impression that we are trying to size up the missional church. We don’t attempt to define *missional*, and we aren’t trying to divide the missiological landscape into good guys and bad guys. We really don’t want this to be an us-against-them kind of book. But we do want to respond to potential objections and interact with different missiological approaches. Hence, we tried to make our missions-related reading deep and wide.¹³

¹³Among the books we read in part or (more often) in whole are: Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World*; Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990); Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids:

Back to the Question at Hand

So what is the mission of the church? We've kept you in suspense long enough. In short, we will argue that the mission of the church is summarized in the Great Commission passages¹⁴—the climactic marching orders Jesus issues at the ends of the Gospels and at the beginning of Acts. We believe the church is sent into the world to witness to Jesus by proclaiming the gospel and making disciples of all nations. This is our task. This is our unique and central calling.

That's the case we will seek to make in the next chapter, looking both at the Great Commission passages themselves and at several other texts that are often suggested as alternative or additional commissions for the church. The next six chapters (part 2) explore a number of larger theological concepts that are always at issue in these discussions of mission. Chapter 3 asks what the main thrust of the

Eerdmans, 1994); Bosch, *Transforming Mission*; P. T. O'Brien, *Gospel and Mission in the Writings of Paul: An Exegetical and Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995); Darrell Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); Köstenberger, *The Missions of Jesus and the Disciples according to the Fourth Gospel*; James F. Engel and William A. Dyrness, *Changing the Mind of Missions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000); Andreas J. Köstenberger and Peter T. O'Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001); Mark R. Gornik, *To Live in Peace: Biblical Faith and the Changing Inner City* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); Cornelius Plantinga, *Engaging God's World: A Christian Vision of Faith, Learning, and Living* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, 2 vols. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004); Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005); David J. Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict: 10 Key Questions in Christian Missions Today* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2006); Ed Stetzer and David Putnam, *Breaking the Missional Code: Your Church Can Become a Missionary in Your Community* (Nashville: B&H, 2006); Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006); Craig Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church: Community Led by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007); Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007); McNeal, *Missional Renaissance*; James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Keller, *Generous Justice*, John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad! The Supremacy of God in Missions*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010); David Platt, *Radical: Taking Back Your Faith from the American Dream* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2010); M. David Sills, *Reaching and Teaching: A Call to Great Commission Obedience* (Chicago: Moody, 2010); Timothy Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-first Century* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2010); David VanDrunen, *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms: A Study in the Development of Reformed Social Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010); Wright, *The Mission of God's People*; Michael Horton, *The Gospel Commission: Recovering God's Strategy for Making Disciples* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011).

¹⁴Matt. 28:16–20; Mark 13:10; 14:9; Luke 24:44–49; Acts 1:8. See chapter 2 for discussion.

Bible's story line is and how that affects our understanding of the church's mission. Chapter 4 seeks to understand the structure and content of the gospel message itself and asks whether the gospel of forgiveness of sins through Jesus is "too small." Chapter 5 considers the Bible's teaching on the kingdom of God and how we relate to it. Chapters 6 and 7 form a pair, exploring the idea of "social justice" and looking carefully at several biblical texts relating to justice. In chapter 8 we think about God's intention to remake the world, and consider what that means for the church's activity in the world. Chapter 9 is our attempt to think practically about what all this means. If the mission of the church is proclamation and disciple making, then what is the theological motivation for good deeds? And how might a local church think about what it ought to be doing? Finally, chapter 10 offers a concluding perspective and an encouragement to all of us to recommit ourselves to the great work our Lord has given us.

One last word before we launch into things: We want to say again that we strongly support churches undertaking mercy ministries in their communities. Both of our churches have programs and support missionaries that aim to meet physical needs while also hoping to share the gospel whenever possible. Though we do not believe that the mission of the church is to build the kingdom or to partner with God in remaking the world, this does not mean we are against cultural engagement. Our point is simply that we must understand these endeavors in the right theological categories and embrace them without sacrificing more explicit priorities. We should not cheapen good deeds by making them only a means to some other end (evangelism), but neither do we want to exaggerate our responsibility by thinking it is our duty to build the kingdom through our good deeds. Similarly, we should not overspiritualize social action by making it equivalent to God's shalom. As the church loves the world so loved by God, we will work to relieve suffering wherever we can, but especially eternal suffering.¹⁵

¹⁵See D. A. Carson's editorial in *Themelios* 33, no. 2; <http://thegospelcoalition.org/publications/33-2/editorial>.

CHAPTER 2

What in the World Does Jesus Send Us into the World to Do?

MISSION, AS WE TRIED to demonstrate in the previous chapter, is not everything we do in Jesus's name, nor everything we do in obedience to Christ. Mission is the task we are given to fulfill. It's what Jesus sends us into the world to do. And if we want to figure out what Jesus sends disciples into the world to do, we think the best place to look is the Great Commission.

A Few Other Options First

Before we state our reasons for focusing on the Great Commission, and before we get to the Great Commission texts themselves and how they support our thesis above, it might be helpful to examine a few other passages that are sometimes pushed forward as offering a different and fuller mission identity for the church. As you'll see, our problem is not with applying these texts to our contemporary context, or even with using them to shape our missional identity. Every passage of Scripture is

inspired by God and profitable for us (2 Tim. 3:16). But—and here’s the rub—every passage is profitable only *if understood and applied in the right way*.

Genesis 12:1–3

We begin with Yahweh’s call to Abram:

Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (Gen. 12:1–3)

Everyone agrees that this is a pivotal text not just in Genesis but also in God’s grand plan of redemptive history. After a host of curses (Gen. 3:14, 17; 4:11; 5:29; 9:25) and lots of sin run amok, Genesis 12 bursts onto the scene with the promise of universal blessing. At last, here’s a spot of good news and a beautiful revelation both of God’s mission and of marching orders for Abraham.

But whereas everyone recognizes Genesis 12 as a key passage in the unfolding of God’s plan of salvation, others also see it “as one of the most important places in a missiological reading of the Bible.”¹ What they mean is that Genesis 12 reveals the heart of God’s mission *and ours*—namely, to be a blessing. Reggie McNeal argues that in this “simple but far-reaching covenant . . . the people of God are charged with the responsibility and enjoy the privilege to bless everyone.”² Likewise, Christopher Wright maintains that “it would be entirely appropriate, and no bad

¹Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 199.

²Reggie McNeal, *Missional Renaissance: Changing the Scorecard for the Church* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 27.

thing, if we took this text as ‘the Great Commission’. . . . There could be worse ways of summing up what mission is supposed to be all about than ‘Go . . . and be a blessing.’”³ Later he concludes, “The Abrahamic covenant is a moral agenda for God’s people as well as a mission statement by God.”⁴ In missional thinking, Genesis 12 is more than a promise. It’s more than a revelation of God’s ultimate mission in redemptive history. It is a *command* for the children of Abraham to help the nations experience all the good gifts that God longs for them to enjoy.⁵

At first, a closer look at the grammar of Genesis 12 seems to support a “missional” understanding of the text. There are two imperative verbs: “go” in verse 1 and “be a blessing” at the end of verse 2. So, contrary to the ESV translation, it looks as though Abraham has two commands: go and bless. Wright makes much of the grammar, arguing that “both [verbs] therefore have the nature of a charge or a mission laid on Abraham. . . . ‘Be a blessing’ thus entails a purpose and goal that stretches into the future. It is, in short, missional.”⁶ But it’s curious that Wright builds so much on this foundation when earlier he acknowledges that “it is a feature of Hebrew (as indeed it is in English) that when two imperatives occur together the second imperative may sometimes express either the expected result or the intended purpose of carrying out the first imperative.”⁷ In other words, the second grammatical imperative may not have the force of an imperative, but rather of a purpose or a result of obeying the first imperative. In fact, our English translations⁸ all render the end of verse 2 “you shall be a blessing” or “so that you shall be a blessing” or something similar. There are several other places in the Old Testament where an imperative verb

³Wright, *The Mission of God*, 214. Second ellipsis in original.

⁴Ibid., 221.

⁵This language is taken from *ibid.* This is Wright’s exposition of blessing, and it seems that he understands the command to bless to entail these things.

⁶Ibid., 211.

⁷Ibid., 201.

⁸Including the ESV, KJV, NKJV, NASB, NIV, NLT, RSV, and NRSV.

should be translated as a result clause, rather than a command. Take Genesis 42:18 for example, where Joseph says, “Do this and you will live.” Both “do this” and “live” are imperative in form, but “live” is also clearly to be understood as the *result* of “doing this.” It’s not another command. We think this is how the second imperative in Genesis 12:1–2 should be translated—as a result clause, rather than as a command.⁹ This means, to quote Eckhard Schnabel, “Abraham does not receive an assignment to carry YHWH’s blessings to the nations; rather, the nations are promised divine blessing if and when they see Abraham’s faith in YHWH and if and when they establish contact with his descendants.”¹⁰

In talking about Hebrew grammar we quickly realize two things: (1) most people reading this book are ready for us to stop talking about Hebrew grammar, and (2) we are not experts in Hebrew grammar. Some (but not all) Hebrew scholars may disagree with the last paragraph. But even if the verb should be translated as a command, or even if it has that force no matter how you slice it, we still think the “missional” reading of the text says too much. Even if Abraham is told, “Go be a blessing,” the entire story of the patriarchs demonstrates that God is the one doing the blessing, quite apart from any blessing strategy on the part of Abraham. True, God’s blessing may be dependent (in a proximate way) on Abraham going. And true, Abraham’s obedience to God results in blessings on the nations. True, Abraham and his kin are interacting with Gentiles all throughout Genesis as the chosen family is the means of blessing for some peoples

⁹Old Testament scholar Victor P. Hamilton explains the functions of the imperatives in Gen. 12:1–2: “Here the first imperative states the exhortation, and the second imperative touches on the results which are brought about by the implementation of the first imperative (e.g., Gen. 17:1; 1 Kings 22:6; 2 Kings 5:13; Isa. 36:16). Applied to Gen. 12:1–2, this construction means that the first imperative, *go*, is related as effect to cause to this second imperative, *be*. Abram cannot be a blessing if he stays in Haran. But if he leaves, then a blessing he will be.” *The Book of Genesis*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 373.

¹⁰Eckhard Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, vol. 1, *Jesus and the Twelve* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 63.

and cursing for others. But Abraham does not leave Ur intent on blessing the Canaanites. After Genesis 12, the narrative follows different individuals and nations whose plusses and minuses prove the promise of God that whoever blesses Abraham will be blessed, and whoever curses him will be cursed. God blesses Abraham's family despite themselves, and he blesses those who treat Abraham well despite Abraham's failures. This is not to suggest that Abraham's obedience is irrelevant for God's promised blessing. He has to *go* in order to be a blessing. Our point is simply that the obedient going is not going out to serve Amalekites and help them grow crops and learn to read. There is plenty of blessing to go around, but there is no evidence Abraham ever takes his call in chapter 12 as a commission to go find ways to bless the nations.

This doesn't in any way mean it's wrong for Christians to bless others, but it does mean we should not take Genesis 12:1–3 as a moral agenda or as another Great Commission. The call of Abram is not about a community blessing program. It's about God's unilateral promise to bless fumbling Abraham and bless the nations through faith in the promised Seed that will come from his family tree. Even when the blessing is connected to obedience, it is not the obedience of missional engagement but Abraham's obedience in leaving his land, in circumcising his offspring (Gen. 17:10–14), and in being willing to sacrifice his son (Gen. 22:16–18). The emphasis in Genesis is on the chosen family as recipients of God's blessing, not as the immediate purveyors of it.

Most crucially, the New Testament does not understand the call of Abram as a missional charge. Clearly, it is a glorious mission text announcing God's plans to bless the whole world. But the blessing is not something we bestow on others as we work for human flourishing. Rather the Abrahamic blessing comes to those who trust in Abraham's Offspring. This is Paul's understanding in Galatians 3:9 when, after quoting Genesis 12:3 ("In

you all the families of the earth shall be blessed”), he concludes, “So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.” If there are missiological implications from Genesis, their emphasis is not “go and bless everyone” but rather “go and call the nations to put their faith in Christ.”

Exodus 19:5–6

We now turn to the well-known passage where God prepares Israel for his presence at Mount Sinai:

Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel. (Ex. 19:5–6)

Some argue that the language of “kingdom of priests” indicates that we are intermediaries for the presence of God in the world. The logic usually works like this: “The Bible says we are priests. And what do priests do? They mediate God’s presence. So what is our mission? We are supposed to be a kingdom of priests mediating God’s blessing to the world.” Reggie McNeal, commenting on Exodus 19, puts it like this: God “created a people to serve as his ongoing incarnational presence on the earth.”¹¹ Christopher Wright puts it this way: “It is thus richly significant that God confers on Israel as a whole people the role of being his priesthood in the midst of the nations. . . . Just as it was the role of the priests to bless the Israelites, so it would be the role of Israel as a whole ultimately to be a blessing to the nations.”¹²

¹¹McNeal, *Missional Renaissance*, 30.

¹²Wright, *The Mission of God*, 331. Likewise, N. T. Wright comments on Ex. 19:4–6 saying, “The royal and priestly vocation of all human beings, it seems, consists in this: to stand at the interface between God and his creation, bringing God’s wise and generous order to the world and giving articulate voice to creation’s glad and grateful praise to its maker” (*After You Believe* [New York: HarperOne, 2010], 80–81). Later, N. T. Wright argues that

While it is attractive to think Israel is meant to mediate God's blessings to the nations as a kind of incarnational presence, this is not the best way to understand Exodus 19 or the phrase "kingdom of priests." Here are five reasons why:

1. The Levitical priesthood serves a mediatorial role not in terms of incarnating God's presence (his presence is in the glory cloud over the ark of the covenant) but in terms of placating his anger. The primary function of the priests in the Old Testament is to mediate between God and man by administering sacrifices. The book of Hebrews understands the priestly office of Christ in largely the same way (4:14–5:10; 7:1–28; 10:1–18).

2. "Kingdom of priests" is best understood as a designation for Israel's call to be set apart from the world and belong to God. "Kingdom of priests" is an overlapping term with (though not identical with) "holy nation." This is why the Lord tells the people at the mountain to consecrate themselves (Ex. 19:10); they are to be holy as he is holy. Likewise, when the Exodus passage is referenced in 1 Peter 2:9, the focus once again is on holiness—abstaining from the passions of the flesh (1 Pet. 2:11–12). The image of a royal priesthood in the Old Testament and in the New Testament suggests holiness and privilege, not incarnational presence.

3. If God were giving the Israelites a missionary task to bless the non-Israelites, we might expect to see this task specified and elaborated in the Mosaic Law. Yet the rules and regulations of Sinai say nothing about a mission to the Gentiles. There are commands for Israel to express care for sojourners and foreigners in its midst, but not explicit instructions for Israel to go into the world and meet the needs of the nations.

4. The Israelites conquer the surrounding nations by military force, not by any kind of incarnational mission. The nations are

"royal priesthood" means "carrying forward the mission of God declaring God's powerful and rescuing acts, and beginning the work of implementing the messianic rule of Jesus in all the world" (86).

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more often threats to Israel's religion than they are opportunities for service, even if God's design all along is to save more than ethnic Jews (see Isa. 42:6; 49:6; 60:3). If Israel is supposed to mediate God's blessing to the nations, it has a strange way of fulfilling the task.

5. The prophets never fault Israel for neglecting its missionary or international blessing mandate. God certainly cares about how his chosen people will be an attraction or a byword among the nations. But the direction is "come and see" not "go and tell." If missional engagement were a covenant obligation, surely the Israelites would be rebuked for failing to keep this aspect of the law.¹³

Luke 4:16–21

A final popular missional text comes at the start of Jesus's public ministry:

And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written,

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." [Isa. 61:1–2]

And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed

¹³These last three reasons, and a few more we haven't included, can be found in Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, 71–72.

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on him. And he began to say to them, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” (Luke 4:16–21)

No doubt, this text is one of the clearest statements of Jesus’s mission and the goals of his ministry. It is also one of the most misunderstood. In popular explanations, Luke 4 underscores that Jesus’s mission focused on the materially destitute and the downtrodden. In this interpretation, Jesus was both Messiah *and* social liberator. He came to bring the Year of Jubilee to the oppressed. He came to transform social structures and bring God’s creation back to shalom. Therefore, our mission, in keeping with Christ’s mission, is at least in part—if not in its central expression—“to extend the kingdom by infiltrating all segments of society, with preference given to the poor, and allowing no dichotomy between evangelism and social transformation (Luke 4:18–19).”¹⁴ Above all else, Luke 4 (it is argued) shows that Jesus’s mission was to serve the poor. So shouldn’t that be our mission too?

This common approach to Luke 4 is not entirely off base, but it misses two critical observations.

Missing the Trees for the Forest

First, this approach overlooks the actual verbs Jesus read from the Isaiah scroll. The Spirit of the Lord, resting upon Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah, would anoint him to *proclaim* good news to the poor, to *proclaim* liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, and to *proclaim* the year of the Lord’s favor. With the exception of “to set at liberty the oppressed” (which we’ll come back to in a moment), these are all words that point to speaking. While it’s certainly true that Jesus healed the sick and gave sight to the blind (as pointers to his deity, signs of

¹⁴James F. Engel and William A. Dyrness, *Changing the Mind of Missions: Where Have We Gone Wrong* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 80.

the kingdom's in-breaking, and expressions of his compassion), the messianic mission statement in Luke 4 highlights the *announcement* of good news. If Luke 4 sets the tone for the mission of the church, then the center of the church's mission should be the preaching of the gospel.

The Humble Poor

Second, the "missions as social transformation" reading of Luke 4 assumes too much about the economic aspect of "the poor" (Gk., *ptōchos*). While *ptōchos* in verse 18 is probably not without some reference to material poverty, the word has broader connotations and significance. Here are four things that lead us to that conclusion:

1. The quotation is from Isaiah 61:1–2, where the poor are lumped in with the "brokenhearted" and "all who mourn." The poor in Isaiah are not just materially poor; they are the humble poor, the mournful ones who trust in the Lord and wait for their promised "oil of gladness" and their "garment of praise" (Isa. 61:3). The Hebrew *anaoim* in verse 1 can be translated "poor" (ESV, NIV) or "meek" (KJV) or "afflicted" (NASB, ESV footnote). All are possible because clearly something more than material poverty is in mind.

2. Likewise, the Greek word *ptōchos* can speak of literal or figurative poverty. Of the ten uses of *ptōchos* in Luke, seven should be taken as literal poverty (14:13, 21; 16:20, 22; 18:22; 19:8; 21:3), while three may be figurative (4:18; 6:20; 7:22). Elsewhere in the New Testament, Revelation 3:17 is a clear instance where *ptōchos* should be taken figuratively. The church in Laodicea thought themselves rich (and they were, materially), but on a deeper spiritual level they were "wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked." As in English, the Greek word for "poor" carries different shades of meaning, both literal and figurative.

3. A strictly literal understanding of "the poor" in the immediate context would not make sense. If "the poor" are

the literally financially poor, then “the captives,” “the blind,” and “the oppressed” should be taken literally as well. And yet there is no instance in the Gospels of Jesus setting a literal prisoner free (something that confused John the Baptist in Luke 7:18–23). Quite naturally we understand captivity and oppression to include spiritual bondage. It is not inappropriate, then, to see a fundamental spiritual aspect to “the poor” in Luke 4.

4. The slightly wider context makes the same point. In Luke 4:25–27 Jesus mentions two examples of the type of person who experienced the Lord’s favor in the Old Testament. One is the widow of Zarephath. She was materially poor. But the other example is Naaman, the important Syrian general who humbled himself by dipping seven times in the Jordan River. If these are the examples of good news being proclaimed to the poor, then “the poor” has more to do with poverty of spirit than material destitution.

Summary

For all these reasons we agree with Andreas Köstenberger and Peter O’Brien that “the ‘poor’ to whom the good news is announced are not to be understood narrowly of the economically destitute, as most recent scholars have suggested; rather the term refers more generally to ‘the dispossessed, the excluded’ who were forced to depend upon God.”¹⁵ We agree with David Bosch when he concludes:

Therefore, in Luke’s gospel, the rich are tested on the ground of their wealth, whereas others are tested on loyalty toward their family, their people, their culture, and their work (Lk. 9:59–61). This means the poor are sinners like everybody else, because ultimately sinfulness is rooted in the human heart. Just as the

¹⁵Andreas J. Köstenberger and Peter T. O’Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 117.

materially rich can be spiritually poor, the materially poor can be spiritually poor.¹⁶

This does not rule out an economic component to *ptōchos* in Luke 4. The poor are often the economic poor because material hardship rather than material plenty tends to be a means of cultivating spiritual sensitivity, humility, and the desperation needed to hear God's voice. There's a reason Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor," instead of, "Blessed are the rich." The poor are more apt to see their need for help than the rich. The Greek word *ptōchos*, to quote Darrell Bock, is best described as a "soteriological generalization."¹⁷ It refers to those who are open to God, responsive to him, and who see their dependence upon him. It is to these that Jesus proclaims the year of the Lord's favor.

Therefore, Jesus's mission laid out in Luke 4 is not a mission of structural change and social transformation, but a mission to announce the good news of his saving power and merciful reign to all those brokenhearted—that is, poor—enough to believe.

What Makes the Great Commission So Great?

Having examined several common "missional" texts and come to the conclusion that these passages are often misappropriated and misunderstood, we are now in a position to turn our attention to the Great Commission, or more precisely, the Great Commissions (Matt. 28:16–20; Mark 13:10; 14:9; Luke 24:44–49; Acts 1:8).

¹⁶David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 104. For ease of reading, we dropped Bosch's parenthetical citations in these two sentences. They were: Nissen 1984: 175, 176; cf. Pobe 1987: 19, 53. Many other scholars past and present, including Eckhard Schnabel, David Hesselgrave, Robert Stein, Christopher Little, I. Howard Marshall, and Darrell Bock, have come to similar conclusions. See Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, 225. References to many of the other authors were found in David Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict: 10 Key Questions in Christian Missions Today* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 125–38.

¹⁷Darrell Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 408.

Before we get to Jesus's parting words, though, we must face an honest question: Why should our theology of mission focus so intently on this cluster of postresurrection, preascension commands? After all, there's no inspired section heading that says Matthew 28:16–20 should be called "The Great Commission" (and it hasn't always been known by this illustrious title).¹⁸ Furthermore, many Christians throughout history have believed that the apostles have already fulfilled Jesus's parting instructions and therefore they are not a direct command for the church today. More recently, missional thinkers have been reticent to ground the missionary task in specific imperatives (like we find toward the end of each Gospel). The whole Bible, they argue, is about the mission of God, not just a few isolated passages. So maybe the Great Commission isn't so great after all. Maybe John Stott was right when he said that "we give the Great Commission too prominent a place in our Christian thinking."¹⁹

So why should we emphasize these so-called Great Commission texts in determining the mission of the church? That's a fair question, and there are several good ways to answer it.

First, even if the entire Bible is essentially a missional book (and on one level, who would want to disagree with this assertion?), we would still do well to ground what we *must do in mission* on Scripture's explicit commands. One of the biggest missteps in much of the newer mission literature is an assumption that whatever God is doing in the world, this too is our task. So if the *missio Dei* (mission of God) is ultimately to restore shalom and renew the whole cosmos, then we, as his partners, should work to the same ends. Christopher Wright, for example, states

¹⁸For history on the title see David F. Wright's essay, "The Great Commission and the Ministry of the Word: Reflections Historical and Contemporary on Relations and Priorities (Finlayson Memorial Lecture, 2007)," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 25 (2007): 132–57; <http://netcommunity.rutherfordhouse.org.uk/publications/Document.Doc?id=69>.

¹⁹John R. W. Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World: What the Church Should Be Doing Now* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1975), 29.

that “everything a Christian and a Christian church is, says and does should be missional in its conscious participation in the mission of God in God’s world.”²⁰ But what if we are not called to partner with God in all he undertakes? What if the work of salvation, restoration, and re-creation are divine gifts to which we bear witness, rather than works in which we collaborate? What if our mission is not identical with God’s mission? What if we carry on Jesus’s mission but not in the same way he carried it out? Isn’t it better to locate our responsibility in the tasks we are given rather than in the work we see God accomplishing? In fact, there are certain things that God intends to do one day that we are to have no part in, and certainly not in this age. The slaying of the wicked comes to mind! Not only so, but there were certain elements of Jesus’s mission during his first coming that were unique to him. We have no part, for example, in dying for the sins of the world. None of this is to suggest that a story or a poem or a proposition cannot carry an imperatival force, but it is to argue that it is better (surer and more straightforward) to find the church’s mission in specific commands rather than in employing a hermeneutic that assumes a priori that we are partners with God in every particular of his redemptive purposes for the world.

Second, it makes sense that we would look to the New Testament more than the Old for a theology of mission. Now obviously, the Old Testament also shows God’s heart for the nations. God has always been intent on blessing the whole world through his people, and the Old Testament anticipates a future ingathering of the nations. We see this plan unveiled and unfolded at numerous points in the Old Testament. But it’s also obvious that the Old Testament is concerned mainly with the nation of Israel. Even in Jesus’s ministry a full-fledged mission to the Gentiles lies in the future (Matt. 15:24). God’s old covenant people are

²⁰Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God’s People: A Biblical Theology of the Church’s Mission* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 26

never exhorted to engage in intentional cross-cultural mission. Their mission light shines by attraction, not by active invitation. For all these reasons the New Testament is a better place to look for a strong missionary impulse. Indeed, as Eckhard Schnabel concludes in his magisterial *Early Christian Mission*, “The missionary work of the first Christians cannot be explained with prototypes in the Old Testament or with models of an early Jewish mission.”²¹ Missions, in the sense of God’s people being actively sent out to other peoples with a task to accomplish, is as new as the New Testament.

Third, it makes sense that we would look to Jesus for our missiological directive. As we’ll see later, *the* mission in the Bible is the mission of the Father sending the Son. As the messianic king and the Lord of the church, Jesus claims the right to send the church, even as the Father had the right to send him (John 20:21). Therefore we would do well to pay close attention to what the Son explicitly tells his disciples to do in his absence.

Fourth, the placement of the Great Commissions suggests their strategic importance. They record Jesus’s final words on earth, after his death and resurrection and just prior to his ascension. Common sense and biblical precedence tell us that a man’s last words carry special weight,²² especially when some form of these words is preserved in three of the Gospels (and in Mark in a slightly different form) and again at the beginning of Acts. The biblical authors and the early church understood Jesus’s final words to be among the most important sentences he ever uttered, and the most significant instructions he gave for shaping their missional identity.

Fifth, the Great Commissions seem to sum up many of the major themes of the Gospels. Take Matthew, for example. More than any other Gospel, Matthew focuses on discipleship. What

²¹Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, 173.

²²One thinks of the famous last words of several biblical characters, including Jacob, Moses, Joshua, David, Elijah, Paul (at Ephesus in Acts 20 and to Timothy in 2 Timothy), and Peter (see 2 Pet. 1:12–15).

do disciples believe about Jesus? How do they behave? What must they be willing to give up? It's no surprise, therefore, that Matthew's Great Commission stresses *discipleship*. Similarly, from the opening genealogy to his baptism in the Jordan, to his temptation in the wilderness, to the frequent references to Old Testament fulfillment, Matthew presents Jesus as a new Israel, as the Messiah to whom the Law and Prophets were pointing. So, again, it's no surprise that Jesus's closing words in Matthew emphasize his *authority*. We could go on and note the long Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, which forms the backbone of Jesus's *teaching*, or the presence of the magi in the second chapter, which hints at Jesus's *universal kingship*. These elements too find their climax in the Great Commission, with its emphasis on going to the nations and teaching them to observe all that Jesus commanded. The Great Commission, it turns out, sums up Matthew's most important themes. As Bosch puts it, "Today scholars agree that the entire gospel points to these final verses: all the threads woven into the fabric of Matthew, from chapter 1 onward, draw together here."²³

If everything in Matthew culminates in the Great Commission, everything in Acts flows from it. Jesus tells his followers gathered in Jerusalem that they will be his witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). And that's exactly what the book of Acts records. First, Christ is preached in Jerusalem (Acts 2–7), then in Judea and Samaria (Acts 8), and finally, with the conversion of Paul and Peter's rooftop vision, the gospel makes headway among the Gentiles. The book even concludes with Paul under house arrest, yet "proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance" (Acts 28:31). From beginning to end, the story of Acts is of the proclamation of the gospel from Judea to Samaria to the ends of the earth, just as Jesus commanded.

²³Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 57.

The Great Commissions, therefore, whether at the close or the outset of the narrative, are more than random parting words from Jesus. They actually shape the whole story, either as the climax to which everything points or as the fountain from which everything flows.

What Do We Have Here?

With all that as necessary introduction, we can now turn to examining briefly the Great Commission texts themselves.

Matthew 28:16–20

We start with the most famous commission:

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”
(Matt. 28:16–20)

As if there were any doubt that this is a significant pronouncement, Matthew tells us that Jesus directed the disciples to “the mountain” (v. 16). From Sinai to the Mount of Transfiguration to the Sermon on the Mount, mountains are places where the most important instruction or revelation is given. This scene is no different. Jesus has brought his disciples together one last time for something truly significant.

Before Jesus calls the disciples to mission, he reassures them of the good news: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (v. 18). The mission Jesus is about to give is based exclusively and entirely on his authority. There can only be a

mission imperative because there is first this glorious indicative. God does not send out his church to conquer. He sends us out in the name of the One who has *already* conquered. We go only because he reigns.

Then we come to the four verbs in verses 19–20—one main verb and three supporting participles. The main verb is the imperative “make disciples.” Jesus’s followers are to make disciples of the nations (*ta ethnē*). As is now widely known, this is the word not for political nation-states but for people groups.²⁴ Jesus envisions worshipers and followers present among every cultural-linguistic group on the planet.

The remaining participles, which can have the force of imperatives, flesh out what is entailed in the disciple-making process. We *go*, we *baptize*, and we *teach*. “Going” implies being sent (see Rom. 10:15). “Baptizing” implies repentance and forgiveness as well as inclusion in God’s family (Acts 2:38, 41). “Teaching” makes clear that Jesus has more in mind than initial evangelism and response. He wants obedient, mature disciples, not just immediate decisions.²⁵

Finally, this discipling task is possible, Jesus reassures his audience, because “I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20b). Such a far-reaching guarantee would not have been necessary if Jesus envisioned the apostles fulfilling the Great Commission. But a promise to the end of the age makes perfect

²⁴See, for example, John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad! The Supremacy of God in Missions*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 155–200, and Timothy C. Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-first Century* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2010), 138.

²⁵On this general theme of discipleship versus decisions, see M. David Sills, *Reaching and Teaching: A Call to Great Commission Obedience* (Chicago: Moody, 2010). Sills has a helpful discussion of Matt. 24:14 (“And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come”). He explains that in context the “world” may refer to the known world of the Roman Empire and that the “end” may be the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. Even if you don’t accept this view, it is still important to note that Jesus is giving a prediction of what will happen before his return, not a formula to hasten his coming. The emphasis is on enduring persecution until the end, not on ushering in the kingdom. Matt. 24:14 highlights the centrality of proclamation, but it does not imply a “need for speed” in fulfilling the Great Commission (121–26).

sense if the work of mission also continues to the end of this age. Jesus's promise extends to the end of the age just as his commission does.

Mark 13:10; 14:9

Mark does not include a postresurrection Great Commission in his Gospel. Although Mark 16:15 has Jesus saying "Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation," the vast majority of modern commentators now think Mark's Gospel ends at 16:8. This explicit Great Commission then is not original to Mark, though it does represent the missionary impulse of the early church, which added this longer ending between AD 100 and 150.

Even without a traditional Great Commission, however, Mark still has two explicit references to the same missionary task.

- Mark 13:10: "And the gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations."
- Mark 14:9: "And truly, I say to you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she [the woman who anointed him with oil] has done will be told in memory of her."

We see in these texts not only a prediction that the gospel *will* be proclaimed in the whole world, but a summons that it *must*. As Jesus approaches the cross, he is already laying the groundwork for the universal proclamation of his gospel.

Luke 24:44–49

We now turn to Luke's complementary account of the Great Commission:

Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." Then

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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 and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.” (Luke 24:44–49)

Luke, like Matthew, bases the command in divine authority. But whereas the authority in Matthew 28 was Jesus’s authority given to him, here the authority is rooted in the Scriptures. The disciples go forth into the world because Christ has all authority *and* because the events they will proclaim are the fulfillment of scriptural prophecy and foreshadowing. In both Matthew and Luke, the authority of the disciples comes from God.

Moreover, the command to “go and make disciples” in Matthew is stated here in terms of the disciples’ own role in that task: “You are witnesses of these things” (Luke 24:48). The task set before them by their Lord is to bear witness to Jesus, that is, to proclaim the good news about him. Once again, of course, the disciples do not bear witness by their own power. The Spirit will clothe them with power from on high.

Finally, we see that Jesus makes explicit that this proclamation includes the good news concerning repentance and forgiveness of sin. All this was implied in “baptizing them” in Matthew 28:19, but now it is brought to the forefront.

In summary, the Great Commission in Luke’s Gospel consists in bearing Spirit-empowered witness to the events of Christ’s death and resurrection and calling all nations to repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Acts 1:8

The same Luke who wrote the Gospel according to Luke wrote the book of Acts (see Acts 1:1). So we’ll look at Jesus’s last words

in Acts before returning to the Gospels and looking at the Great Commission in John.

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. (Acts 1:8)

Given the common authorship of Luke-Acts, it's no surprise that the theme of Spirit-empowered witness is as central to this Great Commission as it was in Luke. Nor is it surprising that the mission described in Acts is overwhelmingly focused on proclaiming the Word of God and bearing witness to Christ.

The book of Acts is especially important because in it we can actually see the scope and nature of the earliest Christian mission. If you are looking for a picture of the early church giving itself to creation care, plans for societal renewal, and strategies to serve the community in Jesus's name, you won't find them in Acts. But if you are looking for preaching, teaching, and the centrality of the Word, this is your book. The story of Acts is the story of the earliest Christians' efforts to carry out the commission given them in Acts 1:8.

This does not mean that the church in Acts is one big evangelistic rally or inductive Bible study. We see the church devoted to the fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer, as well as the apostles' teaching (Acts 2:42). We see examples of believers sharing with each other (Acts 2:44–46; 4:32–37) and hear of many signs and wonders (Acts 2:43; 5:12–16). Truly the kingdom has broken in as Jesus continues to “do” miracles through the apostles and sometimes others (Acts 1:1; Heb. 2:3–4). But there is no doubt that the book of Acts is a record first and foremost of apostolic witness expanding from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria to the ends of the earth. As Darrell Bock puts it:

This commission [Acts 1:8] describes the church's key assignment of what to do until the Lord returns. The priority for the

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church until Jesus returns, a mission of which the community must never lose sight, is to witness to Jesus to the end of the earth. The church exists, in major part, to extend the apostolic witness to Jesus everywhere.²⁶

Even a cursory overview of Acts bears this out. In Acts 1 Matthias is chosen to replace Judas, that he might become a witness to Christ's resurrection (v. 22). In Acts 2 Peter preaches at Pentecost, expounding the Scriptures, bearing witness to Christ, calling people to faith and repentance. Many received the Word, and about three thousand souls were added to the church that day (v. 41). In Acts 3 Peter heals a lame beggar in Jesus's name and then uses the occasion to bear witness to Christ and call people to repentance (see especially vv. 15, 19). As they proclaim the resurrection, many more hear the Word, and five thousand men believe (Acts 4:2, 4). In Acts 4 Peter and John testify before the council to the crucifixion, and when they are released from custody, the believers pray that they might continue to speak the Word with boldness (vv. 29, 31). While in prison again in Acts 5, an angel of the Lord sets the apostles free and commands them to "go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life" (v. 20). And when they heard this, Luke records, "they entered the temple at daybreak and began to teach" (v. 21).

Every chapter of Acts is like this. In Acts 6 the apostles appoint protodeacons so that they (the apostles) can stay devoted to the Word of God and prayer (v. 4). The result was that "the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith" (v. 7). In Acts 7 Stephen bears witness to Christ by walking through the Old Testament and refuting those who have charged him with blas-

²⁶Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 66.

pheming Moses. In Acts 8 Philip proclaims Christ in Samaria, Samaria receives the Word of God (v. 14), and the disciples preach the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans (v. 25). Later Philip expounds the Scriptures to the Ethiopian eunuch, after which he “preached the gospel to all the towns until he came to Caesarea” (v. 40).

Over and over Luke makes clear that the point of this book of Acts is to show the mission of Jesus being fulfilled as the Word of God increases and multiplies (Acts 12:24). Everywhere the Word goes there is opposition, but everywhere the Word goes, some believe. So Paul and Barnabas proclaim the Word in Cyprus and at Antioch in Pisidia, at Iconium and Lystra. Along the way Paul not only preaches the gospel in new frontiers, but also strengthens the disciples, encourages them in the faith, and appoints elders (Acts 14:21–23). His mission is not just evangelism, but deeper discipleship. He wins converts, plants churches, builds up existing congregations. Bearing witness to Christ and teaching the Word of God is the singular apostolic mission, but it takes on many different forms.²⁷

At this point we’re only halfway through the book. In the second half we see the same theme: Spirit-empowered witness—in Derbe, in Philippi, in Thessalonica, in Berea, in Athens, in Corinth, and in Ephesus, and finally in Jerusalem. Then Paul bears witness before the council, before Felix, before Festus, before Agrippa and Bernice, then on Crete and Malta, and lastly in Rome. The book ends much as it started, with the apostles (in this case Paul) “proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance” (Acts 28:31). A witness has gone out to the ends of the earth, all the way to Rome itself and from there it will ring out, we are led to believe, with great

²⁷“Conversion to Christ meant incorporation into a Christian community” is how Köstenberger and O’Brien put it (*Salvation to the Ends of the Earth*, 268).

success. The mission Christ gave to the disciples in Acts 1:8 is well under way.

John 20:21

John's is the shortest of the postresurrection commissions, but as Schnabel notes, it "is perhaps the most striking directive from a theological point of view." It is also the most controversial.

Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." (John 20:21)

We want to highlight three significant theological points.

A Peace That Passes Understanding

First, Jesus gives the disciples his peace. Jesus's peace is the basis for their ministry and, we can imagine, shapes the content of their message. So what is this peace? Some are quick to point out that the Hebrew word for peace is *shalom* and biblical *shalom* entails the right ordering of all things, the way the world is supposed to be. This is no doubt true, but we must always remember (1) that biblical *shalom* is much deeper than societal harmony and (2) that true *shalom* comes only to those who have union and communion with the *shalom* giver. John Stott is right:

The biblical categories of *shalom*, the new humanity and the kingdom of God are not to be identified with social renewal. . . . So according to the apostles the peace which Jesus preaches and gives is something deeper and richer, namely reconciliation and fellowship with God and with each other (e.g. Ephesians 2.13–22). Moreover, he does not bestow it on all men but on those who belong to him, to his redeemed community. So *shalom* is the blessing the Messiah brings to his people.²⁸

²⁸Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, 18–19.

We see this clearly in the way “peace” is used in John’s Gospel. The peace Jesus gives is better than anything the world can offer. His peace provides the assurance that he, by his Spirit, will always be with them (John 14:26–27). This peace, Jesus says, can be found only “in me” (John 16:33). It is the peace that comes to Jesus’s followers by virtue of his resurrection from the dead (John 20:19, 21, 26). In prefacing his commission with “Peace be with you” Jesus is saying nothing about the renewal of social structures and everything about the assurance and forgiveness they can have and can offer in his name (Acts 10:36; Rom. 5:1; Phil. 4:7).²⁹

The Sending That Matters Most

Second, Jesus’s being sent is prior to Jesus’s sending. In other words, the sending of Jesus happened first and is more central. As we said earlier, Christian mission is first of all Christ’s mission in the world. As we will argue shortly, our mission is not identical with Christ’s earthly work. Even less do we think we must complete what the Son somehow failed to accomplish. Nevertheless, in a real way the Son is continuing to do through us what he began to say and do in his earthly ministry (Acts 1:1). The mission of Jesus is the focal point of human history. His is the fundamental, foundational, essential mission—not the mission of his disciples. But in a wonderful act of condescension, the mission of the exalted Jesus, John 20:21 tells us, will be carried out through his followers.³⁰

Jesus’s Mission as a Model

The third point follows from the second: Jesus’s mission is in some ways a model for our mission. But this invites the ques-

²⁹Schnabel writes, “The message of the disciples is about peace: about the restoration of peace with God through Jesus’ death on the cross, about the atonement and forgiveness of sins, about the reconciliation of rebellious humankind with God” (*Early Christian Mission*, 379).

³⁰See Andreas Köstenberger, *The Missions of Jesus and the Disciples according to the Fourth Gospel: With Implications for the Fourth Gospel’s Purpose and the Mission of the Contemporary Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 207, 210; Köstenberger and O’Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth*, 264–66.

tion, in what ways? How does the exalted Christ carry out his mission through us? Is it by empowering us to do what he did and to continue his incarnational presence on the earth? Or is it by empowering us to bear witness to all that he taught and accomplished?

It is very popular to assume that missions is always incarnational. And of course on one level it is. We go and live among the people. We try to emulate the humility and sacrifice of Christ (Phil. 2:5–11).³¹ But incarnationalism in missions often means more than this.³² It means that we model our ministry on Jesus's ministry. For Stott, and many others after him, this means the mission of the church is service. "Therefore," says Stott, "our mission, like his, is to be one of service."³³ Evangelism and social action, therefore, are full partners in Christian mission.³⁴ Since the most crucial form of the Great Commission is the one we see in John (argues Stott), the simplest way to sum up the missionary enterprise is this: "We are sent into the world, like Jesus, to serve."³⁵

Stott's reading of John 20:31 has been very influential. There are, however, two problems.

First, it can be misleading to summarize Jesus's mission as one of service. There's no problem with this formulation if we mean "serve" in the Mark 10:45 sense of the word, that Jesus "came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." But Stott means more than this. He means that Jesus's mission was to meet human need, whether spiritual or physical.³⁶ Again, no one can deny, nor would we want to deny, that Jesus showed compassion to countless multitudes in extraordinary

³¹A moving exposition of this theme is found at the end of B. B. Warfield's sermon, "Imitating the Incarnation," in *The Savior of the World* (repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1991), 247–70.

³²See Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict*, 141–65, for a helpful summary of the incarnationalism versus representationalism debate. Hesselgrave argues for the latter.

³³Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, 23, 24.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 27.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 30.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 24.

ways. Nor do we want to suggest that meeting physical needs has no place in the church's work. On the contrary, let us be zealous for good works (Titus 2:14) and walk in the good deeds prepared for us (Eph. 2:10).

But it is misleading to contend that Jesus's ministry focused on serving, and even more so to claim, as one recent book does, that "every moment of his ministry is spent with the poor, sick, helpless, and hurting."³⁷ Sometimes Jesus was alone and wanted to be away from people (Mark 1:35, 45). Other times he was with rich men like Zacchaeus (Luke 19:5). Often he was with the disciples, who were not destitute and were in fact supported by wealthy women (Luke 8:1–3).

We know this sounds heartless, but it's true: it simply was not Jesus's driving ambition to heal the sick and meet the needs of the poor, as much as he cared for them. He was sent into the world to save people from condemnation (John 3:17), that he might be lifted up so believers could have eternal life (3:14–15). He was sent by the Father so that whoever feeds on him might live forever (6:57–58). In his important work on the missions of Jesus and the disciples, Andreas Köstenberger concludes that John's Gospel portrays Jesus's mission as the Son sent from the Father, as the one who came into the world and returned to the Father, and as the shepherd-teacher who called others to follow him in order to help gather a final harvest.³⁸ If Köstenberger is right, this is a long way from saying that Jesus's fundamental mission was to meet temporal needs.

But that's John, someone may object. His Gospel is always something of an outlier. What do the other three Gospels say? Well, let's take a look at Mark as an example. No doubt, Jesus often healed the sick and cast out demons in Mark's Gospel. Teaching, healing, and exorcism were the three prongs of his

³⁷Gabe Lyons, *The Next Christians: How a New Generation Is Restoring the Faith* (New York: Doubleday, 2010), 55.

³⁸Köstenberger, *The Missions of Jesus and the Disciples*, 199.

ministry (see, for instance his quintessential first day of ministry in Capernaum in Mark 1:21–34). And yet what drove his ministry was the proclamation of the gospel, the announcement of the kingdom, and the call to repent and believe (1:15). Jesus healed and exorcised demons out of compassion for the afflicted (1:41; 9:22), but the bigger reason for the miracles was that they testified to his authority and pointed to his unique identity (e.g., 2:1–12).

Don't miss this fact: *there is not a single example of Jesus going into a town with the stated purpose of healing or casting out demons.* He never ventured out on a healing and exorcism tour. He certainly did a lot of this along the way. He was moved with pity at human need (Mark 8:2). But the reason he “came out” was “that [he] may preach” (1:38). If anything, the clamor for meeting physical needs sometimes became a distraction to Jesus. That's why he frequently commanded silence of those he helped (1:44; 7:36), and why he would not do many works in a town rife with unbelief (6:5–6).

In Mark, as in the other Gospels, there are plenty of miracles and acts of service to celebrate, but they are far from the main point. The first half of the Gospel drives toward Peter's confession in chapter 8, where Jesus's identity is revealed. The second half of the Gospel drives toward the cross, where Jesus's work is completed (three predictions of death and resurrection in chapters 9–10, and a detailed description of Holy Week in chapters 12–16). Mark's Gospel does not focus on Jesus meeting physical needs. Mark's Gospel is about who Jesus was and what he did to save sinners.

It's no wonder, then, that Jesus's first action in Mark, after preaching, is to call men to follow him and promise to make them fishers of men (1:17). Jesus's purpose statements in Mark are revealing. He came to preach (1:38). He came to call sinners (2:17). He came to give his life as a ransom for many (10:45). Or as we read elsewhere, Jesus came to seek

and save the lost (Luke 19:10). The focus of his ministry is on teaching. The heart of his teaching centers on who he is. And the good news of who he is culminates in where he is going—to the cross. The mission of Jesus is not service broadly conceived, but the *proclamation* of the gospel through teaching, the *corroboration* of the gospel through signs and wonders, and the *accomplishment* of the gospel in death and resurrection.

Second, it is unwise to assume that because we are sent as Jesus was sent, we have the exact same mission he had. We must protect the absolute uniqueness of what Jesus came to do. D. A. Carson, commenting on John 17:18, concludes that when it comes to the mission of the disciples, “there is no *necessary* overtone of incarnation or of invasion from another world.” Instead, we come face-to-face with “the ontological gap that forever distances the origins of Jesus’ mission from the origins of the disciples’ missions.”³⁹ We cannot re-embody Christ’s incarnational ministry any more than we can repeat his atonement. Our role is to *bear witness* to what Christ has already done. We are not new incarnations of Christ but his *representatives* offering life in his name, proclaiming his gospel, imploring others to be reconciled to God (2 Cor. 5:20). This is how the exalted Christ carries out his mission through us.

So how then is the Son’s being sent a model for our being sent by the Son? Köstenberger explains:

The Fourth Gospel does therefore not appear to teach the kind of “incarnational model” advocated by Stott and others. Not the way in which Jesus came into the world (i.e., the incarnation), but the nature of Jesus’ *relationship with his sender* (i.e., one of obedience and utter dependence), is presented in the Fourth Gospel as the model for the disciples’ mission. Jesus’ followers are called to imitate Jesus’ selfless devotion in seeking his

³⁹D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 566.

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sender's glory, to submit to their sender's will, and to represent their sender accurately and know him intimately.⁴⁰

Consequently, a focus on human service and on physical need was not, at least in John, a primary purpose of either Jesus's mission or the disciples' mission.⁴¹ If the context of John 20:21 tells us anything, the mission of the disciples was to wield the keys of the kingdom, to open and close the door marked "Forgiveness" (20:23; see also Matt. 16:19). John wrote his Gospel so that his audience might "believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing [they would] have life in his name" (John 20:31). This was John's mission, as he understood it. And there's every reason to think he saw this as the fulfillment of the mission he recorded from Jesus a few verses earlier. The Father sent the Son so that by believing in his name the children of God might have life (1:12). The Son sent the disciples, in the same spirit of complete surrender and obedience, so that they might go into the world to bear witness to the one who is the way, the truth, and the life (14:6).

Putting It All Together

So how should we pull all this together? Well, on the one hand, we've seen a fair amount of diversity among the Great Commissions. Matthew emphasizes discipleship, Luke-Acts stresses being witnesses, and John highlights the theological nature of our sending. The diversity, of course, is not owing to varying levels of truthfulness in the accounts, but to the unique aims of the Evangelists.

And yet the Great Commission accounts show more similarity than dissimilarity. Together they paint a complementary and fairly comprehensive picture of the mission of the first disciples. We can summarize this mission by answering seven questions:

⁴⁰Köstenberger, *The Missions of Jesus and the Disciples*, 217.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 215.

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- *Who?* Jesus gave this mission verbally to the first disciples, but it did not end with their deaths. As Lord of the church, he expects his followers to carry out this mission “to the end of the age.” Their mission is our mission.
- *Why?* The authority for our mission comes from Christ. It is rooted in the Word of God and based on the Father’s sending of the Son. We are sent because Christ was sent, and we go in his name, under his authority.
- *What?* The mission consists of preaching and teaching, announcing and testifying, making disciples and bearing witness. The mission focuses on the initial and continuing verbal declaration of the gospel, the announcement of Christ’s death and resurrection and the life found in him when we repent and believe.
- *Where?* We are sent into the world. Our strategy is no longer “come and see” but “go and tell.” The message of salvation is for every people group—near, far, and everywhere in between.
- *How?* We go out in the power of the Holy Spirit and in submission to the Son just as he was obedient to and dependent upon the Father.
- *When?* The mission began at Pentecost when the disciples were clothed with power from on high with the presence of the Holy Spirit. The mission will last as long as the promise of Christ’s presence lasts; that is, to the end of the age.
- *To whom?* The church should make disciples of the nations. We must go to every people group, proclaiming the good news to the ends of the earth.

One More Commission

We have been looking at Jesus’s postresurrection, preascension commissions. But a study of mission would seem incomplete without a glance at the missionary par excellence of the New

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Testament: Paul the apostle to the Gentiles. As Jesus confronts and converts Saul (later Paul) on the Damascus Road, he also commissions him with a new mission. Paul, as Jesus's "chosen instrument" (Acts 9:15), must "go," carrying Christ's name and suffering much for his sake (vv. 15–16). In a different account of the same call Paul goes into more detail relaying precisely what Jesus sent him to do:

I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me. (Acts 26:16–18)

What did this look like in Paul's life? Obviously he knew that evangelism and disciple making were not the only worthwhile activities or the only way to help others or please God. He was a tentmaker, after all (Acts 18:3), and eager to "remember the poor" (Gal. 2:10). He also taught that love fulfilled all the horizontal requirements of the law (Rom. 13:9; Gal. 5:14). But at the same time, he did not declare "I no longer have any room for work in these regions" because he had sufficiently loved the people in those regions, but because he had founded and nurtured fledgling churches by proclaiming the gospel (Rom. 15:23).

It is sometimes argued that although Paul's ministry centered on word-based evangelism, there is little evidence he expected his congregations to pursue the same mission. In his book *Paul's Understanding of the Church's Mission*,⁴² Robert

⁴²Robert L. Plummer, *Paul's Understanding of the Church's Mission: Did the Apostle Paul Expect the Early Christian Communities to Evangelize?* (Eugene, OR: Paternoster/Wipf and Stock, 2006).

Plummer counters this claim and makes a convincing case that Paul's congregations were evangelistic communities. Consider a few examples:

- Evangelistic language is used of the Thessalonian church. The Word was at work in the believers (1 Thess. 2:13–16), the Word was running ahead (2 Thess. 3:1), and the Word was ringing and sounding forth (1 Thess. 1:8).
- Philippians 1:12–18 suggests that Paul anticipated Christ being “proclaimed in every way” by the church in Philippi.
- The gospel-armor shoes in Ephesians 6:15 should make the believers “ready to proclaim the gospel of peace” (NRSV).
- First Corinthians 4:16 exhorts the early church to imitate Paul's openness to suffer as a result of proclaiming the foolishness of the cross.
- Similarly, 1 Corinthians 11:1 calls Christians to imitate the apostle in his salvific concern for outsiders. We also see evidence that the Corinthians were to be concerned for the salvation of nonbelievers in 1 Corinthians 7:12–16 and 14:23–25.
- Besides these examples of “actively” sharing the gospel, several texts show how the early churches were to “passively” bear witness to Christ. Second Corinthians 6:3–7, 1 Thessalonians 2:5–12, and Titus 2:1–10 demonstrate that “all the various segments of the Christian community are to live praiseworthy lives—not simply for the sake of obeying God, but also because their behavior will commend or detract from the gospel.”⁴³

To summarize, then, we follow Paul's example of following Christ and his Great Commission. We see in Acts that

⁴³Ibid., 104–5. These bullet points are taken from Kevin's review of Plummer's book in the 9Marks eJournal. Used by permission.

the responsibility of discipleship was given to more than the Twelve. We see the same thing in Paul's epistles and in his own ministry. The Great Commission is for the whole church, of which Paul is the most significant model. A careful study of his life and teaching shows that Paul's mission was threefold: (1) initial evangelism, (2) the nurture of existing churches by guarding them against error and grounding them in the faith, and (3) their firm establishment as healthy congregations through the full exposition of the gospel and the appointing of local leadership.⁴⁴ We believe his mission models for us what we ought to be doing in the world insofar as Paul's ambition ought to be our ambition (1 Cor. 10:33–11:1), and we should be partners in the same work he undertook (see Phil. 1:5, 14, 27, 30; 2:16).

A Preliminary Conclusion

There are still a number of theological bricks to lay in the foundation of our argument (so don't close the pages just yet), but with the ground we've covered in this chapter we're ready to offer a one-sentence answer to the question of this book. *The mission of the church is to go into the world and make disciples by declaring the gospel of Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit and gathering these disciples into churches, that they might worship the Lord and obey his commands now and in eternity to the glory of God the Father.* We believe this is the mission Jesus gave the disciples prior to his ascension, the mission we see in the New Testament, and the mission of the church today.

This mission is a specific set of things Jesus has sent his church into the world to accomplish and is significantly narrower than "everything God commands." That's not to say that our broader obligations aren't important. They are! Jesus and the apostles command us to parent our children well, to be

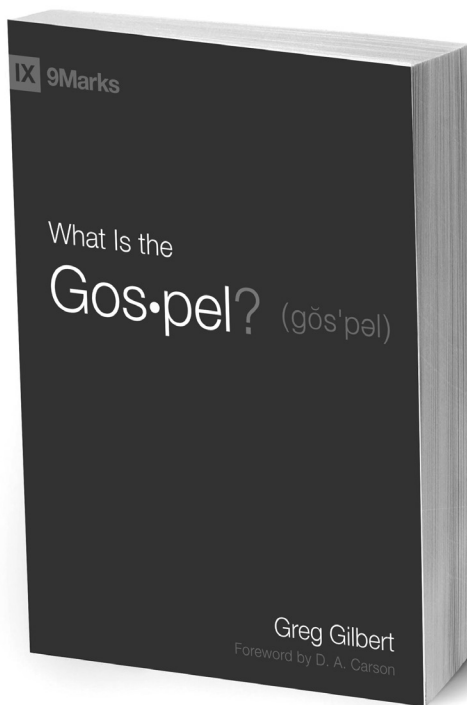
⁴⁴This summary owes its basic formulation to P. T. O'Brien, *Gospel and Mission in the Writings of Paul: An Exegetical and Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 43, 64.

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loving husbands and wives, to do good to all people, and many other things. Jesus even tells us in the Great Commission itself (as Matthew records it) to teach people “to observe *all* that I have commanded you.” But that doesn’t mean that everything we do in obedience to Christ should be understood as part of the church’s mission. The mission Jesus gave the church is more specific than that. And that, in turn, doesn’t mean that other commands Jesus gives us are unimportant. It means that the church has been given a specific mission by its Lord, and *teaching* people to obey Christ’s commands is a nonnegotiable part of that mission. We go, we proclaim, we baptize, and we teach—all to the end of making lifelong, die-hard disciples of Jesus Christ who obey everything he commanded.

So here it is again: the mission of the church—as seen in the Great Commissions, the early church in Acts, and the life of the apostle Paul—is to win people to Christ and build them up in Christ. Making disciples—that’s our task.

Also Available from **Greg Gilbert**



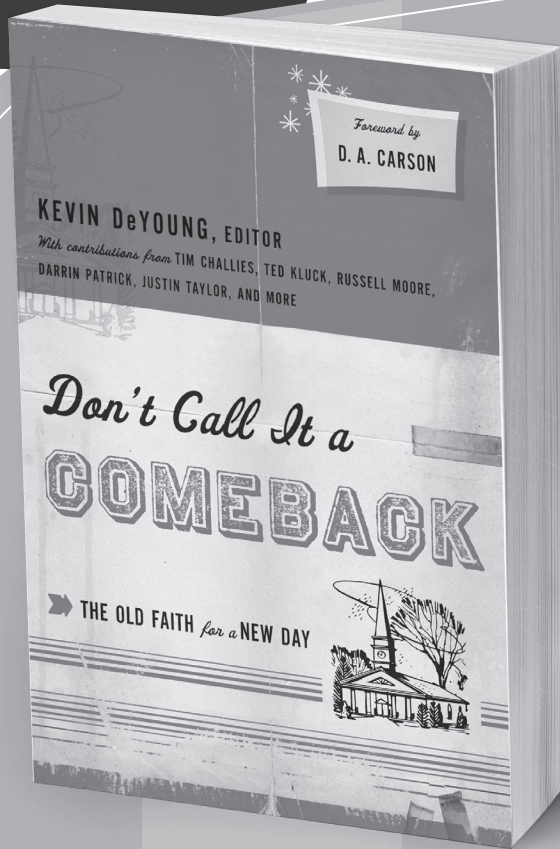
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