

# Called By Whom, To What, To Where? A Critique of Co-Vocationalism

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AUSTIN HOLCOMB, THM, PHD CANDIDATE

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*Austin Holcomb serves with the International Mission Board as a Seminary and Pipeline Liaison in the United States.*

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## Introduction

A new concept is beginning to circulate related to strategic entry and mission engagement in the West. *Covocationalism* is being touted as a preferred strategy for many church planters, but the term itself has yet to receive significant academic criticism. A good critique tends to refine rather than discard a particular method or idea. In the dynamic contemporary landscape, the Holy Spirit and the Scriptures are the primary resources through which followers of Christ foster a vision for gospel proclamation and sustained presence in their respective communities. Error and syncretism are known to occur unless biblical teachers construct a hermeneutical bridge to aid the application of God's unchanging truth in specific cultural settings (Barnes 2023, 10). The following research will aim to form a bridge for evangelicals to carefully consider and evaluate this new trend. While there are many practical and corrective aspects about covocationalism, it will be argued that this approach to church planting may unintentionally contribute to the present pastoral malaise and the reconfiguration of mission paradigms in the United States if it is widely promoted and uncritically adopted.

## 1. Definition and Historical Emergence

The meaning and origin of *covocational* is closely linked with the subject of church planting. *Church planter* proves to be an elusive role to understand. Even while church planting continues to surge in popularity among evangelicals, its broad and varied

forms are beginning to reveal an elastic limit.<sup>1</sup> Even so, it is generally recognized that pastors of small congregations and new church plants in the United States sense immense financial pressure. For some, the answer to financial pressures and denominational headwinds is a bi-vocational ministry model.

In the last decade, traditional church planting models in North America have proven to be expensive, largely ineffective, and mostly exclusive to wealthy, educated leaders (DeYmaz 2019, 102-12). Lifeway Research published a report on the state of church planting in 2015, which disclosed that over thirty percent of 1,200 new church plants were unable to become financially independent within three years. Unfortunately, this fact is said to be a strong indicator that many of these churches will not last since their models were not sustainable in the first place (Stetzer et al. 2015, 4). Just before this report, one church planter said, “The old method of displaced, seminary-trained church planters...is proving to be insufficient. We believe that locally identified, locally church-trained bi-vocational pastors provide the best opportunity to make the math work. . . . We must find pastors who are willing and able to support their families without taking a salary from the church—maybe ever.” (Scroggins 2013). A bi-vocational pastor is traditionally understood as one who works a second or third supplementary job alongside their ministry duties as a pastor. In response, future SBC president J. D. Greear acknowledged the benefits of bi-vocationalism, while also pointing out several challenges and steering readers away from a “one-size-fits-all solution” to sending (Greear 2014).

Over time, missiologists and church planting catalysts began to discern why a new term was needed to replace or coexist alongside bi-vocationalism (Brisco 2018, 27-28). First, some bi-vocational planters began to see their role as a strategic, and even a desirable option, rather than a forced reality. Other planters continued to see the necessity of an extra job as a burden which prevents them from “full-time” ministry. Second, the word itself seems to unintentionally encourage the bifurcation of “spiritual” work in religious institutions from “normal” mundane jobs in the world. Some suggest this false dichotomy of sacred and secular vocations was popularized by Augustine, only later to be challenged and somewhat dismantled by the Protestant Reformation (Brisco 2018, 20-23). Thus, while closely related to bi-vocationalism, *covocationalism* was created to describe how different callings can be intimately connected and equal, instead of isolated from one another. Brad Brisco, the director of

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<sup>1</sup> A full investigation of this claim and the plethora of models which exist does not lie within the scope of this study. Consider, for example, the difference between the church planting goals, accountability structures, and funding mechanisms of the International Mission Board (IMB) and the North American Mission Board (NAMB) of the Southern Baptist Convention. For this article, a church planter can be understood as one who leads in church-planting efforts.

bivocational church planting with NAMB, is credited for coining the term itself (Sterciuc 2022, 78-79).<sup>2</sup> He says a “covo” planter is “one who has a clear and definite calling in the marketplace that they never intend to leave. They know God has called them to be a teacher, mechanic, or doctor and they desire to weave that calling into the plan to start a new church” (Brisco 2018, 24-25).

While it seems like there are several church leaders and organizations that are getting behind the *covocational* model, one in particular stands out. Gracepoint, rebranded as “Acts 2 Network,” is a part of the Southern Baptist Send Network and is led by Ed and Kelly Kang. The website describes their network in this way: “We are a network of collegiate churches and parachurch ministries. At the heart of our network is a tight-knit community of 1,600 covocational ministers across all our locations” (Gracepoint Ministries n.d.) Ed claims he was a “covocational college minister” at UNC Berkeley in the 1980s, and his wife, Kelly, worked for years as a software developer while also being involved in “full-time ministry.” This seems to insinuate that covocational models have existed for some time. There are creative resources and videos on the website detailing the realities and challenges of a covocational lifestyle and collegiate churches. What is apparent is that while the ministry (or former church) is based in California and utilizes English, the ministry team leaders are predominantly Asian who are spread out across the US working in unique jobs while also doing collegiate campus ministry in their spare time. Acts 2 Network is based on the premise that all Christians are called to “full-time” ministry, and every minister should be in the marketplace.<sup>3</sup> This example raises pertinent questions related to church polity and Protestant ecclesial distinctives. Perhaps the most central question for this study is: how do proponents of covocationalism argue for its necessity and appropriateness as a strategic model for church planting? Moreover, why should gospel ministers *choose to remain* in the marketplace?

Beneath the veil of covocational practice is a kind of emergent ecclesiology that can be described as “missional.” The sort of argument Brad Brisco makes for covocationalism is largely in parallel with a broader stream of missional church

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<sup>2</sup> Brisco is one of the leading Southern Baptist writers and proponents of covocationalism. His training booklet on the topic is one of the first of its kind, and many of the cognitive shifts for church planting are being implemented on a much wider scale in North America. Brisco is in close step with many other missional church leaders who express the need to diminish any notion of clergy-laity divide. Only one researcher has written on covocationalism to date. Sterciuc confirms Brisco introduced the term and has since been instrumental in its development. Sterciuc’s work is comprehensive, but he offers little scholarly criticism on the subject.

<sup>3</sup> On this point, the Gracepoint website links to an article by J. D. Greear explaining how calling is a myth. Greear elucidates, “the Great Commission was not a second calling for an elite few. Summit church in Raleigh, North Carolina believes everyone is called to the mission of God—the question is only where and how” (Greear 2016). Choosing “where” and discerning exactly “how” to obey God’s calling(s), indeed, forms some of the backbone of this critique.

literature.<sup>4</sup> Further, a series of claims aptly exhibits the benefits of being in the marketplace. The first is a *contextual* claim that Western Christianity is in decline. Going to an institutional church is not popular or understood anymore. As denominational entities grow weak, and attendance decreases, churches will financially struggle to afford full-time pastors. The second is a *missional* claim that Western churches need to imitate the pattern of the New Testament church in Acts. As the culture becomes more secular, Christians must take up a missionary posture in the places they live. Pastors lack cultural credibility since they work in an insulated Christian “bubble” of sorts. Planters need to see themselves as tentmaking-apostles, laboring in the community. Finally, there is the *vocational* claim that every job is sacred. Planters must resist any clergy-laity division and strive for greater alignment and integration between faith and secular work spheres. In his earlier training booklet titled, *Rethink*, Brisco uses these claims to explain why his constituents need an ecclesiastical shift in church planting vision. This narrative-style argument is now culturally adopted within Brisco’s own mission organization (Brisco 2018, 1-5).<sup>5</sup> His two manuals were condensed to form a training guide for bivocational church planters within NAMB (Brisco 2019).

In summary, as religious institutions decline and traditional planting models are not sustainable, covocationalism views God’s call to ministry in the context of the marketplace. It is a deliberate choice by church planters to strategically position themselves among the lost rather than withdraw to religious circles. According to Brad Brisco, this approach is biblical and theologically aligned with the *Missio Dei*. If God is a “missionary,” and his primary activity is in the world, then “the life of the church will focus on and revolve around God’s mission” outside of the Sunday event (Brisco 2018, 40-41). This includes every activity within the priesthood of all believers. Instead of contemporary or reformational forms that grow by addition, covocationalism gives the hope of multiplication. Brisco adds this “alternative vision of the church is to see it as a people called and sent by God to participate in His redemptive mission for the world” (Brisco 2018, 37-38).

Covocationalism, then, encourages Christians to leverage personal skills and marketplace trades for God’s glory. It allows planters to become financially

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<sup>4</sup> Brisco’s views are shared by an eclectic mix of Western missiologists and practitioners who mostly stay within the bounds of evangelicalism. On missional church leaders, Ed Stetzer respectfully writes, “For church planters who fall into this camp—with proponents such as Frost and Hirsch, Huge Halter and Matt Smay, and many others—life and ministry seem to be much more spiritual than strategic, more about prayer than planning, and more spontaneous than organized” (Stetzer and Im 2016, 84).

<sup>5</sup> Brisco explains how pragmatic changes will not happen unless the organizational culture changes by rethinking Christological and missiological underpinnings. For this reason, Brisco seeks to inspire change rather than manipulate. He says, “Adaptive leaders need to activate all the people of God to engage in God’s mission. We need to give people the language and license to get into the game.” This is precisely what is happening with the shift to covocational language and missional ecclesiology.

independent and align their faith commitments with daily responsibilities. The model reduces the professionalization of ministry and activates the whole body of Christ. Additionally, consistent presence in the marketplace helps ministers build rapport and see new avenues for community engagement. Thus far, evangelicals are positively responding to this new training paradigm. For many, covocationalism offers a hopeful vision of multiplication from the margins and a realistic outlook of Christian witness and community in a secular, post-modern world.<sup>6</sup> Supporters claim it mimics the early church and ministry of the Apostle Paul. Before addressing theological and missiological concerns, pertinent biblical passages will be considered as a way to shape the forthcoming critique.

## 2. Related Biblical Passages

This section turns to selected biblical texts to address issues related to covocational church planters, pastors, and missionaries. Parallel with missional church literature, the focus will be on New Testament passages dealing with first-century believers. Four themes will be considered; each of these themes is at great risk of being confused or truncated amid the rising trend of covocationalism.

### A. Ministerial Offices and Roles

Church governance has been a source of disagreement and divergence since the first century. What is agreeable in historical Christian orthodoxy, however, is that Scripture indicates that there are distinct offices of the church that require the appointment of qualified leaders. Acts 6:1-6, for instance, is said to be the origin story for the role of *deacons* in the church (Hammett 2019, 160). As the early church was growing there was a discrepancy in the distribution of food in that several Hellenist widows were being overlooked in favor of Hebrew widows (Acts 6:1 ESV). The Apostles corrected the situation through a division of labor: they designated seven men of good repute, “full of the Spirit and wisdom” to serve tables (Acts 6:3, 5-6). This allowed the Twelve to remain dedicated to prayer and the “ministry of the word” (Acts 6:2). The role of deacon or deaconess is a distinguished position of service in many churches today. In Baptist churches, for example, deacons are often ordained and affirmed by the congregation, most of whom also have normal jobs in the community. It begs the question as to whether being covocational is more similar to the *diakonos* in the early church as opposed to the apostolic leaders who directed their efforts toward prayer, teaching, and

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<sup>6</sup> This summary paragraph tries to capture the best ideas of the model from the perspective of Brisco and others in the missional church camp. Lesslie Newbigin citations have been avoided on purpose in this section. While his ideas have been instrumental to missional ecclesiology, his words tend to be overemphasized or accommodated to the argument at hand. Still, Newbigin would likely affirm many aspects of this approach.

soul care. Even if Western church planters are likened to first century apostles, this text seems to encourage a healthy division of roles as the church grows. Does Acts 6:1-6 lay the foundation for what would eventually be understood as a call to “full-time” vocational ministry and the tradition of ordination? It is interesting how a passage involving social action and marketplace responsibilities highlights aspects of human limitation, spiritual duties, and Christian maturity.

After this incident, the New Testament indicates there are other necessary leadership positions beyond Apostleship. Ephesians 4:11-12 asserts that Christ has given the church five offices: Apostles, Prophets, Evangelists, Shepherds, and Teachers (Eph. 4:11). Each of these roles seems to have distinct giftings from which to build up the body of Christ and equip each member for the work of ministry (Eph. 4:12). This text does not indicate that ministry roles converge or seamlessly overlap across members. If these are unique positions of service, it follows that the work of ministry universally prescribed to the congregation must be treated as a separate calling. Covocationalism seems to imply that APEST callings are like functions of personality which disciples infuse into mundane jobs for the sake of mission (Brisco 2018, 204).<sup>7</sup> Passages such as Titus 1:5, however, show that formal offices are not removed or absent in the early church. Paul instructs Titus to appoint elders in the churches of Crete. Similarly, even modern churches with congregational polity do not expect the absence of select leaders. Many Protestants maintain that the two offices of pastor and deacon are ongoing, whereas apostles, prophets, and evangelists are considered to be exceptional or extraordinary (Hammett 2019, 187-89). Bivocationalism seems to affirm a more traditional polity than covocationalism in that the former typically views secular employment as temporary or unavoidable. The latter, by feeling “called” to another vocation at the same time, appears to reduce the formal office, risk the conflation of roles, or shift pastoral leaders towards apostolic ends.

## B. Ministerial Support

The three passages above can all be discussed together on the topic of financial sustainability for pastors, missionaries, or anyone in a “formal” office of church ministry. Twice Paul quotes an Old Testament phrase to argue that it is appropriate and good to compensate ministers of the word. The particular phrase is one used by Moses in the Torah, “You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain” (Deut. 25:4). Paul compares the principle of feeding an ox with his apostolic right to earn a living in

<sup>7</sup> The acronym APEST (or APEPT) is short for apostle, prophet, evangelist, shepherd (pastor), and teacher. According to one scholar, Ephesians 4 is more concerned with the need for unity in the midst of conflict and spiritual warfare than five gifts which unlock multiplication. Unity is the shared “calling” (Eph. 4:1-6), but Paul explains how this unity does not negate the diversity of formal roles (Eph. 4:7-16; Mangum 2020).

ministry. In essence, a person or group should not withhold provisional resources from the one who has offered them service or labor. This is clearly reiterated when the Apostle uses agricultural imagery a few verses later, “If we sowed spiritual things in you, is it too much if we reap material things from you? (1 Cor. 9:9-11). Paul was an Apostle sent by God working on behalf of the Corinthians, but he applies this principle again to all “elders who rule well . . . especially those who labor in preaching and teaching” (1 Tim. 5:18).

What seems to be a clear biblical principle for congregations and denominations to financially support their leaders through tithes and offerings, not to mention pray for and honor them, often gets dismissed as being unrealistic or unethical. To balance these thoughts, John Piper in an interview suggests, “Churches should not try to keep their pastors poor and should not want to make them rich” (Piper 2015). It may be true in North America that dual-income households are normative, inflation and costs continue to rise, and avenues of philanthropic charity has increased competition to the extent that local churches must consider new ways of collection and fundraising (DeYmaz 2019, 31-33; 99). Nevertheless, context should not reduce the biblical precedent nor diminish the church’s desire to support gospel ministers to the best of her ability.<sup>8</sup>

### C. Ministerial Goals

Paul went about his work with a kind of apostolic focus that is hard to ignore. Things did not always go as planned, but Paul understood his mission and calling clearly. He did not “run aimlessly” or “box as one beating the air” (1 Cor. 9:26). Paul tells Timothy to devote himself “to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching” until he comes (1 Tim. 4:13). In another place, Timothy is reminded that “No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him” (2 Tim. 2:4). How does covocationalism account for this prioritization of mission? In the New Testament, it appears Jesus and the Twelve do not have much interest in acquiring income through skilled trades. What does it mean for self-sufficient church planters to “carry no moneybag, no knapsack, no sandals” and receive hospitality? (Luke 10:4). Jesus did not have an affinity for money-traders unless it turned into discipleship or generosity (Mark 2:13-17; Luke 19:1-10; John 2:16-17). How does covocationalism

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<sup>8</sup> Brisco acknowledges there is a place for traditional pastoral support, but he states that covocational church planting is a more viable financial model that puts less pressure on churches and families. He seems to use conflicted reasoning when he argues for marketplace income sources in saying, “It is important to understand that bivo and covo church planting is not simply about having two or more jobs; it is really about aligning one life. It’s about blending our calling to support our families and ourselves with our calling to live a life engaged in God’s mission.” Perhaps he is referring to passive income from Christian non-profits, seminaries, internet ads, book deals, or investing for optimal alignment (Brisco 2018, 27).

remain committed to the apostolic aims of proclamation and teaching in a world with timecards, graveyard shifts, and cubicles? How would pastoring or apostolic church planting occur if disciples did not leave their nets or disrupt the local economy (Matt. 4:19-20; Acts 19:24-28)? To be above reproach, the pastoral vocation should be free of greed, selfish ambition, and detached from the burden of making money to maintain a specific standard of living (Jam. 4:13-14; Heb. 13:5; Tit. 1:7).

#### **D. Ministerial Presence**

Finally, it is instructive to notice that the Apostle Paul fostered deep personal relationships. He was not merely a nomad who could not dwell in a place for long. If his apostolic call bade him to move into new areas for the sake of the lost, his shepherd-like heart caused him to return or stay in previous cities with those he loved. His letters dictate orders for coworkers and friends to “come” visit him along with his desire to “stay” in certain places or “be with” former disciples (2 Tim. 4:9-11; Col. 2:1). To fledgling churches, Paul was like a spiritual father or a caring mother that included both encouragement and correction (1 Thess. 2:5-8). Covocational church planters must consider the investment of time needed for tasks unrelated to gospel proclamation and healthy church formation. Truly, secular work can provide access and opportunities to share the gospel, but it does not necessarily guarantee intimacy with Christ or “incarnational” presence with others (Mark 3:14).

### **3. Theological and Missiological Reflection**

After considering the definition and historical emergence of covocationalism, and examining biblical passages that address pertinent themes, this section aims to present areas of theological and missiological concern. Pairing these two together will allow the critique to be directed toward both faithful orthodoxy and healthy orthopraxy. The best rationale for a strategic shift towards covocational church planting seems to be sustainability and cultural engagement. Many practitioners sense the waning Christian influence in a secular, pluralist society and are searching for imaginative expressions of church, new patterns, and fresh ideas (Newbigin 1989, 235). Like missionaries in an apostolic setting, they desire to be embedded in the culture for the sake of gospel witness. Covocationalism presents itself as an opportunity to capture the evangelical imagination of church planting and cultural relevance in the globalized West.

The shift in understanding of church and Christian responsibility has come in stride with the rejection of both traditional and attractional models of church planting.

Missional ecclesiology, to the extent it is connected with convocational thought, has valid biblical perspective to offer, but it also comes with hidden implications or assumptions. Among these include the need to abandon institutions and formal religious structures, the dismissal of clergy in view of the priesthood of all believers, and the uncritical promotion of Western ideology. In order to avoid the risk of non-contextualization or inaccurately portraying the state of global Christianity, evangelical ministers in North America must reconsider their contextual reality, their ministerial calling, and their human particularity (Hiebert 2009, 19-20).

### A. Contextual Realities – Apostolic or Pastoral?

Is it a fact that the state of Christianity in North America is dismal? The answer may depend upon what statistic or trend is considered. In view of global Christianity, Gina Zurlo's recent work shows as of 2020, the United States of America remains the country with the most Christians in the world. The country leads the globe in the number of missionaries sent and the number of missionaries received. The context is also given a very high status in terms of gospel access and church saturation (Zurlo 2022, 304). Furthermore, the United States generally ranks among the most wealthy and educated nations in the world. Western Christendom may be "in decline," but these statistical realities demand more precise language to clarify what decline actually means. The issues facing the church in North America seem to be mostly pastoral and polemical ones involving ethnic prejudice, gender inclusion, immigration, nationalism, and the abuse of power (Zurlo 2022, 305).

Regarding the prioritization of world evangelization, J. D. Payne shows how apostolic work naturally concedes to pastoral duties as pioneer missionaries succeed in a given area (Payne 2021, 120). On a broad scale, in what used to be known as the frontier, North American churches have been established and apostolic work has moved on to other unreached regions (See Dent 2019, 2023). According to Alan Johnson, if missionaries or mission stations ever intend to remain a permanent fixture, they must redefine their purpose if they stay in that context. This has likely corresponded to the influx of "western managers" in parachurch operations (Johnson 2009, 24). While America is one of the youngest nations, there are legitimate reasons for the West to have mature, thriving churches, doctrinally and morally speaking, rather than an infantile ones (Luke 12:48). Sadly, some scholars are convinced that the "theological heart" of the pastoral vocation has been lost. This group acknowledges the widespread role confusion and "bewildering variety" of pastor images and church expressions seen across the church planting industry (Vanhoozer and Strachan 2020, 3, 7, 61-63). In a region with a

Christian majority and many kinds of under-shepherds, a perplexing question remains. Why do evangelicals in North America *deeply identify* with first century “exiles” and scattered sheep and what exactly is causing this cultural malaise that is driving the narrative of decline (1 Pet. 1:1)?

Catholic theologian, Charles Taylor, unfolds that Western society in the twenty-first century is enveloped in what he calls “the age of authenticity.” He explains that the unwritten assumptions and attitudes of the contemporary social framework revolves around unbridled choice, individual expression, and personal fulfillment (Taylor 2007, 478-85).<sup>9</sup> James K. A. Smith explains how the “sacred” in the age of authenticity is reduced to a spiritual quest of the individual. There is almost a complete detachment from “the church” as a transcendent society or voluntary association by which a person is fed and finds meaningful fulfillment (Smith 2014, 88-89).<sup>10</sup> If society has become secular in this way, then some may say there is no conceptional need for clergy, because the thought of any spiritual authority besides what is derived from the individual is repulsive. Newbigin offers a corrective by recognizing both the “missionary situation” of the West and the need for a ministerial priesthood. Pastors and missionaries are not set apart to “take priesthood away from the people, but in order to nourish and sustain the priesthood of the people.” Formal church leaders are needed to enable full participation of the members in the work of ministry (Newbigin 1989, 235).<sup>11</sup> Beyond Newbigin, this provides a clear lens by which to explain the felt “decline” of Western Christianity and the anti-institutionalism in missional church literature.

What does this have to do with the appeal of covocational church planting? Church planting practitioners are quick to point out the evils of individual consumerism, but they do not tend to see the same individualistic culture flaws within themselves, such as the endless vocational “choices” made in pursuit of self-actualization or the professional networks joined for social status and recognition. The subject is complex,

<sup>9</sup> Taylor originally pens this idea down in his earlier work. He claims that expressive individualism is a cornerstone of modern culture. Expressivism arose in the late eighteenth century from the idea that “each individual is different and original, and that this originality determines how he or she ought to live.” This phenomena altered a historical sense of “calling” due to the notion that human nature was seen as the primary source of self-identity. In other words, society began to look inside for meaning and human fulfillment. Calling, even divine calling, needed to be original to “us” based upon an inner voice or impulse rather than a fixed set of callings found in Scripture. See (Taylor 1989, 374-76).

<sup>10</sup> Smith explains this detachment culminates into a “nova effect” of personal options and pathways fueled by a kind of self-sufficient spirituality that Taylor calls “immanentization.” Sacred reality of the past only lingers to haunt present day believers, but most cope with a “buffered self.” See the glossary of terms. It would be incorrect to assume what Taylor means by “secular,” since he explains two common understandings of the term and his work develops a third meaning. The classic notion of “secular” which refers to normal jobs alongside “sacred” ones in the church was not mischaracterized as “dualism” by Taylor and the Magisterial Reformers. Cf. (Brisco 2018, 22).

<sup>11</sup> Newbigin goes on to say, “Clericalism and anticlericalism are simply two sides of one mistake.” Even missionary Roland Allen, who thought natural leaders of the people could communicate the gospel better than the seminary-trained foreigner, believed in the importance of elders and deacons. This was seen by one of his students who labored in Hindu contexts that resisted organized gatherings. See (Allen 2017, 36-37).

and even the best scholars on the subject admit a profound impasse. Robert Bellah is an Episcopalian sociologist who claims the chief task of the person in the West becomes “finding oneself in autonomous” isolation from parents and larger traditions that form one’s past (Bellah 1993, 144). This break is what leads to the illusory search of purpose and vocational fulfillment which often ends in emptiness. Human occupations become “instrumental—not a good in itself, but only a means to the attainment of a rich and satisfying private life.” Bellah’s greatest hope is that Christians can “discern the habits of the heart” and learn to navigate this individualist culture in a way that is above reproach. (Bellah 1993, 163).

Is there a limit to personal choice and freedom of expression? According to Anthony Hoekema, each person has influences which shape life-decisions and constitute relative freedom. To be a person, however, “means to be able to make decisions, to set goals, and to move in the direction of those goals. It means to possess freedom—at least in the sense of being able to make one’s own choices” (Hoekema 1994, 5). It is more American than it is Christian to trust self and depend on no one else (Jer. 17:9, Prov. 12:15). For example, the IMB teaches that there are four types of calling in a Christian’s life: salvation, mission, station, and service (International Mission Board 2022, 84-85). Despite this, there is no clear direction or expectation for anyone to escort a North American Christian in discovering their calling. The mantra to “follow your heart” and the misplaced Christian moral of “putting family first” seems to be the trump card of vocational decisions concerning where to live, how long to serve, and how much to spend. For this reason, disciples must lean on the Holy Spirit, biblical truth, and the counsel of others in the church than mere intuition for divine guidance and confirmation.

## **B. Divine Calling – Innovation and Tentmaking**

Missiologist Gailyn Van Rheezen proposes the real crisis of the North American church is not one of numerical decline or dwindling resources, but leadership development. He chides that leaders in the church “have inadvertently become organizers of ministry rather than makers of disciples” (Van Rheezen 2014, 366). Van Rheezen is not alone on this point. In the early 2000s, pastors were blamed for spending too much time effectively managing resources and activities inside church buildings rather than making disciples and engaging the surrounding culture. Breen and Cockram suggest, “We need leaders who will step out of ‘managing church’ and make discipling others their *primary objective*” (Breen and Cockram 2011, 116). Eugene Peterson highlights perhaps one of the most concerning aspects about the professionalization of gospel ministry, “American pastors [and other full-time ministry roles], without really noticing

what was happening, got our vocations redefined in terms of American careerism. We quit thinking of the parish as a location for pastoral spirituality and started thinking of it as an opportunity for advancement” (Peterson 1994, 20). It seems that covocationalism is a natural response to these church growth trappings, but it may not be the solution.

As pastors and church planters have been trained to “rethink” their missionary situation the past twenty years, a similar phenomenon has surfaced. Covocational models seem to encourage Christian leaders to be innovators and social entrepreneurs for the purpose of “street credibility,” thereby making them “affluent managers of time and money” outside the church over anything else. Seeking worldly favor tends to miss the prophetic stance of the gospel toward sin and culture. This is an error that redefines both the image and function of church planters. Apostolic workers and pastors indeed need to affirm the sacredness of all work and eliminate elitism, they may even be well served by past job experience, but part-time or overworked marketplace specialists are not the solution (Charles 2023, 14-15). Jesus commissioned his followers with divine authority and promised to be with them always (Matt. 28:19-20) but spoke nothing of “street cred” that some claim is needed today (Brisco 2018, 25, 235). He sent his original disciples out as “sheep in the midst of wolves,” not as relevant urban merchants (Matt. 10:16). Sean Benesh, a former church planter in the Pacific Northwest claims,

In many ways, since the beginning of the church as recorded in Acts, church planters or missionaries have been its *entrepreneurs*. Starting churches from scratch in new locations is a very creative and *entrepreneurial* endeavor. In the same way that business entrepreneurs have changed their approaches throughout history because of technological advances and changes in local and global economies, church planters also continue to adapt with the changing times. (Benesh 2018, 22)<sup>12</sup>

Dutch Reformed missiologist Stefan Paas sees no value in evangelical marketplace credibility. He recognizes the post-modern trends of secularity and decline like other missional church leaders, but he does not take the road of innovation like evangelicals nor adopt the sprawling church forms of liberals in his view of mission. Instead, Paas promotes a more visible ‘catholic’ ecclesiology claiming that “the Church’s identity is to be distinguished from its acting in the world” (Paas 2019, 89).

<sup>12</sup> The ‘entrepreneur’ sentiment is front and center in Sean’s book except he mostly applies the analogy to unique expressions of doing church. Sean rightly pushes planters to go to hard places that are unpopular, and he also pushes against unsustainable church launches. What is concerning, however, is his argumentation and conception of the missionary task. Benesh no longer seems to be involved in church planting since COVID-19, instead, he leads an adventure photography business. Many of his books, like *Part-Time Pastoring: Leading God’s People by Integrating Faith and Work* have been endorsed by NAMB church planting strategists like Brad Brisco. (Littleton et al. 2020)

While Paas's view can serve as a corrective for the church planter's activity and desire for cultural relevance, the remarks of Jonathan Edwards can restore the vision of the pastoral church planter. In an ordination sermon, he defined the sacred nature of a "full-time" minister:

The business of the Gospel is properly a divine business.... It is a business wherein a person has, in all parts of it, to do with God....God is more immediately the end of the work of the ministry than of any other work or employment that men are called to in this world....The office of the ministry is an office not of any human or earthly kingdom, but it is an office of Christ's kingdom. A gospel minister is Christ's officer, and his business is to be an instrument to carry on Christ's work, the work of redemption. (Vanhoozer and Strachan 2020, 83)

Edwards was mostly a pastor, but still a productive worker. Even with technological advances, few in history have likely matched his output. Apparently, there is no lack of duties present for pastors, but "too many pastors (church planters, missionaries, etc.) have exchanged their vocational birthright for a bowl of lentil stew (Gen. 25:29-34, Heb. 12:16; Vanhoozer and Strachan 2020, 1).

What about the overlap and combination of ministry roles? Numerous combinations are assumed to exist: shepherd-teacher, apostle-prophet, evangelist-apostle, prophet-teacher, prophet-evangelist.<sup>13</sup> Since Paul is seen as a proto-type missionary, his giftings and roles fall prey to eisegesis. Hirsch describes the Apostle as an architect, planter, father, foundation layer, and ambassador (Hirsch and Catchim 2012, 103-04). This is not inaccurate, but it is helpful to remember these are ways to describe a single vocational calling, not Paul's identity or numerous occupations. The degree to which gospel ministers should embrace multiple "hats" lies at the center of this discussion. Multi-directional leadership seems unavoidable in today's world. Vanhoozer and Strachan suggest that everyone wears multiple hats, but no other vocation seems littered with so many metaphorical equivalents of their chosen field than someone called to gospel ministry (Vanhoozer and Strachan 2020, 9). Even presuming the

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<sup>13</sup> A unique contemporary example might be the role of a Christian professor at a seminary who also serves as a local pastor. Wilson and Hiestand try to eliminate the gap between academia and the church by explaining four spheres of scholarship: research, systemization, ecclesial significance articulation, and ecclesial implementation. They describe two kinds of theological vocations which intersect but lean more to one side of the spectrum: ecclesial theologians or academic theologians. Two reasons this articulation is helpful: (1) it liberates divine callings from monetary employment, and (2) it highlights the general nature of responsibilities and gifting in the ministerial office. The relationship between missiology and field practitioners may also be helpfully explained in this fashion. See (Wilson and Hiestand 2016, 61-67).

Apostle Paul was a super-hybrid of all ministerial giftings, his “tentmaker” role arguably gets more attention in recent missiological literature than any of his other roles.

The idea of “tentmaking” stems from the New Testament but became popular among Western Protestants in the late twentieth century. J. Christy Wilson’s *Today’s Tentmakers* launched what could now be called the modern tentmaker movement (See Wilson Jr. 1979). Wilson, who was inspired by Dennis E. Clark, discovered in Afghanistan that where the traditional missionary was not welcome, Christian businessmen and tradesmen were. A brief word can be mentioned here as it relates to covocationalism. First, tentmaking and great commission companies have been particularly helpful in regard to creative entry in countries with little gospel access and closed doors to traditional missionary work. This lies in contrast to the contextual infrastructure of the United States, where the first amendment protects religious freedom and public ministers are often influential and openly supported. In the majority world, there has been significant development and progress in both empowering skilled labors to be global disciple-makers and using their trades, skills, and resources to be a blessing to the nations of the world.<sup>14</sup>

Second, Paul understood his calling as a servant of God and minister to the Gentiles, not a tentmaker in the marketplace. Ordained ministers should not be ashamed of their calling and believers should make extra effort to honor such roles. Vocational ministry is neither wrong, nor does it reduce other callings of service. Paul’s vocational paradigm is fundamentally different from a global, lay-leader “tentmaking” mission strategy. Dan Gibson provided the best explanation decades ago by contrasting between “Priscillan” and “Pauline” types of tentmaking in his book, *Avoiding the Tentmaker Trap*. He explains in detail the difference in professional training, time management, language expectation, self-image, and self-fulfillment of modern missionaries and Christian businessman (Gibson 1997, 38). Many still understand and acknowledge this difference without placing guilt or elite status on either vocation. The whole church is called to Great Commission obedience, and each member has a unique place and role that must be recognized and embraced.

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<sup>14</sup> A full analysis of tentmaking and similar movements, such as BAM, lies outside the scope of this research. For further study, see the following (Lai 2012; Johnson and Rundle 2009; Rundle and Steffen 2003).

### C. Human Embodiment – Pace and Overwork

Mark DeYmaz believes “when entrepreneurs are rightly empowered to help the church meet economic challenges and overcome financial obstacles in partnership with pastors, in recognition of their life experience and in the strength of their gifting, they come alive...when pastors position entrepreneurs “as entrepreneurs” in the church, it will thrive” (DeYmaz 2019, 135).<sup>15</sup> DeYmaz sees how pastors can tend to mismanage entrepreneurs and financially successful people by asking them to serve as committee leaders, Sunday school teachers, greeters, or offering collectors. He also recognizes the fiscal struggle of churches in the West, but the encouragement in this statement is the author’s intuitive understanding of vocation. In contrast to identity or a job that provides income, vocation is a “station” or sphere of human activity that assumes a certain level of human particularity. Why is particularity important? Recent events have provided the answer.

Since COVID-19 occurred in 2020, global displacement, job transition, and virtual meetings soared to an all-time high. With this came numerical records of anxiety, loneliness, and depression. Due to these phenomena, individuals of all ages have been savoring books and research on human embodiment and relational presence. Theologian Greg Allison lays out four theses of human embodiment, one of which is human particularity (Allison 2019, 168). Human beings are created by God to be a particular gendered embodied person. There are many aspects to this individual particularity, but the one that applies to covocationalism the most is spatiality. Spatiality is the inescapable reality of physical location whereby each person occupies a unique space and place in this world. More than ever before, human beings sense a need for personal connection and relationships beyond the self. Additionally, they possess a felt need to be rooted or grounded to a particular context in a changing and unpredictable world. Put simply, recognizing the creaturely limitations of geography, time, and energy is natural and sometimes good.

Proponents of covocationalism seem to suggest it is a lifestyle conducive to faithful presence and workplace excellence. The literature uses terms such as, “incarnational,” “relational,” and “alignment,” but are these descriptors accurate or justified? Currently, there is little evidence that proves a covocational lived experience enhances the quality of work and relationships. A divine call to serve in the marketplace and the church,

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<sup>15</sup> Some are exploring holistic ways to measure effectiveness in entrepreneurial church planting. The goal is not just conversions or financial sustainability, but rooted relationships in which the *imago Dei* is recovered through neighborhood and church interactions. It is a reminder that covocational efforts and intentions are not inherently unbiblical or unhealthy (Lee 2018).

especially if a church is able and willing to support her own ministers, calls for a definition of work. Dorothy Sayers says,

Let the Church remember this: that every maker and worker is called to serve God in his profession or trade – not outside it. The Apostles complained rightly when they said it is not right that they should leave the word of God and serve tables; their vocation was to preach the word. But the person whose vocation it is to prepare the meals beautifully might with equal justice protest: It is not right for us to leave the service of our tables to preach the word....The only Christian work is good work well done. Let the Church see to it that the workers are Christian people and do their work well, as to God: then all the work will be Christian work, whether it is church embroidery, or sewage farming. (Sayers 2014, 25)

If church planters take up a secular vocation, and they begin to sense God's pleasure in *that* work rather than preaching or efforts in evangelism or discipleship, the missionary task will suffer. On the contrary, if they relentlessly focus on apostolic duties in secular spheres of work, those organizations may suffer. Even a church planter with a high capacity for multiple tasks and jobs must come to terms with a biblical view of leisure and rest (1 Cor. 10:23; Ps. 127:1). The tendency to overwork and live at a hurried pace is normative in Western culture. How is the church to resist this pull and live in prophetic contrast to "patterns of this world" (Rom. 12:1-2)?

These questions and much more should be answered before a church planter *deliberately chooses* to indefinitely retain jobs in the marketplace. Pastors, missionaries, and church planters are those divinely called to use their gifts for equipping the body of Christ, reaching the lost, and dedicating themselves to prayer and the teaching of God's word. If circumstances permit, they are said to occupy "a different vocational space and social location" than the CEO, the farmer, the public school teacher, and the salesman (Wilson and Hiestand 2016, 67). Unfortunately, North Americans inherited a distorted and secularized version of the Protestant work ethic which drives the search for ultimate significance in careers, productivity, and the tendency to see work in relation to money (Hammett and McCoy 2023, 224-28). For this reason, the modern ideas of "part-time" and "full-time" work have seamlessly crept in Christian organizational structures to make more confusion regarding vocation and roles in the body of Christ. Covocational church planters may be some of the most talented human beings, but even they must find sustainable rhythms in light of human embodiment. According to Leland Ryken, "the contemporary views of time is an overstimulated and frenzied lifestyle beset with a desperate feeling that they should be accomplishing more than they are,

people try to cram more and more into their lives. They are like vehicles gaining speed as they barrel down a mountain” (Ryken 1995, 272). As covocational planters sense a call to leverage their influence, extend networks, and be in the marketplace, they must evaluate what it means to be among those who “rule well” in the church, especially laboring to preach and teach the word. This is the work, Paul says, that is worthy of “double honor” (1 Tim. 5:17).

#### 4. Conclusion

In summary, “co-vocationalism” is a term used to describe a new strategy for church planters in North America. It was developed by Brad Brisco, according to limited sources, but has since been affirmed and shared by many Western church leaders and urban practitioners. The definition is similar to “bi-vocationalism” with the main difference being that some church planters *strategically desire* to remain in the marketplace indefinitely for the sake of mission. This is a marked shift from the traditional expectation of many bivocational ministers who want to dedicate all of their time and energy to pastoral duties or the missionary task. This research identified several reasons for this shift in both method and terminology, which were as follows:

- A narrative belief that North American Christianity is in major decline.
- Equating the present Western context to the first-century apostolic period.
- A need to activate all Christians on mission and eliminate elitism.
- A need to better align secular business and mission and eliminate dualism.
- A push for multiplication strategy, and rejection of addition/attraction strategy.
- A subtle dismissal of traditional religious structures and resistance to institutions.
- A narrowed vision of faithful Christian presence in the marketplace.
- A push for apostolic church planters over pastoral church planters.
- An affinity for entrepreneurial skills based on Paul’s tentmaking abilities.
- Divine/vocational calling depends on individual choice, skills, and desires.
- A desire for “street-cred” and relevance among secular non-Christians.
- A desire to use strategies that “work” and eliminate those that don’t.

After these observations, a theological critique considering biblical doctrine and missiological factors was presented. Based off of this, some suggestions are found

below. Due to the dynamic North American context, the wide range of gifts and personalities in church planters, a plethora of vocational opportunities in a democratic space, combined with the financial constraints of some churches, these points may not apply to every situation and many do have exceptions, but they can still serve as guidelines for strategic organizational leadership.

- North America is increasingly secular and trends of decline can be validated, but the US is also one of the most Christianized countries in the world, with greater access to churches and gospel resources than would justify assuming the label of a true missionary context.
- Consequently, it should be normative for near-culture church planters to cultivate a vision to pastor and lead in healthy churches in their communities.
- Missional ecclesiology is not uniform and must be carefully evaluated, since emergent forms are reactionary to attractional models and traditional institutions.
- Covocationalism seems to conflate biblical leadership and offices with dualism.
- The integrity and sacred nature of every vocation should be respected. Entrepreneurs should leverage skills as entrepreneurs, and pastors should be free to be pastors.
- The biblical thrust for local churches is to compensate and support ministerial leaders.
- Multiple vocations and alignment must consider human placement and spatiality.
- The missiological strategy of seeking to be “relevant” could miss the prophetic stance of the gospel and does not automatically imply healthy contextualization.

Generous, prayerful cooperation in mission to support gospel proclamation and alleviate physical burdens is a New Testament theme that continues today among certain congregations, associations, and denominations. Covocational ministry may be normal, necessary, or strategic in the majority world, especially in apostolic environments. Tentmaking platforms and marketplace jobs are often used to assist with entry and access to closed countries in the Middle East. Since North America does not have this challenge, secular jobs and skilled trades beyond vocational ministry tend to involve matters of financial sustainability or additional income. In the end, further research and biblical accountability structures are needed to better assess internal

motivations, individualism, and vocational alignment related to calling, career, and church planting in North America. This paper suggests that assumptions of covocationalism must be refined to ensure sustainable, contextual, and fruitful ministry. Even then, such a strategy should not seek to diminish the vision, desire, and full support for ordained public ministry and those appointed to equip, lead, and extend the church.

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***Austin Holcomb** serves with the International Mission Board as a Seminary and Pipeline Liaison in the United States. He has previous field experience as an international church planter working in the Sahel and Horn regions of Africa. Austin is currently working toward a PhD in Missiology at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary.*

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