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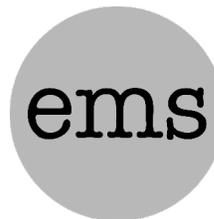
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Matthew 25:40 And ‘The Least of These’: Interpretive Implications for a Missional Ecclesiology



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And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’ ~ Matthew 25:40

Two approaches dominate the church’s interpretation of Matthew 25:31-46 as it concerns the identity of “the least of these my brothers”: a universal approach that considers Jesus’ statement as establishing the way one treats the poor and needy as a (or even ‘the’) primary condition for salvation, in contrast to a particularist or narrow approach that rather understands Jesus as referring to how one receives the disciples sent in His name. In this study the various exegetical bases for these two dominant arguments will be examined in light of Matthew’s thematic interests. That is, what are the dominant theological threads that run throughout Matthew’s gospel, how does Matthew 25:40 cohere with other themes and emphases, and how does either interpretation fit with what the rest of the New Testament (NT) says about this subject. These are the questions this study will examine. In the end, I will propose that a narrow interpretation is most consistent with Matthew’s theology and with that of the NT as a whole, where “the least of these my brothers” refers explicitly to cross-cultural missionaries. I will then draw out some general conclusions for a missional ecclesiology.

Keywords: Ecclesiology, Discipleship, Missions, Missio Dei, Missional, New Testament, Gospel of Matthew, Sheep and Goats, Compassion, Missionaries.

The Problem

The exegetical problem with this passage centers on two questions with varying degrees of difficulty. First, what is the identity of “all the nations” (Gr. *panta ta ethnē*)? That is, who exactly is it that will stand before the eschatological throne of judgment according

to the opening verses of the pericope (vv. 31-33) and be divided into the righteous sheep and unrighteous goats? Second, and perhaps most crucially, who are “the least of these my brothers”? Are they the poor of the world in general, or are they a narrower, more limited group? These are the questions to which we now turn.

A Brief History of Interpretation

The universalist approach that sees Jesus’ statement about “the least of these my brothers” as referring to all the world’s poor and needy finds wide acceptance among liberation and liberal theologies especially but may be gaining ground even among contemporary evangelicals (Luz 2005, 269). Several scholars believe that the universal approach is the most widely accepted view in the twentieth century (McMahon 2016, 560; Blomberg 1992, n.p.; Gray 1989, 255) though not everyone agrees (Keener 1997, 360). Interestingly, throughout most of church history, the narrow interpretation dominated. Sherman W. Gray has produced the most sustained analysis of various approaches to this text diachronically, examining many hundreds of sources from every epoch of church history from the apostolic fathers to the modern era. In his analysis, one constant difficulty proved to be that large numbers of interpreters were either neutral or ambiguous about the identity of the “least of these.” That said, he finds that both the patristic era and medieval eras both tended heavily toward the narrower interpretation among those who articulated a specific position, while those in the neutral camp constitute the largest group. In fact, during the patristic period, which Gray measures as from the 2nd century to AD 750, of a total of 504 uses of the passage that he considered, most (62%) were neutral, while 33% favored the narrow view, and only 5% took the universalist view (Gray 1989, 338-39). In many cases, neutral positions can be attributed to the fact that the writer was simply not concerned with the identity of “the least of these my brothers” due to other, often apologetic, concerns. In the Middle Ages, “seventeen of twenty-one medieval authors” (or 80%), “who comment on vv. 40 and 45 see ‘the least of these’ as Christians” (Gray 1989, 340). Gray attributes the dominance of the narrow view in the Middle Ages in Western Christianity to the influence of Jerome and Augustine, while the east was more influenced by Chrysostom’s more open views. Augustine, for example, refers to Matthew 25:31-46 114 times and yet never explicitly refers to “the least” as the world’s poor; but more than a third of those references link this phrase to poor Christians (Gray, 69). Chrysostom’s views are a bit more ambiguous, as he often understands “the least” as Christians only. But in other places he refuses to exclude non-believers. One might imagine then for exegetes like Chrysostom seeing

something like concentric circles of need with believers being the inner circle and everyone else being the outer (Gray, 50-52). In the Renaissance and Reformation era, the numbers were strikingly similar (also at 80%), with twenty-nine of thirty-six authors endorsed the narrow interpretation, and two (5.5%) being neutral. This preference for the narrower view held in the early modern era as not a single eighteenth-century author favored a universal interpretation. The nineteenth century saw a slight upsurge though, with 17% taking a universal approach while 19% can be classified as neutral (Gray 1989, 345-46). Explicit universal interpretations were the minority view for most of church history until the modern era when a dramatic shift took place (ibid., 348; cf. Blomberg, n.p.; Keener, 360). It does not require much imagination or creativity, therefore, to deduce that the dramatic departure from a narrow, restricted interpretation tends to line up fairly well with the emergence of the Enlightenment and liberal theologies.

The Arguments

Much of the difficulty in interpreting this passage lies in the challenge of identifying the various groups in view (Michaels 1965, 27). Specifically, two distinct groups feature prominently in the pericope: on one hand, we have “all the nations” (*panta ta ethnē*), who are subject to divine judgment, and on the other “the least of these my brothers” who are not among those being separated into the righteous sheep and unrighteous goats. The simplest answer is to see these two groups as simply the teachers (the disciples) and those being taught (Michaels, 30). Otherwise, if “the least of these my brothers” generally refers to the world’s poor, you have the soteriological problem that all of them somehow escape the final judgment. This is because vv. 40 and 45 make it clear that “the least of these” are excluded from the separation process and from the ensuing judgment (Cope 1969, 37).

Those who take the narrow view also tend to argue this perspective based on the combination of the terms “least” (*elachistōn*) and “brothers” (*adelphōn*). “Least” is the superlative form of “little (ones)” (*mikroi*) “which without exception in Matthew refers to the disciples (10:42; 18:6, 10, 14)” while “brothers” always has the sense of “spiritual kin” (Blomberg, n.p.). Christopher McMahan objects to this reasoning by claiming that first, *elachistōn* and *mikroi* stand in contrast to one another, by which he seems to mean Matthew 25 and its reference to “least” (*elachistōn*) should be seen as an intentional departure from earlier references to the disciples as “little ones” (*mikroi*)

since the precise terminology differs. Second, he notes that the use of “brothers” for disciples “might be mitigated by the fact that a ‘non-ecclesial’ use of the word is employed in Mt 5:22-24; 7:3-5” (McMahon, 560). I would argue, however, that classifying the word “brothers” in these instances as “non-ecclesial” may be technically correct but also anachronistic. Jesus surely intends the word “brothers” in the Sermon on the Mount to refer to the community of His followers (see Luz 2007, 204). Finally, McMahon (2016) finds it inexplicable that those being subjected to judgment would not know how they had treated missionaries (560).

Frederick Bruner, a former missionary to the Philippines who came to understand his missionary calling in terms of “going down” via exegetical study rather than “going out” in evangelism and mission (Bruner 2004, Preface), also argues for an unrestricted and universal interpretation based on four characteristics of the passage:

(1) the finality and universality of the setting of the text (last judgment, all nations, vv. 31-32); (2) the surprise of the righteous (vv. 37-39, in contrast to the intentional service of Christians or special people in 10:40-42); (3) the four lists of the needy, which provide the most accessible definitions of “the least” (vv. 35-36, 37-39, 42-43, 44); and (4) the context of the four concluding warning stories in Jesus’ Sermon on the End of the World, the theme in each of which is the seriousness of the judgment for Christians, too (24:45-25:46; it would be unlike Matthew to end a discourse with a story that failed to complete and heighten the teaching of all his preceding stories; cf. the ending of each of Jesus’ other sermons). (Bruner 2004, under “Chapter 25: The Sermon of Judgment”)

In addition to the above arguments, Bruner also deals briefly with the question of a works-based salvation that follows from the universal interpretation. He admits that the universal approach comes very close to a salvation by works. In response, he cites “the deeply Evangelical Schlatter” who is simply not troubled by that conclusion (Bruner 2004, “Chapter 25”). In other words, some evangelicals seem to have just embraced the inevitable conclusion of a universal, works-based salvation as lying at the center of what Jesus teaches here. Ron Sider, for example, also takes this position (Sider 1993, 60-61). But Bruner’s position is more complex, as he also cites Luther and Calvin as seeing in this passage salvation by grace and works of love made possible by that grace, with Luther then restricting such works only to the believer. Bruner rejects this

limitation and argues that God’s grace can even be at work in unbelievers to this end. He concludes:

But now, in amazing magnanimity, this very Christ [who died on the cross] swings heaven's doors wide open to let in simple caregivers. Jesus' Sermon on the Last Judgment is his extended commentary on the Fifth Beatitude: “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.” Jesus promises this, not a “liberal” Christianity. (Bruner 2004, under “Chapter 25”)

Of McMahon and Bruner’s take, I find McMahon’s argument fairly easy to refute. While admittedly, the difference between “least” and “little ones” might be problematic if that were the only evidence suggesting the narrow view, the addition of “brothers” in the possessive form (these brothers of *mine*) combined with “least” greatly strengthens the argument that the disciples are in view. Regarding McMahon’s final objection, the point is not that the nations would be ignorant of how they treated Christ’s envoys (or missionaries), but that they would be ignorant of the fact that their acceptance or rejection of those missionaries amounted to acceptance or rejection of Christ, a point that echoes a statement made earlier by Jesus in Matthew 10:40 when he said to his disciples, “the one who receives you receives me, and the one who receives me receives Him who sent me.” Anecdotally, it does not strike me at all as inconceivable that people would knowingly reject Christian missionaries and their message but remain in the dark about their simultaneous rejection of Christ. Many people who reject the gospel when shared by a missionary do so on the grounds that they consider missions itself to be an absurd endeavor in the modern world. How dare we claim that *only* our religion is true! I can recall a number of specific instances in my own life where people knew I was a missionary and rejected my efforts to share the gospel, often with sneers and laughter. I suspect they might potentially be surprised to one day learn that in doing so they rejected Christ.

As to Bruner’s argument, I think his objections can readily be overcome if we consider two of the most often-cited arguments in favor of the narrower view. First, J. Ramsey Michaels has argued that Matthew 25:40 must be read in connection with Matthew 10. This is because both passages conclude important discourses by Jesus and have striking parallels. Matthew 10 concludes Jesus’ missionary discourse to the disciples while Matthew 25 concludes Jesus’ “farewell address.” (Michaels 1965, 27-28). He also notes that in both pericopes, that (1) a specific group of people is in view, the “little ones” in Matthew 10 and “the least” in Matthew 25, (2) the two texts are linked

in that the good works of Matthew 25 are linked to the phrase “a cold cup of water” in Matthew 10, and (3) both passages refer clearly to two groups of redeemed people. In chapter 10 “the little ones” are clearly the disciples (see 10:2-5, 42) and the other group of the redeemed are those who receive these (vs. 40), which explains why they are not subject to judgment. Thus:

this parallel material in Matthew would suggest that in Matt. 25 “the least of these” are Jesus’ disciples (specifically the Twelve) who stand in their Lord’s place and proclaim the gospel, while the righteous “sheep” are those who gladly receive the word and demonstrate their faith by hospitality and works of love to the messengers. (Michaels 1965, 28)

Michaels goes on to point out not only the clear connection to Matthew 10 but also to the Great Commission passage, Matthew 28:19, which again contains the identical phrase, “all nations” (*panta ta ethnē*). Thus Matthew 25 presupposes the completion of Matthew 28:18-20, and disciples having been finally made of all nations. And, as even Bruner points out, the Great Commission should be understood as the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant. So, “the end of our Gospel connects with the beginning of our Bible” (Bruner, under “Chapter 25”). And as I’ve noted elsewhere, the whole gospel of Matthew is therefore bookended by references to the Abrahamic covenant and God’s plan to bless the nations through Israel; thus, missions defined as taking the gospel to the nations constitutes a major theme for Matthew’s Gospel (Ireland, *The Missionary Spirit*; Bruner, under “Chapter 25”). To not interpret Matthew 25 then along these lines seems strange to say the least.

Michaels also points out that there are several New Testament passages that support the narrow interpretation and show that this was how the early church understood these words. And the same can be said for perhaps the church’s earliest discipleship document, *the Didache*. For example, *Did.* 4.1 and 4.5 both seem to reference Matthew 25 in general and possibly 25:40 specifically and admonish catechumens to support and receive their teachers in the faith as service to the Lord (Michaels, 31). In the New Testament, we see the narrow view of Matthew 25:40 played out when Paul and Silas are in prison and the jailer inquires about salvation. Paul and Silas share the gospel as Jesus’ envoys; the jailer in return cares for their physical needs by attending to their wounds, proving them a meal in his home, and receives the gospel and is baptized. Thus the jailer is the righteous sheep in Matthew 25:40 and Paul and Silas “the least of these,” Jesus’ brothers. Michaels also argues that the commands to “watch” (vs. 42) and “be

ready” (vs. 44) that lie at the center of two of the three parables in the closing verses of Matthew 24 and opening verses of Matthew 25 (i.e., the faithful slave and the parable of the talents), both have a general application to all believers but should especially characterize the actions of church leaders. Therefore,

a prominent theme of Matt 24-25 is that of judgment, and in both these pericopes the ones being judged are those in positions of special trust. Unless all of this can be written off as merely part of the parabolic setting, it indicates that the Matthean context of 25:31-46 has “ecclesiastical” or “pastoral” as well as eschatological and missionary overtones.

While Gray in his exhaustive study of this passage did not find any explicit references among the apostolic fathers, what he did find was that without exception Christian charity in that era focused on the Christian community (Gray 1989, 11). Similarly, Michaels points to clear references to Matthew 25:40 in the Second Epistle of Clement (2nd Century). Second Clement 17:3 in fact references all of the key themes discussed—all nations, obedience to Christ, final judgment, helping the weak as support for missionary endeavor, and obedience to church leaders, or elders (Michaels, 32).

Finally, Michaels argues that his thesis can only be proven based on how “the least of these my brothers,” that is, the missionary disciples (or what Luz calls “the itinerant radicals”), relate to the deprivations of Matthew 25 elsewhere in the New Testament. The sufferings of Jesus through his missionary disciples are repeated several times in Matthew 25: hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick, and in prison. Importantly, Paul’s catalogue of apostolic hardships in 2 Corinthians 11:23 are strikingly similar. Here Paul testifies to having been imprisoned, hungry, thirsty, and a stranger—among other things. Paul refers to these as *the* characteristics of an apostle, thus agreeing with Matthew that “to watch” includes these things (Michaels, 33). Other direct parallels to these sufferings describing the characteristics of Christian missionaries are found in the 2nd Century Acts of John, 1 Corinthians 4:10-13, and the third century Acts of Thomas. This leads then to his conclusion that as it concerns the interpretation of Matthew 25, “Jesus’ disciples are not so much called upon to ‘help’ the poor as they are to become the poor and outcast themselves in the completion of their world mission” (Michaels, 37).

To put it plainly, Michaels has answered all the objections raised by Bruner, and then some. To this argument, Lamar Cope offers additional important insight. He observes first (along with many other NT scholars) that the text should not be taken as a parable,

even though it is commonly referred to as such. This is due to the directness of the imagery and unambiguous statements about the final judgment that would be out of step with a parable (Cope 1969, 34; cf. France 2007, 960; Luz 2005, 264). This is important, because were the passage considered a parable, then we might be inclined to not read too much into the various details and focus solely on a single overarching lesson. But Jesus does not present here an imaginary or invented story in order to advance a spiritual truth. He presents a true picture of how the nations will be judged.

In addition, Cope notes an additional connection to Matthew 10 that greatly strengthens the argument that Matthew 25 should be read in connection to that passage. In Matthew 10, Jesus clearly designates the disciples as his representatives, or more precisely, His prophets, and says that those who receive them receive the Lord, and those who provide a cold cup of water to the disciples “shall by no means lose their reward” (vv. 41-42). This seems to reflect an Old Testament theme in which showing hospitality to a prophet entitles the person to the prophet’s reward. This appears to be the main idea in the rather bizarre story in 1 Kings 13:11-32, where a non-Israelite prophet receives a prophet’s reward, namely a revelation from YHWH, by showing hospitality to the disobedient prophet from Judah. So too in the story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath, who shows hospitality to Elijah and is blessed with both material provision and with the resurrection of her son (Cope, 40-41). Therefore, given the Jewish background of Matthew 25, the explicit connections between the disciples as prophets and the eschatological judgment, which echoes common “Jewish motifs of judgment, agency, and hospitality,” the narrower interpretation of this passage becomes almost certain. As Cope concludes

Matthew 25:31-46 cannot provide a legitimate basis for Christian concern for the poor and needy of the world. Such an interpretation violates the text by eisegesis. “The least of these my brethren” are the disciples; the ethic is a churchly, sectarian one; it does not represent a significant advance in ethical thinking over the ethics of the Judaism of its day. For a wider concern and richer ethic interpreters must turn to other places in the New Testament. (Cope, 44).

Finally, should anything be made of the fact that vs. 45 omits the phrase “brothers of mine” and contains only “the least of these”? Does this impact the interpretation outlined above? Some argue, and I tend to agree, that the most likely reason for the omission lies in that Matthew had already made his point and despite contemporary confusion, “his understanding of it was clear and needed no further elucidation”

(Luz 2005, 282). As France (2006) argues, “the omission of ‘brothers and sisters’ with reference to the ‘smallest’ in v. 45 is to be attributed to literary abbreviation rather than to any change in the identity of the people concerned, as the reader will naturally understand the phrase in the light of the fuller expression in v. 40” (996). That said, some do in fact see this as a broadening of the initial mandate to extend beyond fellow Christians to anyone in need (Noland 2005, 1034). Regardless though of how one interprets this latter verse, the emphasis of vs. 40 on caring for missionaries remains.

Mission in Matthew

David Baur has said that “along with Luke-Acts, [Matthew] is among the most explicitly missional books of the New Testament (Baur 2019, 241). If we examine Matthew’s thematic interests and ask where and how the NT concept of mission fits into Matthew’s gospel, a few important emphases emerge. First, as many commentators have observed, there is a certain duality at work in Matthew that at first seems contradictory. Matthew portrays Jesus as advocating both a ruthless particularism as it concerns Israel and a universalism regarding Gentiles (Harvey 1998, 120). But as Harvey observes, these together “suggest that prominent among [Matthew’s] purposes must have been (1) providing material to evangelize fellow Jews (cf. Matt. 10:23) and (2) explaining the origins of the Gentile mission (cf. Matt. 28:18-20)” (Harvey 120). Thus, missions, both to Israel and to the nations constitutes a major structural theme for Matthew’s gospel.

What does it mean, then, to read Matthew missiologically? To answer this question, I am going to borrow insight from a sermon preached by Don Carson on this passage. As he rightly observes, Matthew 25 falls within what has been called Jesus’ eschatological discourse—his sermon on the last things. Along these lines, Carson points out that each of the parables in the last half of Matthew 24 and beginning of Matthew 25 constitute Jesus’ teachings on how to faithfully wait for Christ’s return. Importantly, each parable builds on and increases the intensity of the previous one. For example, we wait knowing that the Master will return like a thief, when we don’t expect it (24:43). Therefore, we also wait as stewards knowing that we must give an account of our service (24:46). We also wait as those who understand that the Master’s return may be long delayed, as emphasized in the parable of the ten virgins (25:1-13). Finally, we wait knowing that while we do not know the time of the Master’s return, and while we know that the master may be delayed, we are tasked with improving or expanding the Master’s assets, as seen in the parable of the talents (25:14-30; Don Carson, “The Parable of the Sheep and Goats”).

Carson then moves on to the pericope of the sheep and goats and concludes that, in the end, we wait for the Master by caring for our fellow Christians. But based on the missiological paradigm outlined above, I suggest moving beyond Carson and concluding that we wait, preeminently by remaining engaged in Jesus' mandate to take the gospel to all nations. This is because the "least of these my brothers" are not Christians in general, but as Keener argues, Christian missionaries specifically (Keener 2009, 605). And how the nations (i.e., people groups) receive them proves determinative regarding their eternal status. The church then must wait by engaging in mission to the lost, considering this our greatest form of stewardship. It is for the nations, after all, that Jesus went to the cross. *They*, the *panta ta ethnē* are the Lord's most precious asset (1 Peter 2:9) and it is for their sake that we must remain fully engaged in the *missio Dei* until the Lord's return.

The Narrow View and its Implications for a Missional Ecclesiology

If we adopt the universal interpretation of this passage, it's worth asking what we gain in doing so? First, we embrace, at some level a soteriology that is at odds with the rest of the New Testament and the doctrine of justification by faith. We might, by embracing this interpretation find an answer to the ever-challenging question of those who have never heard the gospel (that is, they are saved through Christ based on their good deeds toward humanity). Bruner argues this in his commentary on Matthew. And we get an affirmation of Christian social concern that is completely compatible with the rest of Scripture. Which means that if we adopt the narrow interpretation of Matthew 25:40, we lose nothing in terms of our ecclesiology. There are plenty of passages in Scripture in both the OT and NT that instruct God's people to be generous toward the poor and needy among us (to name just a few, see Ex. 23:6; Deut. 15:4; Psalm 9:9, 109:31; Matthew 19:21; Mark 12:40; Luke 4:18, 14:13; Gal. 2:10; James 2:2-6, etc.). There is no need therefore to treat these options as mutually exclusive and to think that a narrow interpretation of Matthew 25:40 will somehow diminish the biblical basis for Christian compassion. And perhaps no passage better captures the narrow interpretation of our passage *and* the broader need to be generous to the poor, whoever and wherever they are, than Paul's admonition in Galatians 6:10: "So then, while we have opportunity, let's do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of faith." So, the expectation that God's people will demonstrate a constant and sacrificial concern for the least well off among us is fully compatible with a biblical ethic, a specifically Christian ethic, and is certainly consistent with even a narrower Matthean

ethic (Matt. 6:2; 19:21). Yet that does not seem to be what Jesus is teaching here in 25:40. Therefore, if we adopt the broader universal interpretation we stand to lose a critical statement by Jesus, found nowhere else in the Gospels, about the importance of the missionary enterprise and the support of missionaries by church leaders and local congregations. Given the great commission passage as the final word of Jesus in Matthew, this narrower missionary interpretation seems to best fit Matthew's overall theological framework. From this, then, several important points regarding a missional ecclesiology can be deduced.

1. *The support of missionary evangelists is not optional.* We live in a church age in which missions in the local church, is frankly, a mess. I know from my time as a missionary with the Assemblies of God, that most local churches have no formal strategy for what missionaries to support (if any), or any clearly articulated bases on whom they should or shouldn't support. Consequently, money is more often than not given to programs that are "sexy"—by which I mean, those that pull people's heart strings and leave people feeling that they've done something important on the world stage, just long enough for them to return to their lives of rampant consumerism and materialism, guilt free. Often its humanitarian aid-type projects that raise the most funds, and often-repeated statistics on missions giving have supported this fact for decades. It is a widely known fact in missionary circles that giving to missionaries working among the unreached is an embarrassingly small portion of overall Christian giving in general and an even smaller portion of giving to global causes (see Status of Global Christianity). For most churches, missions strategy is broad and scattered. For most the strategy is, as my friend Alan Johnson once described it, "go everywhere, do everything, all at once." In fact, as a direct result of this shotgun approach to giving, world missionaries are increasingly having a difficult time raising money to get to foreign fields. Could this be a direct result of poor exegesis and the misguided preaching of Matthew 25:40? I think there's a good chance this is at least part of the problem. After all, when was the last time you heard a sermon on this passage that was fundamentally about missions support in a way that tied directly to Matthew 25:40? I, for one, have never heard a sermon on this text along those lines and yet there are very good reasons for believing that this is precisely the intent of the passage.

2. *Missionaries should expect to suffer.* When missions is understood rightly as proclaiming the Gospel to those who have never heard, then we would expect that missionaries would find themselves in the midst of terrible hardships and deprivations, as did the apostle Paul. But when we define missions as anything that we do across

geographic borders, even if it's just sending a shipping container laden with mosquito nets or used clothes, then it's not hard to imagine why we have difficulty conceiving of missions as suffering; if our missions involvement begins and ends with us sitting in our Lazy-boy and tapping a few buttons on our smartphone in order to donate our spare change, we may be inclined to gloss over any biblical suggestion that missions means suffering for those who go. Perhaps we seldom encounter such hardships as those mentioned in Matthew 25 because we've surrendered our prophetic role and therefore challenge no one regarding their religious commitments and call no one to account. What do I mean? If most of our missionary endeavors are to those nations where the gospel has already taken root, where 75% or more of the population are already Christians, then it's likely we won't experience the sufferings like those described by Paul because we're not truly being good stewards as we wait for Christ's return. We're squandering resources by choosing to go to easy places rather than hard places. Because when we do those things, when we go to those places where Jesus is not known, then Scripture makes it abundantly clear that persecution and suffering and imprisonment and death may follow. And because of this, those engaged in this kind of dangerous and costly work deserve the church's utmost commitment and unwavering support *because Jesus commands it!* Pastors and church members must find motivation for that support by seeing it as being done for Christ himself.

3. *Leaders must disciple their churches in a missional ecclesiology.* Therefore, the church must be disciplined according to the pattern of Matthew 25:40. This should minimally include 1) the certainty of Christ's return, 2) the judgment of the nations based on their acceptance or rejection of the missionaries' message, and 3) the absolute responsibility of every local church for the ongoing commitment and support to "the least of these my brothers"—otherwise known as cross-cultural missionaries. Church leaders (*the presbuteros*) have a divine mandate to make sure that their churches understand and follow the pattern of Matthew 25:40. None of this is to even remotely suggest that the church should stop giving to charitable organizations at home and abroad. But I do recommend that the proper understanding of Matthew 25:40 should call us to a more biblical balance than we are perhaps accustomed to.

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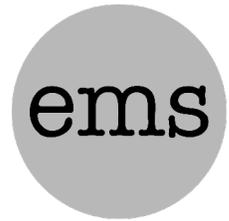
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Has the King Left the Building? Why the Missional Church Needs Kingdom Cultural Intelligence (KQ)



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Introduction

Joining nearly 800,000 new users and another 18.2 million global citizens in 2025, young Drew and Shanti turned to an app to read Scripture on their phones (Fulks et al. 2025, Gryboski 2025, Trachtenberg 2024). Moved by the Jesus they see in *The Chosen*, they yearn for spiritual connection but tend to avoid traditional church, like the 29% of U.S. adults who identified as “nones” or “religiously unaffiliated” (Pew Research Center 2025, 10, 72). Spiritual hunger is rising for some (Silliman 2025), while church attendance declines (Pew Research Center 2025, 53-57). Disillusionment and busy schedules seem to overshadow Sunday mornings, according to Davis and Graham (2023, 42).

Why is this the case? Why is there spiritual hunger but rejection of the church? What might we be doing wrong? The “State of the Great Commission” report revealed most American believers do not seem concerned with Christ’s final command (Niermann et al. 2024). Similarly, van den Berge-Bakker and van der Meulen (2024, 7, 12) found the Dutch church declining and “forgetting its calling.” Might the church need “rebranding,” as Collins (2024) asserted? Why is the mission of this institution, before whom the “gates of hell shall not prevail” (Matthew 16:18), and known as “the most enduring and influential legacy of the ancient world” (Holland 2019, 14), failing to be embraced?

In a different kingdom, the kingdom of Thailand, their *Lèse-majesté* law punishes any perceived dishonor to the monarchy, reflecting cultural reverence for the king

(Kelling 2024). By analogy, has the church diminished the majesty of her King, failing to display His glory to a watching world? If Christianity is so pervasive and appealing, the glory of the King so beautiful, and His solace so needed, what is wrong? Has the King been so dishonored that He has “left the building”? For the maladies of the church of Holland, van den Berge-Bakker and van der Meulen (2024, 7, 12) prescribed a return to focusing on the Kingdom. Along those lines, applying a sociocultural lens to the Kingdom of God, this article explores how the church might better embody the values of the Kingdom to draw seekers like Drew and Shanti into meaningful engagement with the King and His Kingdom.

The Kingdom of God

The theme of God’s Kingdom and His rulership spans Scripture (Bartholomew and Goheen 2009, 2024; Bock, 2001; Fee and Nordling 2025; Glasser 2003; Goheen 2011, 2025; Henry, 1992; McKnight 2014, 2015; Snyder 1999; Spoelstra 2020; Roberts 2002; Vang and Carter 2013; Vos 1903). In Genesis, God reigns supreme and grants governance – from the sun governing the day and the moon the night (Genesis 1:16) to mankind ruling or having dominion over creation (Genesis 1:26). Moses proclaimed, “The Lord shall reign forever and ever” (Exodus 15:18 NASB). Likewise, David declared: “Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom and Your dominion endures throughout all generations” (Psalm 145:13a). God’s reign is acknowledged throughout the Old Testament, especially in the Psalms (Mays 1994).

In the Gospels, Jesus prioritized the Kingdom, outlining its values in the Sermon on the Mount, and teaching his disciples to pray, “Thy Kingdom come” (Matthew 6:10). Then, Peter spoke of “the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 1:11). Paul described believers’ transfer from darkness to “the Kingdom of His beloved Son” (Colossians 1:13). John in the book of Revelation envisioned the ultimate triumph of God’s reign: “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ; and He will reign forever and ever” (Revelation 11:15).

Exploring the literature, definitions of the Kingdom abound. Willard (2010, 7) maintained, “The kingdom of God is just God in action” and “the kingdom of God is where what God wants done is done.” Schreiner (2018, 18) defined the kingdom as “the King’s power over the King’s people in the King’s place.” Likewise, Goldsworthy (2006, 120) explained the Kingdom as “God’s people in God’s place under God’s rule and blessing.” Kraybill (2018, 18) called it an “upside-down kingdom,” and disagreed with

Schreiner (2018) over the sense of place. From a communal seminary assignment, Breshears (1984, 8) provided the following definition of the Kingdom:

The dynamic activity of the sovereign God to manifest His authority in His sin-alienated creation, by redeeming it from the domain of evil, judging all enemies, and bestowing the blessings of His beneficent reign on and through His people in fulfillment of all His promises to the praise of His glory.

Witherington (2009) preferred the word “dominion” for the Greek *basileia*. Similarly, France (1990, 15) maintained, “‘The kingdom of God’ is God in saving action, God taking control in his world, or. . . ‘divine government.’”

The notion of the Kingdom is complex. It is already but not yet, present, past, and future. Wright (1997, 471) explained, “Jesus spent his whole ministry *redefining* what the kingdom meant.” Hauerwas (1991, 82-83) exerted, “The proclamation of the coming kingdom of God, its presence, and its future coming is a claim about *how* God rules and the establishment of that rule through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.” The question remains: “How is God ruling among believers today?”

Even though the Kingdom predates the Church, another debate surrounds the relationship between the two. Biblical scholars such as Bock (2001), Henry (1992), Ladd (1959, 1962, 1996), Toon (2018, 76), and Wright (2008, 2012) prefer not to conflate the Church with the Kingdom. According to Bock (2001, 48), “the kingdom is bigger than the church.” Henry (1992, 42) asserted, “Jesus in his own person is the embodied sovereignty of God.” McKnight (2015, 11), by contrast, equated the church and the Kingdom and added, “We all learn the Christian life from how our local church shapes us.”

In contrast, Jones (1995, 8) opined, “The Church has lost the Kingdom” (Jones 1995, 18). Agreeing with Jones, we must ask where all are the “*prime* citizens of the Kingdom,” those who embrace the Great Commission and walk with obedient and repentant hearts (Plantinga 2002, 101)?

As this is a sociocultural examination of the Kingdom of God, it is beyond the scope of this article to delve more deeply into the theological issues surrounding this “multistage, multi-faceted” concept (Metts 2004, 73). Beyond this discussion, the reader is directed to Keener (2009), Perrin (2019), Schreiner (2018), and other theologians already mentioned.

Many languages and ethnic groups reside on our planet, but only two spiritual kingdoms exist. When Satan tempted Jesus, Satan declared, “I will give You all this domain and its glory, for it has been handed over to me, and I give it to whomever I want” (Luke 4:6). Jesus told the Pharisees, “You are of your father the devil” (John 8:44). Their ways were not His.

Kingdom ways differ radically from the manner in which most humans have been socialized, from the ways of the world, the flesh, and the devil. God proclaimed His ways were higher than our ways and His thoughts higher than ours (Isaiah 55:8). Even the reign of our Lord was not a usual one. Our King was crowned with thorns and given a wooden sign reading, “King of the Jews” (Matthew 27:37). As Wright (2012, 132) proposed, “The kingdom and the cross are part of one another.”

The way out of Satan’s kingdom and entrance into God’s, then, must involve radical change, death to old ways, and something called being born again (John 3:3), a process requiring repentance for our rebel nature (Matthew 3:2, 4:17; Acts 2). Since Genesis 3, humans have been enemies of God (Romans 5:10), slaves of a rival kingdom, and traitors. Humankind certainly committed *Lèse-majesté*, so welcome into the King’s presence requires contrition, change of allegiance, and a sincere pledge of eternal loyalty and fidelity (Luke 14:26).

Culture and the Kingdom of God

Turning to explore culture, Delpit (2005, xxiv) wrote, “We all carry worlds in our heads, and those worlds are decidedly different.” Sire (2004, 123) synthesized worldview definitions and believed worldview to be “a fundamental orientation of the heart.” However, not to conflate worldview with culture but focus on the latter, Lee (2025, 13) agreed culture might be defined as “what matters to a person,” whereas Swidler (1986, 273) found culture to be the “symbols, stories, rituals, and worldviews, which people may use in varying configurations to solve different kinds of problems.”

Those with high cultural competence or high cultural intelligence can more successfully bridge cultural divides. Cultural intelligence or CQ is “the capability to function effectively across national, ethnic, and organizational cultures” (Earley and Ang 2003, 5). CQ involves the cognitive, metacognitive, behavioral, and motivational dimensions, covering CQ Knowledge, Drive, Action, and Strategy (Van Dyne et al. 2012, 301). As a missionary to the Kingdom of Cambodia for twenty years, I learned to

navigate that foreign culture through these elements, including acculturation, studying the language, immersion into the worldview, and cultivating relationships.

It would seem the church needs to cultivate Kingdom Cultural Intelligence or KQ. Acquiring KQ could equip believers to live as Kingdom citizens and better represent Christ’s reign to outsiders. Like the development of CQ, cultivating Kingdom Cultural Intelligence would involve more than emphasis on the cognitive dimension. Similar to my missionary journey and that of anyone entering a new “world,” people like Drew and Shanti require guidance to understand and live out Kingdom values. How might the church foster this process?

People might learn the lingo and some tenets and behaviors of the Kingdom, but is that all a Kingdom citizen needs? Adapting the researched elements of CQ mentioned above, the proposed domains of KQ would need to cover the spiritual/theological as well as the educational, an element of CQ Strategy and of CQ Knowledge. The anthropological domain and knowledge of cultural values also become critical, as well as the communicative, psychological, and sociological, all depicted in Figure 1.

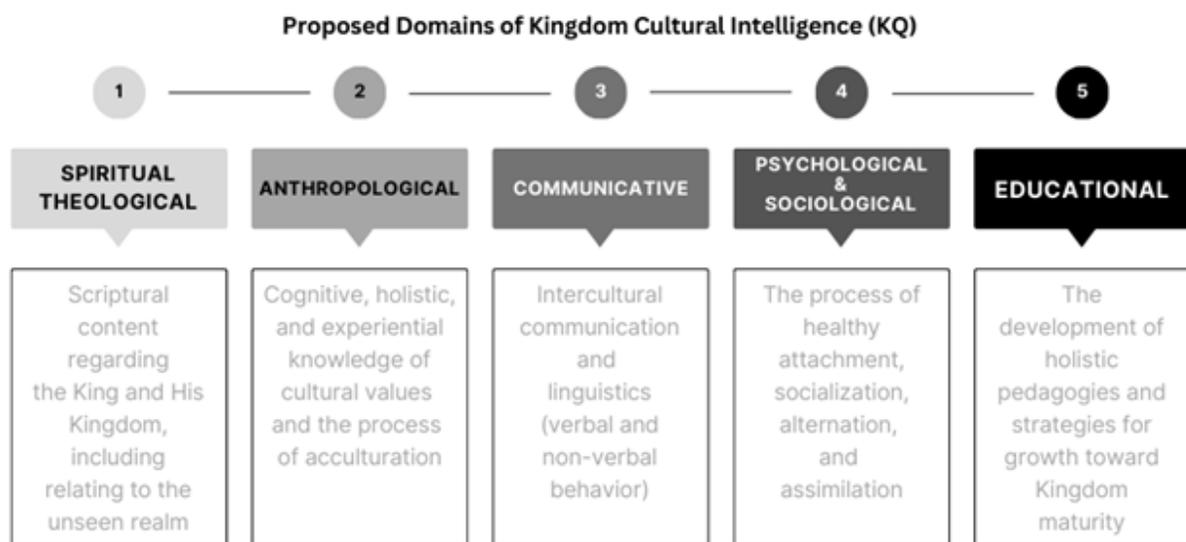


Figure 1. Proposed Domains of Kingdom Cultural Intelligence (KQ)

Cultural Values and Systems

Developing CQ involves understanding cultural systems and the values that shape behavior and identity. Secular cultures vary in orientations toward power, individuality,

time, rules, activity, gratification, etc. (Hofstede 2011; Livermore 2015). On the next page, Table 1 summarizes and contrasts seven key cultural values.

Table 1. Cultural Values/Orientations
Cultural Values/Orientations

Power Distance (PDI): Orientation toward authority and power	High PDI: Emphasis on status and rank (hierarchy)	Low PDI: Emphasis on equality and egalitarianism
Individualism vs. Collectivism: Orientation toward person/goals (self versus group)	Individualism: Emphasis on self, personal goals, privacy, grit, and independence	Collectivism: Emphasis on group, loyalty, belonging, cooperation, and interdependence
Competition vs. Cooperation (or Masculinity vs. Femininity)	Competition: Emphasis on achievement, strength, and individual success	Cooperation: Emphasis on collaboration, caring, and agreement
Long-Term vs. Short-Term (LTO): Orientation toward time (focus on future rewards vs. immediate results)	Long-Term: Emphasis on perseverance, thrift, and future implications. Failure attributed to lack of effort.	Short-Term: Emphasis on tradition, quick results, stability, social spending and the needs at hand. Failure attributed to luck.
Universalism vs Particularism: Orientation toward rules/standards	Universalism: Emphasis on applying rules consistently across situations (universal application)	Particularism: Emphasis on applying rules consistently across situations (universal application)
Being vs. Doing: Orientation toward activity	Being: Emphasis on quality of life and relationships	Doing: Emphasis on task completion, accomplishment, and measurable outcomes
Indulgence vs. Restraint (IVR): Orientation toward gratification or control of desire	Indulgence: Emphasis on freedom to enjoy life and have fun. Has a perception of life control	Restraint: Emphasis on control of desires through social norms and rules. Has a perception of helplessness

Kingdom Cultural Values

Kingdom values contrast sharply with those of “the world.” God warned His people in Leviticus 18:3-4 to avoid walking in the ways of surrounding nations, but to obey Him

alone. Jesus instructed His disciples not to lead like those steeped in the world’s system, but to serve (Matthew 20:25). Even more contrary to the ways of the world, the overarching value for Christ followers revolves around love (Matthew 22).

Early Christians were described as people who “live in their own countries as though they were only passing through” (Diognetus 5:5. See Radford 1908.). Unlike American individualization and independence, which may have fueled the rise of the “nones” (Schnabel et al. 2025, 4), Kingdom culture requires repentance, which “means stepping out of independence back into dependence” (Thomas 1999, 49). As Ryle (2023, 8) advised: “Satan’s dominion must be put down within us and the kingdom of God set up. Self must be crucified, and Christ must reign.” Otherwise, we may continue to find ourselves guilty of *Lèse-majesté* and dishonoring the King before a watching world.

Table 2 delineates the differences in the cultural values of the Kingdom and those of secular cultures and the “world.”¹ As mentioned earlier, Kingdom living stands in stark contrast to the ways in which we might be socialized to live.

Table 2. Kingdom Cultural Values Contrast with Those of the World
Kingdom Cultural Values Contrast with Those of the World (*continued on next page*)

Cultural Values/ Orientations	Kingdom Cultural Values/Orientations	World’s Cultural Values
Power Distance (PDI): Orientation toward authority and power	High PDI with God as Sovereign, but with a Low PDI path. Jesus sent His Spirit to live within His subjects, so there is no fear to enter His Presence. On earth, Jesus emphasized humility and servant leadership. Among His subjects there should be unity and equality, operating in the gifts and callings of the King according to His will.	High or distorted PDI characterized by rebellion against God’s authority or abusive human hierarchies. See Luke 22:25-26, Romans 1:21-23, and 2 Timothy 3:2-4.
Individualism vs. Collectivism: Orientation toward person/goals (self versus group)	High collectivism orientation with the individual factored in. Community is emphasized, with love being the supreme rule. Harmony and unity are valued. The common good is prioritized in the giving of gifts (1 Cor. 12).	High individualism, prioritizing personal gain, selfish ambition, and independence over community. See Gal. 5:19-21, Phil. 2:21, James 4:1-2, and 1 John 2:15-16.

¹ Note: This research was confirmed in discussion with the artificial intelligence, Grok.

Table 2. Kingdom Cultural Values Contrast with Those of the World *(continued)*

Cultural Values/ Orientations	Kingdom Cultural Values/Orientations	World's Cultural Values
Competition vs. Cooperation (Masculinity vs. Femininity)	Highly cooperative from a position of being empowered by God. Nurture, caring, cooperation, mercy, peace, humility, etc. are highlighted, as opposed to competition, rivalry, assertiveness, or material success and achievement. Subjects are admonished to “do nothing out of self ambition or vain conceit” (Phil. 2:3).	High competition, emphasizing individual achievement, rivalry, and material success, often at the expense of others. In cooperative settings, the vulnerable are exploited. See Prov. 14:30, Luke 16:14-15, 1 Tim. 6:9-10, and James 3:14-16.
Long-Term vs. Short-Term (LTO): Orientation toward time (focus on future rewards vs. immediate results)	High long-term orientation. The culture of the Kingdom prioritizes eternal outcomes and long-term gains, requiring perseverance (Heb. 12:1). Our “treasures are in heaven” (Matthew 6:20) because this world is temporary, so gratification of the flesh would be foolish.	Short-term orientation, prioritizing immediate gratification and quick results. See Eccl. 2:10-11, Luke 12:16-21, 2 Cor. 4:18, and Heb. 11:25-26.
Universalism vs Particularism: Orientation toward rules/standards	Universal principles with particular grace (Grok). God’s laws are universal, but grace can be found and bestowed.	Particularism or rigid universalism, depending on the context. See Prov. 17:23, Is. 5:20, Matt. 23:23-24, and Rom. 2:11-15.
Being vs. Doing: Orientation toward activity	Status is ascribed by the King with obedient doing resulting from the King’s indwelling presence. We are called to relationship, in which He dwells within us, as His subjects. We have been adopted, given rights and privileges. The mark of our ascribed status obtained by the blood of Christ results in obedient doing through the power of the Holy Spirit (James 2:17).	Emphasis on doing for self-glorification or being for personal comfort. See Eccl. 4:4, Luke 18:9-14, Col. 2:20-23, and 1 John 2:17.
Indulgence vs. Restraint (IVR): Orientation toward gratification or control of desire	High value for restraint with joy in submission (Grok). Denial of the flesh and living the crucified life is critical to the Kingdom (Matt. 16:24), as life in the Spirit empowers us to live differently from the world, the flesh, and the devil. In the midst of God’s provided boundaries, joy, protection, and abundant life reside (John 10:10).	High indulgence, seeking unrestrained gratification of desires, or excessive restraint driven by fear or legalism. See Rom. 13:13-14, Gal. 5:16-17, 2 Tim. 3:4-5, and Titus 3:3.

Cultural Migration and Acculturation: Leaving the World System

In our world, many people migrate—sojourners or visitors, immigrants and refugees, expatriates working for multinational corporations, third culture kids (TCKs), and those who marry partners from a different culture and become bicultural, etc. Table 3 delineates these options. Short-term visitors hold temporary visas. Expatriates might obtain longer-term work visas. Where might home lie for each? Some who enter a new land to settle permanently may or may not integrate or acculturate. For others, such as TCKs, their birth culture might never be “home.”

Table 3. Cultural Migration & Acculturation

Cultural Migration & Acculturation

STATUS	BIRTH CULTURE IS "HOME"	RELATIONSHIP TO SECOND CULTURE	RELATIONSHIP TO KINGDOM CULTURE
VISTOR	✓	SHORT TERM VISA	NO SHORT-TERM VISA
EXPATRIATE	✓	WORK VISA	NO WORK VISA
IMMIGRANT REFUGEE	✓	YOUNG MAN ASSIMILATE WHILE OLDER MAY INTEGRATE TO SOME EXTENT, SOME MAY SEPARATE OR BECOME MARGINALIZED.	KINGDOM CITIZENS BECOME ALIENS IN OUR FIRST/BIRTH CULTURE
THIRD CULTURE KID	✗	CULTURAL CONFUSION. ACCULTURATES BY CREATING A THIRD (EARTHLY) CULTURE	WE CANNOT CREATE A NEW CULTURE COMBINING THE WORLD AND THE KINGDOM
BICULTURAL	✗	INTEGRATES BEST OF BOTH EARTHLY CULTURES	WE CANNOT CREATE A NEW CULTURE COMBINING THE WORLD AND THE KINGDOM
KINGDOM CITIZEN	✗	TOTAL TRANSFORMATION AND ALTERNATION TO KINGDOM CULTURE	KINGDOM CULTURE BECOMES HOME

Berry (2005, 698) defined this journey toward acculturation as “the dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members.” Becoming acculturated or even

attenuated involves changes in practices, values, and identity (Schwartz et al. 2010). Those who become bicultural tend to choose the best of two worlds, while TCKs create a new culture, a blend of home and host. However, as Barker (2015, 56) explained, “Home-culture core values are rarely abandoned in favor of host-culture ones and the latter are not simply added.” Change of cultural identity in the secular world is rare (Barker 2015, 68) because assimilation involves a “change of cultural patterns to those of the host society” (Singelis 1997, 71). The process involves “culture shedding and culture learning” (Berry 2005, 700) with no competing loyalties.

What helps those crossing cultures succeed? Wilson et al. (2017, 1499) found that relationships in the host culture assisted with cultural adaptation. El Amine and Cascon-Pereira (2024, 16) found expatriate success involved every dimension of life - individual, interpersonal, and organizational. Entering the Kingdom resembles this kind of cultural migration and making a new home. We might extrapolate from the research, then, that successful Kingdom flourishing involves the same elements as does acculturation. In the interpersonal dimension, success requires solid Kingdom relationships. Organizationally, the successful Kingdom citizen would need to feel integrated into the body; and individually, successful Kingdom citizens need satisfaction in ministries and adjustment to Kingdom life.

While growing in CQ and acculturating to a new culture, every sojourner decides how far to take the process. Unlike sojourners or expatriates who incorporate a few cultural values or learn to appreciate facets of a new culture, true Kingdom citizens become aliens (1 Peter 2:11), fully transformed through repentance (John 3:3), leaving the ways of the world behind (Romans 12:2) for a new family and “city” (Hebrews 11:10).

Unfortunately, Kingdom citizens embracing and portraying these cultural values of the Kingdom seem to be rare. Reportedly, “the typical American adult is not a worldview purist but is essentially a worldview plagiarist, combining beliefs and behaviors borrowed from an average of nine recognized worldviews into their personal worldview blend” (Barna 2024, 2). A troubling statistic revealed that “among all adults in the nation [U.S.], only 16% say God is the most important element of their life” (Barna 2025). KQ, then, is needed now more than ever.

Developing KQ: The Content and Process

What is the solution? Ernest (2021) blamed a “massive discipleship failure” that has been caused by a “massive catechesis failure.” Research by van den Berge-Bakker and van der Meulen (2024, 7, 12) found Dutch believers paralyzed by timidity. According to Budde (2011, 124), “The commercial ‘orchestrators of attention’ . . . are winning a contest that church leaders scarcely recognize as underway.” Roadblocks to developing KQ abound. The world is constantly trying to squeeze earthlings into its mold.

Focusing on the educational dimension of KQ from Figure 1, how might we effectively develop KQ and teach the cultural values of the King? Mendenhall and Oddou (1985, 43) found secular acculturation to be multidimensional. Similarly, Talbert (1985, 62) found discipleship involves “being molded by a tradition, being empowered by an experience, and being a participant in a community.” If leaving the culture of the world, the flesh, and the devil requires radical transformation, repentance, and change of allegiance, how might one effectively disciple in such a multidimensional way?

The only solution seems to be “worldbuilding.” Discipleship as worldbuilding would deconstruct old plausibility structures and build new ones (Berger 1966, 49). This is the process of “culture shedding and culture learning” described by Berry (2005, 700). To build an entirely new world in the human heart, to implant the cultural values of the King, what processes need to be in place? According to Livermore (2009, 41), “As God’s kingdom subjects, we live out the gospel by both embracing and protesting various cultural values just as Jesus did.” Additionally, what might be this “curriculum for Christlikeness” to which Willard (2010) referred?

Discipleship as Culture Shedding and Culture Learning

If Christ is King, everything, quite literally, every *thing* and every *one*, has to be re-imagined, re-configured, re-oriented to a way of life that consists in an obedient following of Jesus. This is not easy. It is not accomplished by participating in a prayer meeting or two, or signing up for a seven-step course in discipleship at school or church. (Peterson 2007, 9)

If we consider Table 2, which contrasts Kingdom ways with those of the world, we readily observe the content a new believer requires. These Kingdom cultural values are the essence of Jesus’ teaching reframed in sociocultural terms.

Ultimately, however, King Jesus Himself is the model. Given that fact, “Scripture functions not as a text to be dissected but a canon to be lived” (Hauerwas and Willimon 1986, 119). “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). Kingdom citizens are to embody and display the cultural values of the King. “The early church emphasized morality as much as doctrinal fidelity,” according to Presley (2024, 38); and like “cultural sanctification” proposed by Presley (2024, 23), “Early Christians had to deconstruct many assumptions . . . and slowly begin to construct, through steady discipleship.” We shed the values of the world (on the far right of Table 2) and learn to embrace the new values of the Kingdom, so contrary to our own broken ways. As Garber (1996, 107) shared, what is needed is to “form habits of heart.” This must be the missional church’s primary curriculum.

KQ Acculturation Training

Like the training of a missionary crossing cultures, the process of KQ development and Kingdom acculturation does not occur in a vacuum. Triandis (2006, 25) confessed, “To make a person culturally intelligent requires extensive training.” As mentioned earlier, it “takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members” (Berry 2005, 698). Relationship is key. The process is akin to socialization, which is more than cognitive, but highly emotional, involving attachment to significant others (Berger and Luckmann 1967, 4). Resocialization or secondary socialization to Kingdom culture revolves around choice of identity and attachments, requiring “human interaction or dialogue to affirm the plausibility structure of the new world” (Berger and Luckmann 1967, 178). Hong et al. (2013, 1027) also argued “that the adaptive solutions of acculturation are analogous to those of infant survival and growth—forming secure attachment to people in one’s environment enables one to function adaptively therein.” Do we see this presently in the church? Are new Kingdom citizens acculturated with such a process? Davis and Graham (2023, 52) found that those who left the church hungered for “authentic friendship and sincere community” and experienced “cracks in their spiritual foundations.” The church needs experienced spiritual mothers and fathers to shepherd the young into this world of the King.

Bennema (2025) described early Christian mimesis as observing and imitating Christ-like exemplars, fostering moral transformation. The early church modeled this through time spent in relationship, through narrative, through catechesis, and communal living (Acts 2:46-47). Similarly, Garber (1996, 22) studied young people who

stuck with Christianity after college and found that those who “successfully integrated faith with life” had spiritual mentors, spiritually committed peers, and a worldview that could withstand scrutiny.

What ways or processes could such spiritual guides employ? Swidler (1986, 849) proposed using symbol, story, ritual, and worldview. Deardorff (2020, 5) maintained narrative should be used because of the “power of storytelling.” Smith (2013) likewise advised the use of ritual, liturgy, narrative, and embodied pedagogies, more holistic forms than merely focusing on the cognitive. He contradicted the notion that “learning (and hence discipleship) is primarily a matter of depositing ideas and beliefs into mind-containers” (Smith 2016, 3). Collins (2024) agreed with a more affective emphasis: “The church could highlight the feeling of being in community and the security of God’s care, especially in fellowships that had heavily emphasized obligation, making church feel like a chore.” The glory and beauty of the King needs to be a focus of every missional effort.

Considering the emphasis on narrative, in the early church, Irenaeus (Irenaeus/Smith 1952, 69) used a scriptural metanarrative to reframe converts’ identities, just as modern scholars propose a fresh look at the Grand Narrative of Scripture (See Bartholomew and Goheen 2009, 2024; Glasser 2003; Goheen 2011, 2025; McKnight 2014, 2015; Spoelstra 2020; Roberts 2002; Vang and Carter 2013). Along these lines, non-Christian sociologist Carroll (2001) wrote a controversial book with the subtitle, “The western world is dying for want of a story”; and in his later exploration of the book of Mark, scolded the church, saying, “The Christian churches have completely failed in their one central task – to retell their foundation story in a way that might speak to the times” (Carroll 2007, 7).

At the intersection of the research on acculturation, the history of early church catechesis, and consideration of modern needs lies the following essential elements for developing KQ in the missional church:

- Increased intentional time spent in relational community, building *ekklesia* with mentors and peers (Garber 1996)
- Increased time spent in an intentional discipleship process. In the early church, pre-baptismal training lasted about three years (Presley 2024, 1).
- A focus on the process of transformation and leaving “competing loyalties” (Caynor and Mischke 2025, 232)

- An emphasis on mystery, glory, and beauty as opposed to obligation (Johnson-Miller and Espinoza 2018)
- More experiential learning as opposed to a cognitive focus, observing and practicing Kingdom values in context as Jesus modeled (Leung et al. 2014, 510)
- An emphasis on the use of narrative, sharing God’s story to reshape identity (Deardorff 2020, 5)

Conclusion

In conclusion, during the coronation of England’s monarch, the King received a golden globe while the Archbishop of Canterbury proclaimed, “Receive this orb set under the cross and remember that the whole world is subject to the power and empire of Christ our Redeemer” (Howard 2016). Although humankind has rebelled since Genesis 3, “the Kingdom project” is stealthily at work (Treat 2019). While Americans might not have “grown more prayerful” or more Bible-believing (Pew Research Center 2025, 64-65), God still builds His Kingdom, still desires to live through His Kingdom citizens.

In the Old Testament, the mark of God’s people was His kingly and glorious Presence with them (Exodus 33:16). In the New, the mark of Kingdom people involves allowing the King to dwell within them, manifesting the glory of God through their lives. If Drew and Shanti are to grow into mature Kingdom followers, we need to foster their KQ through narrative, relational community, and experiential discipleship. Missional churches wanting to honor the King of glory will be involved in these Kingdom endeavors. “Satisfaction with life abroad depends on CQ,” according to Jurásek and Wawrosz (2023, 1). Similarly, what if satisfaction in the Kingdom might just depend on KQ, Kingdom Cultural Intelligence?

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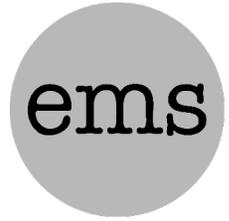
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The Wolves Are Coming: Paul's Pastoral Speech to the Ephesian Elders



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Introduction

The church in Ephesus embodies the gospel of the risen Lord as it reproduced itself within the cross-cultural milieu of its urban setting and Roman Asia. In doing so, the leaders of the church developed in their understanding of what it meant to be the community of Jesus in mission as they witnessed and imitated the godly morality and ethics of the apostle Paul and courageously rejected false teaching that would lure them away from Christ in the ever-changing Mediterranean world of the first century.

At the beginning of Acts 20 Paul farewelled the church at Ephesus and moved through Macedonia to Greece after the violent uprising in that city. In several rapid strokes the author moves the apostle hundreds of miles over difficult terrain to push his story towards the events that are important for his purpose: the mission of God progressing to the capital of the Roman Empire. Concerning this end, Paul's speech to the Ephesian elders reveals insights of his pastoral care that center on warning them against false teaching that without vigilance would ravage the church at Ephesus.

Acts 20:13-16 – Sailing to Miletus

Towards the end of Paul's third missionary journey, he and his fellow travelers sailed from Troas to Assos and onto Mitylene, Chios, and Samos before arriving at Miletus, a five-day excursion of 180 miles (20:14-15).¹ Luke took only three verses to move the

¹ Paul traveled with Aristarchus, Gaius II, Secundus, Sopater, Timothy, Trophimus, and Tychicus. See Acts 20:4.

ministry band over the distance and gave no details.² The author's focus is Paul's speech to the Ephesian elders at Miletus, an important trading port and educational center.³

Paul sent a messenger to Ephesus and invited the leadership to come and meet him at Miletus since he did not want to delay his attendance at the Feast of Pentecost in Jerusalem (20:16). The messenger traveled 45 miles both ways, a four-day excursion, plus a day to gather the leaders to go to Miletus (20:17). Whoever Paul sent was one of his travel group, which included Timothy whom he had sent on similar endeavors and who also had connections with the church leaders.⁴ Although not named, it probably was Timothy since the messenger needed credibility and awareness of the Ephesian situation. He knew the supporters to whom to pass on Paul's message; leaders such as Tychicus, Priscilla and Aquila, and Onesiphorus (Eph. 6:21-22; 2 Tim. 1:16-18; 4:12, 19). They in turn needed to believe that what the envoy conveyed was from the apostle.

Acts 20:17-21 – Serving the Lord

Paul's speech to the Ephesian elders is divided into four pericopes. In the first pericope, he began his conversation with a recollection of the personal knowledge that the audience had about him.⁵ The stress was not on his teaching or miracles but his

² The author on other occasions also moves his players over large distances in a few strokes of the pen since his purpose lay elsewhere. Other examples of Luke's contraction of distance are seen in Acts 8:1, 25; 9:32; 11:19; 13:14; 14:6, 24-26; 15:3.

³ See Titus 1:5-9 and 1 Timothy 3:1-4 for the qualifications of an overseer. The exception on this voyage was Paul's decision to walk from Troas to Assos where he boarded the ship and rejoined the group (Acts 20:13). Why did Paul decide to walk along the Roman road—an extensive day's walk of 31 miles—without his Gentile ministry team? Perhaps Paul desired to be in solitude and silence to spend time with God in preparation for his meeting with the Christian leadership in Miletus and the coming Feast of Pentecost in Jerusalem. Paul also withdrew into the Arabian desert after his conversion (Gal. 1:17-18; cf. Acts 9:23) following the example of John the Baptist (Luke 3:2) and Jesus (Luke 4:1). Particularly relevant was the apostle's awareness that he had warned the church for three years concerning the threat of false teaching that could divert followers away from the truth he had taught (Acts 20:31). His Gentile company did not have the same compulsion towards spiritual preparation since they were not going to instruct the Ephesian church leaders, nor did they follow Jewish religious traditions. In Troas, Paul chose a ship that was not sailing to the port of Ephesus but instead would dock at Miletus. Both Ephesus and Miletus were important shipping ports in the eastern Mediterranean that now are some six miles from the coast because of sedimentary deposits over the centuries. He did not want to be delayed by the churches of Roman Asia or any repercussions from the outcome of the Artemis riot because he was eager to get to Jerusalem (Acts 20:16). For churches planted around Ephesus, see Acts 19:10, 20, 26. In addition, Paul followed the annual Jewish religious calendar. For instance, the feasts of Unleavened Bread (Passover; Acts 20:6) and Pentecost (Acts 20:16), which indicated that the apostle was still adhering to Jewish customs as a messianic follower of the Way (cf. Acts 18:18; 21:23-26).

⁴ For Timothy's connections with the church at Ephesus working alongside Aquila and Priscilla, see Acts 18:18-19; 19:22; 20:4; 1 Timothy 1:2-3; 2 Timothy 1:2; 4:19. Moreover, Paul used Timothy as a working associate to carry messages both written and verbal to and from local churches such as to Corinth (1 Cor. 4:17) and Philippi (Phil. 2:19-23) and from Thessalonica (1 Thess. 3:6), as well as an itinerant preacher (1 Cor. 16:10-11).

⁵ In the fashion of first-century historiography, Luke heard Paul's speech to the influencers of the Ephesian church (as did the non-Jewish travel comrades) and recorded a summary of the crucial elements for the Christian community of the most excellent Theophilus (Luke 1:3; Acts 1:1). Luke was present at Miletus indicated by the beginning of a "we" passage in Acts 20:6. Here the author joined the party at Philippi in Macedonia having been left there by Paul during the second journey. The "we" sea voyage started in Acts 16:10 and ended at Philippi in Acts 17:1. This suggests that the first-hand observer remained behind in the city.

behavior. “You yourselves know how I lived among you the entire time from the first day that I set foot in Asia” (20:18).⁶ It was the leaders’ first-hand knowledge of Paul’s life that had impressed them about the authenticity of his gospel message and not merely his words or actions.

The apostle did not mention his supernatural abilities at Ephesus in Acts 19 such as imparting the Holy Spirit, preaching about the kingdom of God, causing extraordinary healing and deliverance miracles, being known among the demonic world, or enabling the word of the Lord to grow and prevail mightily in Asia (Acts 19:6, 8, 11-12, 15, 20). What motivated Paul’s monologue was the awareness that false teachers were going to come among the congregation and by “distorting the truth . . . entice the disciples to follow them” (20:30). And all the while he was with them he warned them with tears that such a situation was going to take place (20:31). God’s cross-cultural workers need to live with people to know their problems; and live with God to provide answers to resolve them.

Serving in Sacrificial Love

From the start of the speech Paul laid down the criteria of how to judge false prophets within the community (see Luke 6:26, 43-45; contra Luke 11:49-50; 11:27-28; 13:1; 15:32; 21:10). He put himself forward as a standard by whom to compare other leaders. Paul served the Lord as a slave with a lowliness of mind. He had not promoted himself above others but intentionally lowered himself with tears under God’s authority. In Paul’s brief speech—the only one in Acts given to a Christian audience—he referred twice to his tears for the church (20:19, 31).⁷

The criteria of judgment of his servant leadership was character issues following the example of the Lord: humility, compassion, and endurance.⁸ He reminded them of his perseverance amid trials brought about by Jewish persecution (20:3), even though he failed to mention the Gentile riot in their city (Acts 19:23ff.). He served them in

⁶ All biblical quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise stated.

⁷ We do not normally think of Paul as a person associated with strong emotions. Yet in his farewell to the Ephesian leaders they were weeping loudly and embracing and kissing him repeatedly as they grieved over his announcement that “they would not see him again” (Acts 20:38; 20:25b). There was an intense relational bond between Paul and the Ephesian elders that was not witnessed in his farewell to the disciples at Tyre (Acts 21:5). Both Mediterranean congregates knelt and prayed on the beach (Acts 20:36; 21:5; cf. Luke 22:41). But the difference between the groups was that Paul had stayed with the Ephesian assembly for three years and only seven days with the believers at Tyre (Acts 20:31; 21:4). Over the years he had developed fervent associations with the disciples at Ephesus heightened by their banding together against the socio-religious conflicts within the city (Acts 19:30-31). Situations of this emotional fervor rarely occur among present-day Western churches, even with long-tenured leaders. Why is that so?

⁸ See Jesus teaching about humility (Luke 9:46-48), compassion (Luke 15:11-32), and endurance (Luke 8:15). As well, Paul followed the example of the Lord Jesus in humility (Luke 4:42-44), compassion (Luke 7:36-50), and endurance (Luke 4:1-2).

sacrificial love for their benefit not holding back the full message of Christ although his preaching was the reason for his suffering (20:20). The communication was centered on “repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus” (20:21).⁹

Paul accomplished this pronouncement of repentance and faith by going to public areas in the city and visiting the congregants in their homes, both Jews and Gentiles (cf. Acts 19:13). At Ephesus, Jesus had broken down the wall of hatred between these two groups through his blood. The Spirit had joined them together in peace and formed one new-human identity as the family of God (Eph. 2:11-22). No longer was Paul concerned about eating with non-Jewish people as Peter was at Caesarea and Syrian Antioch (Acts 10:14, 28; 11:2-3; cf. Gal. 2:11-16). Paul enjoyed hospitality without hesitation from both Jewish and Gentile believers at Ephesus because of the cross and the Spirit’s working (20:20-21).

Acts 20:22-25 – Captive to the Spirit

In the second pericope of the speech, Paul continues the theme of being a slave to Christ by declaring that he was “a captive to the Spirit” as he moved from past to present reflections (20:22). He did not dictate the happenings of his life. He followed the orders of God as directed by the Spirit (see Acts 19:21). As Paul traveled towards Jerusalem the Holy Spirit testified in the churches of Macedonia that suffering and imprisonment were awaiting him. Through congregational prophecy God’s Spirit forewarned Paul of the coming hardships (20:23).

There are three Lukan themes that occur at the beginning of this pericope that are useful for today’s cross-cultural mission. First, the Holy Spirit guided God’s people. Explicitly, the Spirit directed Jesus and the first-century church. See the Holy Spirit’s guidance of Simeon (Luke 2:27) and Jesus (Luke 4:1, 14). Additionally, the Spirit guided Philip (8:29, 39), Peter (10:19-20; 11:12), Agabus (11:28), the church of Syrian Antioch (13:1-4), the Jerusalem Council (15:28), Paul’s second journey (16:6-7), and Paul’s movements to Rome (19:21; 20:22-23; 21:4, 11).

⁹ This proclamation was a continuation of the teaching of Jesus and the first church. From the beginning of the Lord’s ministry, he preached repentance from sin and faith toward God. For faith in Jesus Messiah, see Luke 5:20; 7:9, 50; 8:25, 48; 12:28; 17:5-6, 19; 18:8, 42; 22:32. For repentance toward God, see Luke 3:3, 8; 5:32; 13:3, 5; 15:7; 16:30; 17:3-4; 24:47. Of special importance was the risen Lord’s exhortation to his followers that “repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name [the risen Messiah] to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (Luke 24:47). This announcement that all peoples were to change their thinking concerning God and embrace a reliance upon Christ were the same two hallmarks of Jesus’ kingdom declaration and his continuing ministry through the first believers. Paul remained faithful to these two fundamental truths as he taught in Ephesus (cf. Acts 13:38-39). In the church’s ministry of faith in the Messiah, see Acts 3:16; 6:5, 7; 11:24; 13:8; 14:9, 22, 27; 15:9; 16:5; 20:21; 24:24; 26:18. For repentance toward God, see Acts 2:38; 3:19; 5:31; 8:22; 11:18; 13:24; 17:30; 19:4; 20:21; 26:20.

Second, the Spirit warned of future suffering.¹⁰ The churches of Macedonia (Acts 20:22-23) and later at Tyre (Acts 21:4), together with the prophet Agabus at Caesarea (Acts 21:11-12; cf. Acts 11:28), warned the apostle Paul through the Spirit about future hardships in Jerusalem (see Acts 21:33).¹¹

Third, God's people will suffer for the gospel. Jesus predicted that his followers would face hardships (cf. Luke 6:22-23, 27-29, 35). From the beginning, the Lord told Paul that he would suffer for his name (Acts 9:16). The apostle passed onto the Anatolian churches this same forecast (Acts 14:22). Trials were a part of the primary Christian experience. There was no discussion as to why God allowed such distress nor any fervent declarations of victorious deliverance. God was in control amid difficulties. As the apostle moved towards Jerusalem the prophecies of his suffering came to pass as the Romans imprisoned him in the capital (Acts 21:33). Still Jesus appeared in a vision bringing Paul encouragement amid sorrow with no thought of physical freedom (contra Peter in Acts 12:11). In fact, the Lord Jesus added pressure to the situation by saying that as Paul had witnessed for him in Jerusalem he would also do likewise in Rome (Acts 23:11; cf. Acts 19:21; 27:24).

What Do We Do Now?

Are these first two ministerial factors of God's Spirit guiding and forewarning the church of coming suffering currently present in our congregations? Do we expect the Spirit to guide the church or are we too reliant on leaders of church-growth proficiency and business effectiveness. Who do we allow to lead our churches? Powerful human manipulators or the Spirit of Jesus (see Acts 16:6-7)? Then there was the role of the Spirit's warnings. Why did the Holy Spirit repeatedly caution Paul of future sorrow? How did this foreknowledge help him and the congregations? Certainly, they became aware of the presence of Jesus in their midst as they undertook God's mission with the help of the Spirit. Do we expect the Holy Spirit to do the same today?

¹⁰ See Luke 9:30-31 for how the Father prepared his Son through his conversation with Moses and Elijah for God's mission of suffering that awaited the Messiah in Jerusalem. Also, see John 16:12-15 where Jesus speaks about the Spirit predicting the future.

¹¹ The Spirit is not a force or power but a heavenly Person of the Trinity, who spoke, guided, and empowered the church via his effective Presence. The force of Star Wars was not with the apostle and believers of Asia. The indwelling Spirit of God was with them. For instance, Paul spoke in the present tense about being "a captive to the Spirit" (Acts 20:22a), "the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city" (Acts 20:23a), and the Spirit appointing the Ephesian elders as "overseers to shepherd the church of God" (Acts 20:28b). In the Western church we need to change our thinking about two related errors. First, we need to repent of undervaluing that the Holy Spirit can empower our ministry through his word, history, circumstances, or any other means that he chooses. Second, we need to stop overestimating the significance of our own activities in strengthening God's kingdom. These assumptions imply that we are more proficient than the Spirit. This results in a reliance on human wisdom rather than the wisdom of God.

Lastly, is the ministerial theme of suffering. Does the prosperity gospel and the ever-victorious assumptions of Western contemporary faith hinder the purposes of God brought about by the discipline of suffering (see Luke 10:3, 10-16; 21:12-19)? The church often presents an illusion to comfort believers—followers of Christ do not need to go through trials and endure suffering. Then when affliction, worries of the world, or persecution arises, this illusion defaults to a disillusion resulting in followers falling away from the faith. Enduring faith that rests in and relies on the character of God is produced when the church embraces God’s discipline of his children through trials and hardships (see Luke 8:13-14; cf. Heb. 12:4-13).

Paul’s Reaction

Paul’s reaction before the Ephesian leaders to this news of coming discomfort was the same as he proclaimed later to the church at Caesarea (Acts 21:13). His life belonged to Christ, and he was willing to die for the name of the Lord Jesus (20:24; cf. Acts 25:11; Phil. 1:20-24; Gal. 2:20). The Spirit had already foretold the apostle, nonetheless, that he was going to Rome before he declared these assurances (see Acts 19:21). Even though he did “not know what would happen” to him in Jerusalem (20:22), he did have a divine pledge that he would eventually arrive in the empire’s capital.¹²

The most critical issue for Paul was completing Jesus’ call to ministry that he had received during his Damascus experience (Acts 9:15-16). The focus of his work was proclaiming God’s kingdom of grace (20:24-25). In this pastoral speech Paul spoke of God’s grace twice (20:24, 32). He knew about the joyful gift of God’s acceptance through his Son because of his past evil persecution of the church and subsequent forgiveness (Acts 22:16; cf. 1 Tim. 1:12-16).¹³

¹² For the Trinitarian affirmation that Paul would see the emperor in Rome, see the Spirit in Acts 19:21; Jesus in Acts 23:11; and God in Acts 27:24.

¹³ See Acts 6:9-14; 7:58; 8:1, 3; 9:1-2, 13-14, 21; 22:3-5, 19-20; 26:9-11 for Paul’s persecution of the church. Grace was a prominent theme in Luke-Acts. For example, there was a sprinkling of scriptures to describe the grace of God’s Son at the beginning of his three-year sojourn in Judea Palestine. Luke’s young churches, nevertheless, had a downpour of God’s grace over a thirty-year period among those who were estranged from God. For references to God’s grace (Gk., *charis*), see Luke 1:30; 2:40, 52; 4:22; 6:32, 33, 34; Acts 2:47; 4:33; 7:10, 46; 11:23; 13:43; 14:3, 26; 15:11, 40; 18:27; 20:24, 32; 24:27; 25:3, 9. The reverse condition is evident for the concept of the kingdom of God. Whereas in the Gospel of Luke God’s “kingdom” or “king” is mentioned forty-nine times, Acts has only nine citations. In Jesus’ preaching to the Jewish people in Judea-Palestine there was a liberty to declare the inauguration of God’s kingdom because the socio-political climate was subdued during that time. Conversely, at the initiation of the church there was a need for caution in declaring the kingdom because of the volatile political milieu against the Roman Empire, which eventually resulted in the Jewish War and the destruction of Jerusalem (66-70 CE; Luke 21:20-24; cf. Acts 5:36-37; 17:7; 21:28). The references to the Lord’s kingship and kingdom in Acts reveals the following. There are two references at the beginning (Acts 1:3, 6), five in the middle, and two at the end (Acts 28:23, 31). Philip preached about the kingdom in Samaria (Acts 8:12) while Paul declared the same at Lystra, Iconium, and Pisidian Antioch (Acts 14:22), Thessalonica (Acts 17:7), and Ephesus (Acts 19:8, 20:25). Why were there two kingdom references connected to Ephesus? The city was 1,185 miles from Rome and 640 miles from Jerusalem. Was it because Ephesus was further away from Rome and the administrators were less concerned about

Acts 20:26-31 – Shepherd God’s Church

The speech’s third pericope begins with the words, “Therefore I declare to you this day . . .” (20:26). The word “therefore” was tied to the previous statement: “And now I know that none of you . . . will ever see my face again” (20:25). This instalment was bookended by a parallel expression at the end of the speech. The leaders were “grieving especially because of what he [Paul] had said that they would not see him again” (20:38). Between the two statements of verses 25 and 38 is the thrust of his plea based on the notion that this was his last testimony and therefore of supreme importance to the church.

Paul gave three declarations because it was the last time that he would see these leaders. First was a dramatic idiom that implied he was not answerable if any person had not changed their allegiance to Christ.¹⁴ “I am not responsible for the blood of any of you” (20:26; cf. Acts 18:6). The second declaration followed. If someone was lost to God then it was not his fault because he had steadfastly declared “the whole purpose of God” (20:27). He left out nothing that they should know about the Lord. Paul had a clear conscience. If people did not listen and obey the truth then he was not to be held responsible for their unbelief. He had done everything that he needed to do and without regret.

The final declaration was a double warning that stretches between verses 28 and 31. It begins with a caution in verse 28: “Keep watch.” And ends in verse 31 with the subsequent caution: “Therefore be alert.” The word “therefore” refers to the prior information he gave from verses 28b to 30. And they should heed the warning because he had continuously told them about these potential spiritual dangers for three years. “I did not cease night or day to warn everyone with tears” (20:31). They had heard it all before, but they needed to hear it again for the survival of the church.

Keep Watch Over Yourselves

The elders were not exempt from the forewarning. “Keep watch over yourselves. And [keep watch] over all the flock” (20:28). After first thinking about their own spiritual condition the leaders then had a duty to safeguard the church described by the same sheep-shepherd metaphor that Jesus used (see Luke 10:3; 12:32; 15:4-6; cf. Acts 8:32).

the opinions of the empire? Paul afterward predicted that he would not return to Ephesus based on the churches prophesying his future suffering in Jerusalem. That grave statement indelibly marked the thinking of the speech’s audience (Acts 20:25, 38).

¹⁴ An idiom is a group of words in a fixed order that has a specific meaning that is different from the meanings of each word on its own. This may be expressed verbally (Acts 18:6) and/or physically as a metaphorical idiom (Acts 13:51; 18:6).

Paul is dispensing spiritual authority to the leaders now that he is leaving. They needed to pick up the mantle of responsibility to protect the flock.

In verse 28 he gives three reasons for this obligation. First, the Holy Spirit had made them “overseers.”¹⁵ Through the Spirit they had a charge to scrutinize—in a skeptical manner as sentries on duty—and be alert, watching for any spiritual enemies who might attack God’s sheep. Next, in taking up their duties they became shepherds of the church and by inference served under the direction of the “Shepherd and Overseer of your souls” (1 Pe. 2:25). Lastly, God’s church was obtained with “the blood of his own Son” through the cross, which reinforced the seriousness of their obligation.¹⁶

In verse 29, Paul the prophet repeats that he was leaving them to accentuate the dangers. Further, he intensifies the metaphor and declares that “savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock” (20:29). Then to underscore the solemn charge he warns: “Some even from your own group will come distorting the truth to entice the disciples to follow them. Therefore, be alert . . .” (20:30-31a; cf. 2 Pe. 3:16-17). Paul’s words drip with emotion. It was serious—a life and death situation. Cruel wolf-like false prophets will come to spiritually kill the truth of the gospel by twisting and misinterpreting his teaching (cf. Acts 13:6). Who are these “savage wolves,” particularly those who are within the church? And what is their motivation?¹⁷

Distorting the Truth

Paul’s concern about false prophets and their teaching in the church at Ephesus was dominant in his first letter to Timothy, five years after he delivered his forewarning at Miletus. From the early days of the city church, he left Timothy to instruct certain people not to teach strange doctrines such as Jewish myths, endless genealogies, and worldly fables, which give rise to foolish and ignorant speculations and fruitless discussion (Acts 18:19; 1 Tim. 1:3-4, 6; 4:7). Some of the untrue philosophies centered around conforming to godliness by using foolish controversies, disputes about the Law, and wrangling with words to gain wealth (1 Tim. 6:3-10). Timothy was to be on his

¹⁵ For the concept of overseer, see Philippians 1:1, 1 Timothy 3:1-2, Titus 1:7, and 1 Peter 2:25.

¹⁶ See Luke 9:23; 14:27; 23:26 (also Luke 23:23, 33; 24:7, 20); Acts 2:23, 36; 4:10, for references to the cross of the Lord Jesus.

¹⁷ We need to first establish a timeline of events to investigate the false prophets and their teaching at the church of Ephesus. Paul was at Ephesus between fall 52 and summer 55. After traveling from Ephesus through Macedonia to Greece and back to Miletus, he gave the speech to the Ephesian elders during the spring of 57. Paul was then arrested in Jerusalem (May 57), spent two years in prison at Caesarea Maritima, and arrived at Rome in early 60. Paul wrote the letter to the churches in Asia, including Ephesus (Ephesians in 60-61), and the two letters to Timothy at Ephesus (1 Timothy in 62-63; and 2 Timothy in 64) when under house arrest in the empire’s capital. In 95 the apostle John wrote about the believers in Ephesus who successfully discerned false apostles, as well as hating the deeds and teaching of the Nicolaitans (Rev. 2:2, 6).

guard and oppose such arguments that they falsely called “knowledge,” which caused some of the believers to be ensnared by the devil and led astray from the faith (1 Tim. 6:20-21). Among the manipulators of the truth were Hymenaeus and Alexander the coppersmith who Paul delivered over to Satan so that they would learn not to blaspheme (1 Tim. 1:19-20).

One year later, Paul again highlighted these two men in his second letter to Timothy, together with Phygelus, Hermogenes, and Philetus as vigorous opponents of his teaching (2 Tim. 2:23; 4:3-4). Of particular concern to Paul was their cancerous lies that the resurrection had already taken place, upsetting the faith of some (2 Tim. 1:15, 2:17-18; 4:14-15). Therefore, Paul encourages Timothy to “hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Guard the good deposit entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us” (2 Tim. 1:13-14; cf. Eph. 4:14; 5:6). At the same time, he pastors Timothy in correcting these opponents by not being quarrelsome, but by being a kind teacher, patient, and gentle so that God would grant them repentance and come to know the truth (2 Tim. 2:24-26).

Acts 20:32-38 – Commended to God

The final pericope of Paul’s talk deals with him surrendering these beloved Ephesian leaders to the protection of God. The apostle presents them before God’s grace so that the Lord would come alongside these influencers and deposit his fortitude. Paul’s final exhortation highlights three inspirations about the consequences of God’s grace. First, the elders of the church would be built up like laying stone-upon-stone in establishing a house that was solid and unmovable (20:32a; cf. Eph. 2:19-22). Second, they would be guaranteed an inheritance in the Lord in which they would possess God himself (20:32b; cf. Eph. 1:11, 14, 18; 5:5). Third, the leaders would be among the sanctified. God’s grace would make them holy, pure, and consecrated unto the Lord (20:32c; cf. Eph. 5:26). Paul had taught these three themes at Ephesus, and the elders had an awareness of this reassuring commendation. This was a fulfillment of a prophecy that he had received from Jesus at the beginning of his ministry to Gentiles (Acts 26:18).

Chiasmic Summit

In the concluding section of Paul’s address he again returns to how he lived among them with hard-physical labor, an unwillingness to financially burden them, generosity to the poor, and godly integrity that mirrored the Lord Jesus (20:33-35;

cf. 2 Tim. 3:10-11). This is a pattern reminiscent of the beginning of his talk and so heightens the reader's awareness of a partial chiasm with a climatic *inclusio* as shown on the next page.

A The example of how Paul lived among them (vv. 18-21).

B Paul's future life with the Lord (vv. 22-25).

B' The church's future life with the Lord (vv. 26-31).

C Keep watch (v. 28).

D Savage wolves (v. 29)

D' Your own group (v. 30)

C' Be alert (v. 31).

A' The example of how Paul lived among them (vv. 32-35).

In other words, A = A' = Paul's model behavior; and B = B' = future predictions for the people of God.

Furthermore, imbedded within the church's future life with the Lord (B') is an *inclusio*, whereby Paul's instructions are framed by repeating the opening lines at the conclusion. This repetition provides a unity and finality that the prose would not have had otherwise. The observation of the *inclusio* is important for two reasons: it identifies that Paul's main purpose is the warning against false teachers and asserts that the audience must understand the content between verses 28 and 31 because it amplifies the theme of verses 29 and 30.

Verses 29 and 30 have the feel of a Hebraic synonymous parallelism, whereby what is stated in the first part (v. 29b) is repeated in detail in the second part (v. 30). In other words:

“... savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock” (20:29b) compared with

“Some even from your own group [savage wolves] will come distorting the truth in order to entice the disciples [not sparing the flock] to follow them” (20:30).

The parallelism highlights that the church elders should be watchful and alert because wolves from within the church will distort the truth—that Paul had taught faithfully for three years—with the intent of causing confusion and scattering the flock—in order to devour innocent disciples—so that the sheep would follow them and leave the Lord’s church in Ephesus that the apostle had planted with God’s help.

Begins and Ends with Jesus

At the beginning of the speech Paul underlines that he was “serving the Lord [Jesus]” in Asia (20:19). At the end he emphasizes Jesus again: “remember the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive’” (20:35). This quote was not from any gospel record. Paul may have received the teaching from Jesus himself during his three years in the Arabian Desert (Gal. 1:15-18), several of the different accounts circulating about the Lord (Luke 1:1-2), eyewitnesses such as Peter and James (Acts 15:7, 13), or other early disciples like Mnason of Cyprus (Acts 21:16). Paul’s literary intention was to begin his talk with the Lord Jesus and end with the Lord Jesus. In addition, at the start and finish of the speech he pushes himself forward as a model of how to behave as a Christian leader to counteract the false prophets and their warped doctrine that would contaminate the truth so that the flock could not flourish as God had intended (see Luke 6:26, 43-45).

Final Reflections

In Paul’s discourse to the church leaders of Ephesus there is a hierarchical order displayed amid the intertwining of Trinitarian roles (cf. Acts 1:7; 3:19-21). The Ephesian church is designed for God’s purpose and grace although Paul’s service and faith is outworked through the Lord Jesus. The Son gives him the ministry of proclaiming the good news of repentance toward God. Paul remembers the teaching of Jesus all the while guided by the Spirit who speaks to him and chooses the eldership who are commended by God. The faith community at Ephesus is rooted in God’s ancient promises, purpose, and grace with the Lord Jesus’ covenantal service continuing in the ministry and faith of his followers by the Spirit’s selection, guidance, and teaching through the church’s leadership.

God the Father is active across all time elements of past, present, and future while the role of the Lord is based upon the past, and the Spirit’s function is in the present.¹⁸

¹⁸ The Lord Jesus and the Holy Spirit are also eternal Persons of the Trinity. For example, Jesus was present in the visions of Paul (Acts 18:9-10; 23:11) and the Spirit was speaking in the past through the prophets (Acts 1:16; 28:25).

God's salvation purpose for his gracious kingdom is orchestrated upon the past promises of the Hebrew scriptures (Acts 24:14) and remains viable in the present and future, activated by the Lord Jesus' past sacrifice on the cross, and continues in the present by the attendance and enablement of the Holy Spirit working through God's church on earth.

In the city of Ephesus, Paul proclaimed, taught, testified, and declared the message of the whole purpose of God's kingdom and the good news of his grace, which he obtained with the blood of his Son. The reality of grace is for those who repent toward God and have faith toward our Lord Jesus. Further, they need to be protected because groups within and without will come to distort the truth.

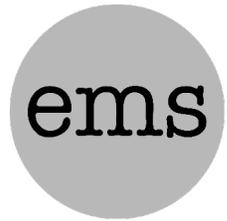
Paul's pastoral address not only sheds light on the role and hierarchy of the Trinity, his methods and topics of proclamation, and his message and manner of living, but besides gives instructions to the church leaders at Ephesus. Paul exhorts them to keep watch over all the flock and be alert because vicious predators want to come after he leave to destroy God's people by misrepresenting the reality. Paul's final direction is to remember two matters. First, he had continuously warned the Ephesians that such a heretical situation would arise. And second, Jesus had taught that to be blessed they needed to be generous, especially to the poor.

Conclusion

Through the power of the Holy Spirit, the church at Ephesus brought God's light to the dark places of Roman Asia, especially through Paul's missional example of holy preaching and living. Yet the Ephesian church was not only a dynamic and creative mission community cross-culturally proclaiming the good news of Christ's kingdom but was also a protecting and nurturing environment for God's family who struggled to retain the true life of the Spirit and protect itself from savage wolves within and without, whose lustful power desired to steal and kill the truth of the risen Jesus planted by the apostle Paul in the hearts of believers.

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Revisiting “Who Really Sent the First Missionaries” – The Role of the Local Church in the Sending of Missionaries



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Introduction

Fifty years ago, Dr. Harold Cook, newly retired long tenured and esteemed Professor of Missions at Moody Bible Institute, wrote an article published in the *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* (Fall, 1975) that raised eyebrows in mission circles. That article, entitled, “Who Really Sent the First Missionaries,” (Cook 1975, 233-239) was written by Cook as a corrective to the then current thinking about the central role of the local church in the missionary sending process. After citing various authors who were advocating for a stronger church-based sending of missionaries, Cook stated:

These men are deeply concerned that the local church assume a more active role in the carrying out of the church’s mission. But this hardly justifies reading into the New Testament text what is not actually there. Nor does it justify treating a New Testament church as if it were structurally similar to one of our free churches of the twentieth century (ibid., 234).

Cook’s premise was that although the local church is important in sending missionaries, at Antioch it was neither central nor supreme. He concluded his article by asserting:

Our only contention in this article is that it is wrong to claim that the organized church is the one agency prescribed in the New Testament for the sending of missionaries. On the contrary, the one indispensable is the sending by the Holy Spirit. If the church acts in accord with the Holy Spirit, well and good. But if not, the Spirit will still send forth his

missionaries, whether individually, as in the early centuries, or through independent societies, as in more recent years (ibid., 239).

The tension is obvious: the belief, on the one hand, that local churches are the prime and only valid sending agency of missionaries versus the belief that individuals, called by the Holy Spirit, exert the right to go on mission either through para-church agencies or, if need be, on their own whether a local congregation validates their going or not.

This entire discussion is based (and solely referenced in Cook's article) on Acts 13:1-4, in conjunction with Acts 14:27. The Acts 13 passage describes how the local believers at Antioch sent out Barnabas and Saul on their first missionary journey. No other New Testament church fits that pattern, nor is there any other passages that references the sending of missionaries.

The passage itself is rather brief. Here is how it is stated in the New International Version:

1 Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul.² While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."³ So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off. ⁴ The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus.

It is the purpose of this article to critically examine the Acts 13:1-4 passage by way of four primary considerations to determine who really sent these first missionaries.

The Consideration of the Church's Involvement

Was the local body of believers at Antioch involved in the sending of the first missionaries, or were the five prophets and teachers who are mentioned the only ones involved? If it was solely the five prophets and teachers, were they in an authoritative position to act on behalf of the entire church? In his article, Cook stated:

It was only these prophets and teachers who were involved. Some would contend that the church was involved by implication since these were the

leaders in the church. But this is pure presumption. There is absolutely no indication in the text that these men were acting on behalf of the church. Nor did their ministry in the church necessarily qualify them to act for the church. They are not named as elders or bishops of the church (ibid., 234).

To the contrary, a mission executive writing at the same time asserted:

In the New Testament the missionary evangelism we see was indissolubly connected with the churches. For all his apostolic authority, Paul was sent forth by the church (God's people in local, visible, congregational life and in associational relationship with the congregations) and equally important, he felt himself answerable to the church (Rees 1974, 23).

With these two opposing views in tension, it demands to be investigated whether the church really was involved and if so, to what extent.

In the previous quotation Cook states these five prophets and teachers were not acting on behalf of the church, nor did their ministry in the church qualifies them to act for the church since they were not the bishops or elders of the church. A close investigation into the language of the text and into the history of that period is necessary before such a statement should be accepted.

The Grammar

In Acts 13:1 there are two prepositions used for the prophets and teachers mentioned. They are *en* and *kata*. The preposition *en* indicates location. This preposition merely states the location is within the bounds marked by the word with which it occurs (Robertson 1914, 605). This word is "Antioch" in the locative case. Thus, these five prophets and teachers were located within the city of Antioch, ministering there.

If the prophets and teachers were also in or part of the church at Antioch, it would be expected that the same preposition *en* or even *eis* would be used to indicate that fact. But to the contrary, Luke used a different preposition, *kata*. This preposition has "down" as its basic root meaning. In this passage it is used in the accusative case and has the horizontal aspect of "down along" (ibid., 608). Thus, it would be easy for one to hastily conclude that the different prepositions used by Luke indicate these five men were in the city of Antioch but only worked alongside the church. In other words, they were outsiders who were ministering at the church at this specific time.

But a study of the usage of *kata* used by Luke shows this opinion to be troublesome. A. T. Robertson commenting on the usage of *kata* in Acts 13:1 stated that here it has a rather ambiguous usage. But when it is compared with other usages by Luke such as Acts 26:3, 17:28 and 18:25, it is observed that Luke used *kata* as an idiom common to the literary *Koine* to show location or sphere (ibid.).

Thus, this use of *kata* by Luke is a mark of his literary style. He used two different prepositions in Acts 13:1 for literary variation. Thus, it cannot be definitively proven from the grammar that these five men were not part of the church at Antioch.

The Historical Context

A study of the history of this time, which generally is accepted as A.D. 45-46, reveals the Church was still in its infant stage in terms of church organization. In some geographical areas, including Syria, it was also in a transitional stage. Therefore, it needs to be determined what the role of the prophets and teachers were at that time. Does the nomenclature "prophets" and "teachers" indicate their function only, or do they also indicate authoritative position in the local church?

William Barclay states that prophets were not attached to any one church. These men were wandering preachers who took the Word to their fellowmen. The teachers, on the other hand, were within the local church and had the duty to instruct those who came to Christ (Barclay 1953, 104). Thus, it seems he does not believe they were in any authoritative position in the church. Fenton Hort, commenting on the government of the church of Antioch states:

Strange to say, we hear nothing about Elders. Since we know that the Ecclesia of Jerusalem had long had Elders, and St. Paul on returning from his first journey in Asia Minor had appointed Elders for each local Ecclesia, it is hardly credible that they were wanting at Antioch, to say nothing of the influence of the precedent of the great Jewish population. . . Evidently at this time the general body of disciples at Antioch must have taken at least a large share in the acts of the Christian community (Hort 1898, 90-91).

Hort also adds that Barnabas, Saul, and the others probably exercised considerable moral authority. Yet this authority was temporary and informal (ibid.). There is, however, substantial evidence from a very important early document, *The Didache*, that in the early churches of Syria prophets and teachers were the leaders of some churches

(Didache 1903, 9). Thus, their designation includes both function and authoritative position. It appears that Burnett Streeter is correct in stating:

The five persons named are mentioned as if they were in charge of the church, and no other officers are mentioned. The occasion was an important one; the step taken is evidently conceived of as being a corporate act of the church, and the representative agents in this act are styled "prophets and teachers." Clearly, whatever other officers the church at Antioch may have had, prophet and teacher are titles borne by those of chief importance (Streeter 1929, 9).

Thus, it can be concluded that even if the entire church at Antioch was not involved in the sending of these missionaries, the prophets and teachers were in a position to represent that church. Their position in the church qualified them to act on behalf of and for the entire church.

The Entire Church

However, that being stated, there has been some debate as to whether the entire church at Antioch and not just the five prophets and teachers were involved in the sending. Newman and Nida commenting on Acts 13:3 state that: "It is not clear to whom *they* and *their* refer. Once again, the pronoun may refer to the remaining three men in the group of five, Simeon, Lucius, and Manaen, or to the entire congregation at Antioch . . ." (Newman 1972, 245).

There are some who agree with Cook's view that only the prophets and teachers were involved in the sending. Yet most Biblical expositors believe the entire church at Antioch was involved in this commissioning. This is borne out by the fuller context of the church's role. There are three other passages which speak either of these first missionaries' return to or subsequent departure from the church at Antioch. It is expedient to examine these passages to find the true relationship of these missionaries to the church.

Acts14:26-28

This passage gives the account of the first missionary conference. After Paul and Barnabas had returned to their home church, they took the initiative to gather the church together and report to them what had transpired (14:27). The fact that they felt the need to report to the entire church and not just the three other prophets and

teachers is overwhelming evidence that the entire church was involved in their commissioning mentioned in Acts 13.

F. F. Bruce commenting on this gathering states that the church had more than a natural interest in the stories of Paul and Barnabas. They shared the responsibility of their missionary service, for it was with the blessing and fellowship of the whole church that the two apostles had been sent forth. Therefore, they felt obligated to report to the entire church (Bruce 1954, 297).

Hort similarly states this verse confirms that the entire church was involved in the original sending. He states that there is no distinction between the "mouthpieces of the Divine command" (Acts 13:2), and those who are to execute it. The Ecclesia commissioned and dismissed Barnabas and Saul, so on their return, they gathered the Ecclesia together (14:27) and reported what had befallen them (Hort 1898, 64). Sir William Ramsay takes the matter a step further by noting:

The Church of Antioch sent them forth, releasing them from their duties there. The Church of Antioch received them again on their return (14:26). It was thereby marked out as the Mother-Church of the Pauline congregations; and it ranks henceforth as more truly the directing and moving power in the Universal Church than Jerusalem was (Ramsay 1959, 14).

It can be concluded that this passage makes clear what the grammar of 13:1-3 does not. Namely, the entire church was involved in the commissioning of these first missionaries, assembled in 13:3 to separate Barnabas and Saul for the new outreach to the Gentiles.

Acts 15:39-40

Barnabas and Paul planned to leave a second time to evangelize new areas. But, this time, because of a disagreement between the two, they each took a new partner and went separate ways. Yet, only Paul's team was "committed by the brethren." What did that committal entail?

The word in Greek *paradidomi* is a compound. Para has the root meaning of "beside," and this holds true when it is in composition (Dane 1946, 108). The verb *didomi* means "to give" or "to give over." In this passage *paradidomi* is used in the sense of "to commend or leave to" (Buchsel 1964, 172). It literally means "to commend to God's providence and care" (Newman 1972, 285).

In Acts 14:26 *paradidomi* is used to refer back to the actions of the church in 13:1-3 when it delivered the two missionaries to the Holy Spirit for the work in regions beyond (Eddleman 1974, 201). Therefore, it is best to conclude that the church again held a public service, as in Acts 13:3, of fasting, praying, laying on hands, and dismissing these two missionaries for the work.

Lenski rightly states: "Luke is speaking of a public service at which Paul and Silas were dismissed for their journey." (Lenski 1934, 630). The entire church once again was involved because the word "brethren" is used. Throughout the Book of Acts "brethren" is used to include the entire church at Antioch (cf. 15:1,32,33) (Hort 1898, 91). Since the entire church was included the second time in the commissioning of its missionaries, it is logical to conclude they were included the first time as well. This is conclusive evidence that the entire church was involved in the Acts 13:3 sending.

Acts 18:22-23

In this passage, Paul now has completed his second missionary journey. It has been four years since his original commission as one of the first missionaries. On his return home there is no record of his reporting to the church nor of them commending him when he left on his third journey.

Lenski, and others feel these events did transpire and that he reknit the bonds of friendship as he "spent some time there." This, of course, is arguing from silence. It appears that Paul had gradually become independent of the Antioch church. Church historian Kenneth Latourette has stated, "We must first think of him as at first sent out by the church of Antioch, but later as largely and perhaps entirely independent of it" (Latourette 1970, 79). This loosening relationship probably resulted for two reasons.

First, as time passed by, Paul became less familiar with the people who made up the church and they became less familiar with him. New converts who came into the church didn't know Paul. Many members who were part of the church at the time of Acts 13 were no longer there at the time of Acts 18. This was due to the transitory and mobile society of the Roman Empire in which many people were up rooted (*ibid.*, 10-11).

Second, we know that Paul was by no means the only missionary of the Apostolic Age. Antioch was becoming a center from which more and more missionaries radiated (*ibid.*, 80). Thus, Paul instead of being only one of two missionaries of the church, was now probably one of several. Therefore, the ties between him and the church were not

as strong as at first. The evidence indicates that although Paul was sent out by the church at Antioch, he gradually became independent of the church over the passing of time.

Conclusion to this consideration

Although the text of Acts 13:1-3 is ambiguous as to whether the entire church sent the first missionaries or the remaining three prophets and teachers, an examination of other related texts shows strong evidence that the entire church at Antioch had to have been involved. But even if this conclusion is not accepted, there is evidence from early church history that the prophets and teachers were the early authoritative leaders in many churches of Syria. This authoritative position gave them the right to act on behalf of the church. In either case, the church was involved. Evidence is wanting that would support the view that the church was not nor could not have been involved in Barnabas and Saul's sending.

The Consideration of the two words "sent"

In the English text the word "sent" is used two times as follows:

3 So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.

4 The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit...

In English the passage seems to indicate that both the church and the Holy Spirit sent the first missionaries. However, Luke is very careful to use two different Greek words translated in our English texts as "sent." A study of these two words is necessary to determine precisely the roles of the church at Antioch and the Holy Spirit in the sending of the missionaries.

The root verb *apoluó*

This verb is used in verse three of the church's activity (*apelysan* - active, indicative, aorist, 3rd person). Although it is translated "sent" in our English texts, it has a better and more accurate meaning. The word is a compound verb consisting of two parts. The preposition *apo* attached to the basic root *lu* along with the personal ending *ó*. A proper understanding of Acts 13:1-4 depends upon an exact definition of this word used for the church's sending. The root meaning and original significance of the word is "off or away from." It always implies separation and is therefore only used with the ablative case, serving to make clearer the case idea of source or separation (Robertson 575).

The root *lu* has as its basic meaning "to loose." The verb *luó* has as its primary meaning "to loosen, set free or untie." In the New Testament the word has as its object: sandals (Acts 7:33), prisoners (Acts 22: 30), one wrapped up (Jn. 11:44), an ass (Mk. 11: 20), seals (Rev. 5:2), and a latchet (Mk. 1:7). It is also used figuratively of the tongue being unloosed (Mk. 7:35) (Buchsel 1964, 335).

In an extensive study of the verb *apoluó* throughout the New Testament never has this writer found the word used in the sense of authoritative sending of individuals on a mission or with a task to perform. Nor will the etymology of the word allow for this kind of a definition. Rather, as Otto Procksch has stated, the best translation of the word is "to release" (Procksch 1964, 328). Bringing all the evidence to bare, it becomes clear that the best translation of *apoluó* found in relation to the action of the church at Antioch is that they "released" or "dismissed" Barnabas and Saul for missionary service. Looking at its use in another way, Ralph Winter makes the comment, "Paul was 'sent off' not 'sent out' by the Antioch congregation. He may have reported back to it but did not take orders from it. His mission band (sodality) had all the autonomy and authority of a 'traveling congregation.'" (Winter 2009, 244-253).

The participle *ekpempthentes*

The second word translated "sent" is the participle used in Acts 13:4 of the Holy Spirit's involvement. In order that there be no ambiguity in the minds of his readers as to who the ultimate sending authority was, Luke uses the participle *ekpempthentes*. The word is a compound verb consisting of two parts. It is comprised of the preposition *ek* attached to the verb *pempo*. A careful study of the word shows a clear distinction between it and *apoluó*.

First is an examination of the preposition *ek*. The root meaning and original significance of this preposition is "out of" or "from within." It stands in contrast with the preposition *en*. The preposition *ek* only occurs in the ablative case. In compounds it follows the root idea of the word closely, meaning "out of," or "away" (Robertson 596).

Next, is a look at the root word *pempo*, with the basic meaning "to send." It is used in the Septuagint and the New Testament, of the sending of things or individuals. Quite frequently in the New Testament it is also used to send something to someone. The idea of a person moving from one place to another, which is inherent in "sending," can retreat into the background so that *pempo* takes on the meaning "commission," or "appoint" (Bauer 1932, 647). Luke could have used the stronger Greek word for sending,

apostello, but choose not to. Grammatically, it would have been the better word to use. But, either for stylistic reasons or because he many times used the two verbs synonymously, he chose to use *pempo* here.

The combination *ekpempo* used here is important to note. This is identified as a nominative, plural, masculine, *aorist*, passive participle. The passive voice denotes the subject (here the two missionaries) as receiving the action. Dana and Mantey state, "when the original agent which produces the action signified in the passive is expressed, the regular construction is in with the ablative" (Dana 161). This is exactly the construction found in Acts 13:4. The construction is *ekpempthentes* (passive) + *hypo* (by) + *Hagiou* (Holy) *Pneumatos* (Spirit) – the direct agent.

According to the statement of Dana and Mantey, this construction indicates that the Holy Spirit was the original agent. Therefore, the grammar shows the Holy Spirit was the direct or immediate agent who sent these missionaries. Newman and Nida commenting on the construction state, "The dependent phrase having been sent by the Holy Spirit may need to be expressed as a separate clause in an active form, 'the Holy Spirit had sent them.'" (Newman 246).

Conclusion to this consideration

Compiling these grammatical observations together, it becomes evident that although the church had a real part in the commissioning of these missionaries, it was not the ultimate or direct sending authority (as Cook noted). The Holy Spirit acted in the role as the immediate sending authority. The church was called upon to act only in a mediate capacity of "dismissing" these two missionaries. These two agents worked together. The Holy Spirit directly called and sent the missionaries. But to validate this sending among men, He used the church as the mediate, visible channel to "dismiss" them on mission.

The Consideration of the Imposition of Hands

3 So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.

In Acts 13:3 it states that Barnabas and Saul had hands placed upon them by either the other three prophets and teachers or by representatives of the church. In either case, whichever it was, the leadership was involved in a ritual of placing their hands on them. To help clarify the role of the church in the sending, it is helpful to determine what this laying on of hands signified.

The Old Testament Background

The imposition of hands is not an innovation of the New Testament Church. As a rite it clearly had its roots in the Old Testament. The meaning of this rite is dependent upon the context in which it is found.

In Association with Blessing

Genesis 48:14-20 is the account of Jacob blessing his grandsons, Ephraim and Manasseh. The imposition of hands was not intended to transfer power from Jacob to his grandsons. It was merely a simple act of blessing associated with the rite of benediction (Leupold 1971, 1152).

In Association with Punishment

In Leviticus 24:14, a blasphemer of God had the hands of all those who heard him imposed on his head before he was stoned. The act likely symbolized that the witnesses were throwing off from themselves the blasphemy which they had heard and returning it upon the head of the blasphemer for him to expiate (Keil and Delitzsch 1975, 454).

In Association with Sacrificial Procedures

The Mosaic law prescribed worshippers who brought burnt and sin offerings to God for sacrifice, to impose their hands upon the animal victim before it was killed (Ex. 29:10; Lev. 1:4; 4:4, 24, 29, 33; 8:14; Num. 8:10, 12). This symbolic act not only consecrated the victim for its special task, but also signified that it was dying as a substitute for the offeror. This action was to expiate the offeror (ibid., 286).

In Association with Ordination Rites

Two ordination rites are recorded in the Old Testament at which time there was the imposition of hands. In Numbers the Levites were ordained to serve as the priests for Israel. These men were set apart for a professional ministry to God, to do the work of the tabernacle. A second instance was the ordination of Joshua by Moses as his successor (Num. 27:18-19; Dt. 34:9). In this ceremony, Joshua was commissioned to his new task. The imposition of hands was done in the sight of the entire congregation of Israel so that all might hearken to and trust Joshua's guidance after Moses died (ibid., 215).

The Meaning in Acts 13:3

The Greek word used for the imposition of hands in Acts 13:3 is an aorist participle *epithentes*. It is a compound from the verb *tithemi* with the preposition *epi*'. *Epi* has as its

basic meaning "upon." In composition this root meaning is maintained (Dana 106). The verb *tithemi* means "to put, place or lay" (Bauer 823). In the New Testament this combination is used forty times.

Both William Ramsay and Harold Cook believe that by the imposition of hands in Acts 13, Saul and Barnabas were merely being "blessed" for the work to which they had been called (ibid.). Just as Jesus blessed the children and Jacob blessed his grandsons, these missionaries were blessed by the church.

However, although blessing was involved, it seems that in this case the imposition of hands entailed much more than a mere blessing. It can be demonstrated that this rite is tied to the Old Testament tradition. John Calvin states:

The apostles retained the ceremony which was practiced among the Jews in accordance with the ancient custom of the Law, just as they retained kneeling and similar rites that are useful for the cultivation of piety (Calvin 1965, 355).

Ernest Best sees many parallels between the commissioning in Acts 13 of these missionaries and the commissioning in Numbers 8 of the Levites. Both cases begin with a divine origin; God approaching Moses, the Holy Spirit moving the leaders at Antioch. In both instances the imposition of hands took place. In both accounts the men are set apart to a "professional ministry"- to do in a systematic way what was previously done haphazardly (Best 347- 48). These parallels give convincing evidence that more than mere blessing was being communicated to Barnabas and Saul by the imposition of hands.

Conclusion to this consideration

It can be concluded that the concepts of identification, representation, and substitution are involved in the imposition of hands in Acts 13:3, as they also were in the Old Testament rite. Thus, missiologist George Peters weighs in by stating:

The rite speaks of authentication, identification, and a creation of a representative by delegation. By this rite the church is publicly authenticating the call of God; she is constituting a rightful and responsible representative, and she is declaring her identification with the representative in his call and ministry. In the person of the ordained individual, the Church by substitution goes forth into the ministry (Peters 1972, 221).

There remains the question as to who specifically laid their hands on the first missionaries. Was it the entire church body, or representatives of the church including the other three prophets and teachers, or only the three prophets and teachers? The answer to this question cannot be determined from the text or the context. Nor does any other Scripture shed light on this question. Therefore, the answer can only be one of speculation with no conclusive evidence. But whether all the members of the church itself or representatives of the body in the presence of the church performed this act, the church as a body was involved (Hort 64).

The Consideration “Set apart for me”

A final and I believe conclusive argument which gives evidence that the Holy Spirit and the church cooperated together in the sending of the first missionaries is found in the command, "Set apart for me," in verse two. This command will be considered from two vantage points: the Holy Spirit's and the prophets and teachers.

The Holy Spirit

The word *aphorizate* in the Greek is identified as an aorist, active imperative from *aphorizo*. It is best translated "separate unto me," being in the dative case (Eddleman 175). This was a direct command by the Holy Spirit given through one of the five prophets and teachers just previously named. Since this command originated with and came directly from the Holy Spirit, He should be considered the direct and immediate agent who called and sent these first missionaries. The Spirit made the revelation, selected the ones who were to go on mission, and assigned them to their work (Hackett 1858, 205).

The Prophets and Teachers

The recipients of the command are not explicitly stated in the text since a nominative is not written. Yet it is most natural grammatically to take the five prophets and teachers previously mentioned as the recipients. But since these men were the official leaders of the church, they were in such a position that it might be said the command came to the whole church. These men were representatives of the entire body.

By giving the command to these men, the Holy Spirit was calling the church into cooperation with him in the sending of these two missionaries. The Holy Spirit could have said, "I have separated," showing that He alone was sending these men. But

instead, He chose the church as the visible and mediate instrument for sending them forth (Reynolds 1907, 104). The verb contains the idea of both selection and consecration. The purpose of the fasting, prayer, and imposition of hands is clearly indicated in the context; for what they did was what they were told to do. This was the method they used of separating them (McGarvey 1892, 4).

By way of this short command, it can be recognized that there were two sending agents: the Holy Spirit who called the missionaries directly, along with the church, which was called alongside to be the visible, indirect sending agent.

Summary and Final Conclusion

So, who really sent the first missionaries? Some, like Cook, contend that the Holy Spirit solely sent them, while others believe it was primarily the local church at Antioch. It is this writer's belief that these two views are opposite extreme interpretations of this passage. Therefore a more balanced position is needed. This study has shown that both views are partially correct, but at the same time, both are in the main incorrect.

Bringing all four of these considerations to bear, it can be concluded that the Holy Spirit was the direct and immediate agent who ultimately called and commissioned Barnabas and Saul to their cross-cultural mission. But he also called the church alongside in cooperation with himself as the outward, visible instrument for the sending. Thus, the church functioned as the indirect and mediate sending agent whereby people could see in a concrete way the call by the Holy Spirit to mission was authentic.

A Probable Reconstruction of the Historical event

By means of this grammatical, exegetical, and historical study, the actual events of Acts 13:1-4 appears to have transpired in the following manner:

On a certain day as the leaders of the church at Antioch, who were called prophets and teachers, were meeting together, they were seeking the Holy Spirit's direction concerning the future of the church. Since it was an important meeting, they were engaged in worshipping and fasting. During this solemn meeting the Holy Spirit spoke through one of the prophets the command to separate two of their members, specifically Barnabas and Saul, for a new outreach in which the two most likely previously expressed an interest.

Shortly afterwards these leaders assembled the entire congregation and made known to all the direct call and command of the Holy Spirit. During this corporate meeting the members fasted and prayed, then watched as some of their representatives placed hands upon Barnabas and Saul as a sign of their identification with the sending of the two. Thus, the church fulfilled the command of the Holy Spirit by commissioning the two by this meaningful act. Subsequently, Barnabas and Saul departed the city and began their new cross-cultural outreach as bonified representatives of the Antiochian church.

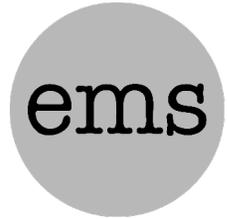
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Called By Whom, To What, To Where? A Critique of Co-Vocationalism



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Keywords: Church planting, bivocational, training, missional ecclesiology, theological anthropology

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.¹ 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

¹ 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.

connected and equal, instead of isolated from one another. Brad Brisco, the director of bivocational church planting with NAMB, is credited for coining the term itself (Sterciuc 2022, 78-79).² 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.³ 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?

² 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.

³ 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.

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 literature.⁴ 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).⁵ 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

⁴ 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).

⁵ 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.

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 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.⁶ 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

⁶ 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.

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 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).⁷ 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.

⁷ 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).

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 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.⁸

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

⁸ 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).

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 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 covocational 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).⁹ 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).¹⁰ 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

⁹ 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).

¹⁰ 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).

participation of the members in the work of ministry (Newbigin 1989, 235).¹¹ 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, 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.

¹¹ 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).

B. Divine Calling – Innovation and Tentmaking

Missiologist Gailyn Van Rheenen 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 Rheenen 2014, 366). Van Rheenen 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)¹²

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).

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-

¹² 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)

teacher, prophet-evangelist.¹³ 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 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.¹⁴

¹³ 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).

¹⁴ 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).

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.

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).¹⁵ 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

¹⁵ 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).

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, 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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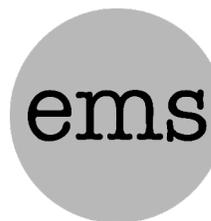
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Keywords: biblical theology of mission, missional hermeneutics, Old Testament, evangelical missiology

Response to Collin Cornell, PhD: *God Draws Near*

Christopher J.H. Wright, PhD

For Panel at the National Evangelical Missiological Society Conference on Oct. 3rd, 2025.

If you read the Preface to Collin’s book, as well as the Preface to the 2nd Edition of my own book, *The Mission of God* (publication 21st October, 2025), you will see that Collin and I had some extensive interaction in relation to each other’s works—a fact that is further evidenced by the mutual endorsements you’ll find on our back covers...!

In 2024 Collin had the kindness (and perhaps the courage!) to send me the whole typescript of his book, *God Draws Near*, when it was in the later stages of editing with Baker, since he had referenced my own work extensively in it. I read it in full, taking some 20 pages of handwritten notes and then sent Collin a 14 page response, with a combination of some warm affirmation and agreement (we share many fundamental biblical convictions), alongside considerable specific critique. We then had some lengthy email exchanges even after that. What follows is a very condensed version of some key points in our “conversation.”

Collin argues that I am one of a whole school of biblical theology of mission exponents who, since the mid-twentieth century have adopted what he calls “the dramatic paradigm” of canonical interpretation. That is, seeing the whole Bible as essentially one great canonical narrative, encompassing creation, fall, redemption (promised in the O.T. and accomplished by Christ), and consummation in the new

creation—a schema that goes back in Christian history to the second century, to Irenaeus and Justin Martyr (and I would argue would not have met any objections from the Apostle Paul).

Collin’s book is very wide-ranging, but let me highlight three ways in which Collin sees significantly detrimental effects of this “dramatic paradigm,” several of which he sees instantiated in the work of mission theologians such as Arthur Glasser, Michael Goheen and myself. I can only speak for myself of course, in attempting some response to each of these. Collin argues that:

1. **The dramatic paradigm adopts a rigidly *unilinear* reading of Scripture.** It’s all one single line of sequentiality—a reading that fails to see how the Bible has a more “*geometric*” pattern (Collin’s preferred phrase), with different centers, multilinear plots, the ability to anticipate forwards and echo backwards within itself.

I would argue that the biblical canon is certainly not *unilinear*, like a canal. But it is *unidirectional* (like the River Amazon, which for all its massive complexity is all heading to its destination in the Atlantic Ocean). That is, with all its complexity, twists and turns, and geometric lines and shapes, the Bible does have an overall purposeful direction of flow towards its destination. The core motif of divine promise and fulfilment surely demands that, as does the constant affirmation of God’s sovereign engagement in history, which generates the covenant promises of O.T. Israel, the explosion of their fulfilment affirmation in the gospel, and the eschatological hope of God’s ultimate victory throughout.

So I am happy to endorse Collin’s observation of the multiple layers and intersections of biblical content (e.g. the echoes of the fall of humanity in the fall of Israel in Ex. 32; the anticipation of Sinai and tabernacle in the blessing promised to Abraham and so on—such inter-textual and trans-historical connections have been part of biblical theology—and disciplined typology—since Jesus himself). But many of the Bible’s own characters seem to have appreciated the linear nature of the story, both its remembered past and its hope-filled future, as something that in itself validated their faith in the faithfulness of God, as a community of memory and hope. Think of the recitals of the story, up to their own day, that we find in the mouths of Moses, Joshua, the Psalms, Nehemiah, Jesus, Stephen, Paul... The dramatic paradigm is hard to overlook in any construal of the Bible itself, in the form God has providentially given it to us.

2. The “dramatic paradigm” operates fundamentally as a *missiology of “repair”* (Collin’s own much repeated word, which I’m not very keen on, since when something just gets “repaired,” it feels like it’s a temporary “fix” of the same old thing—which is decidedly not the glory of the biblical language of redemption, renewal, restoration, “all things made new,” regeneration, reconciliation, etc.). Collin argues that the dramatic paradigm gives too prominent, too pivotal, importance to the Fall as the trigger for the whole rest of the story, which then becomes God’s long-term project to “fix” the problem the Fall created. Not that Collin denies the reality of sin and fallenness (far from it), but his point is that such relentless focus on the narrative of repair obscures, or gives very little if any attention to the Bible’s own emphasis on *communion* as God’s greatest and ultimate goal (God’s longing and intention to dwell within his own creation in loving union with human beings and indeed with all his non-human creatures). That is the freight that the title of his book carries—*God Draws Near*—and God does so not only at the end of the story in the new creation (when the “repair” job is finished), but all the way through in anticipatory relationships, institutions, (like the tabernacle), and profound texts of loving mutuality (The Song of Solomon).

Now I do not want to question Collin’s rich emphasis on God’s mission to dwell with us and all creation in loving union. Immanuel, after all, means God with us—ultimately in the unified heaven and earth, Rev. 21:5—not us going somewhere else to be with God in the end. Nor do I overlook the many points in the biblical story when that eschatological communion is anticipated, in the geometric way Collin portrays the canon, e.g. especially in the tabernacle, the temple, and supremely of course in the Incarnation. When I teach or preach on the mission of God I usually start with Eph. 1:9–10 where Paul succinctly summarizes God’s ultimate mission to bring the whole creation into unified, healed, wholeness in Christ and through Christ. I fully endorse that wonderful biblical, gospel truth and hope!

But what troubles me (as I’ve told Collin in our exchanges) is that he insists (again and again) that a missiology that focuses on this unquestionable desire and intention of God for communion is somehow *antithetical or a necessary corrective*, to the “dramatic paradigm” of envisaging the unity of the canon of scripture in terms of a great arching narrative that spans from creation to new creation. The dominant missiology of repair “cannot accommodate” communion, he says. Furthermore, it remains exclusively horizontal in nature (that is, historically sequential within the economy of salvation), and operates with an instrumental Christology that lacks the vertical dimensions of the immanent Trinity (but those are more than we can address here!).

In my view, the dramatic narrative of redemption and the divine goal of communion are simply complementary, not contrary in any way. Collin acknowledges that some (like myself) will argue for a “both and,” rather than “either or.” And he recognizes of course that there has to be “repair” in order for there to be “communion.” Or, in his own words, “God’s will towards communion generates God’s will towards repair.” But I still wish his overall style of argumentation had not set these things up in opposition.

In his own defense, Collin wrote to me in one of our email exchanges, as follows:

You indicate some discomfort with the antithetical quality of my rhetoric here and there in the book. I suppose in self-defense I would observe that ...a single paradigm has dominated biblical theology of mission since the mid-twentieth century. That being so, the Bible as one big story or drama will feel natural or inevitable to many or most readers of my book. If I am to pitch an alternative, it almost requires sounding a klaxon blast—demonstrating sharply and repetitiously what the dramatic paradigm is and entails and in what respects another proposal could differ. I am quite open to the possibility that I have overstated some contrasts—but I wonder the extent to which drawing bold contrasts is necessary or strategic for a book that could help to kick off an era of renewed biblical theology of mission. Or that is my hope, anyway! (and I suspect that the almost simultaneous publication of our two books has a real chance of doing that kickstarting; perhaps providentially, their joint impact will exceed what either individually might have done)

Well, let’s see what happens!

3. **The dramatic paradigm leads to *obsolescence***, and that in turn generates *anxiety*. Collin illustrates this by reference to western missionaries, who, being totally invested in the dominant missiological paradigm of repair, see mission as fundamentally a linear and time-limited *task* that we have to somehow complete so that God too can get the job finished and Christ can return. The psychological/spiritual effect can be that when they “retire from the mission field,” and so no longer have a meaningful part to play in that task, they feel obsolete (or have indeed become obsolete, in relation to sending churches and agencies). Anxiety kicks in. Do they matter anymore to God, if they are now redundant to his great mission to fix the world?

At the much more serious theological level, if, in the dramatic paradigm, the redemptive story of O.T. Israel has an “ending” (in the middle, so to speak) in Jesus Christ, then Israel itself is disposable—as classic *supersessionism* boldly affirms. The whole Old Testament, or at least the massive chunk between the Fall and the Incarnation, becomes likewise dispensable, it is no more than a “fly-over zone” (Collin’s expression), since who needs it once the “repair” has been accomplished? (And that is indeed how the O.T. is simply ignored in many Christian churches, mission theologies, and evangelistic practice—though the last thing that could be said about my own teaching and writing is that I treat the O.T. as a dispensable fly-over zone!). Indeed, not only Israel would become obsolete, but so would the human Jesus, since the need for the incarnation would have gone once he accomplished the “repair” through his bodily death on the cross. The incarnation also would have an expiry date!

Now, the charge of supersessionism has been robustly leveled at myself, specifically in relation to my book *The Mission of God*, both by Collin, and by Kendall Soulen, whom he quotes. I need to equally robustly affirm that I *do not* embrace supersessionism, or replacement theology. The critique of my book by Kendall and Collin, however, led me to some careful clarifications and adjusted terminology in the 2nd edition (October 2025), and a lengthy response to both in a wholly new chapter 8. For my full response on that issue, then, I refer you to that book, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Biblical Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press; and London: IVP, 2nd edition, 2025), pp. 257–278.

As for the matter of obsolescence, in Collin’s hands, it is routinely a “bad thing.” But there can indeed be wrong assumptions of obsolescence, but also some right and necessary ones, which the Bible recognizes. E.g.:

- The physical tabernacle – with all its vast theological significance gives way eventually to the temple, and both eventually are sublimated in the body of the Messiah, and then the “body” of those who, in Christ and through the gospel, become the dwelling-place of God by the Spirit (Eph. 2), and finally in the cosmic temple of the new creation. And within that sequence, there is a theologically proper obsolescence (the physical tabernacle and temple), and a “never-ever-obsolescence” (the body of Messiah and God’s dwelling in and with his people).

- In Galatians, Paul insists on a temporal change between the eras of Abrahamic promise, the era of the law, and the era of Messiah. Again, there is a combination of eternal non-obsolescence (the promise and the Messiah) with appropriate theological obsolescence (of the role of the law in relation to both).

So then, it is not the case that, just because the dramatic narrative of redemption reached the “It is finished” of the cross, and will reach its “ending and new beginning” in the new creation, then those who have participated in that great story *themselves* become obsolete, disposable, “throw away,” whether one thinks of the irrevocable election of Israel, the eternally incarnate Jesus, Christian missionaries, or the Christian church itself as the ultimate population of the new creation, redeemed from every tribe, people, language and nation.

Response to Chris Wright, PhD

Collin Cornell, PhD

November 28, 2025

The acknowledgments section of my book *God Draws Near* thanks Christopher J.H. Wright for his extraordinary generosity (pp. x–xi), and I want to begin this response to his response with more of the same. Readers of this journal will appreciate that Chris is the premier evangelical biblical theologian of mission, and his book, *Mission of God*, is rightly hailed as a classic in the field. I, on the other hand, was unknown to missiology and unknown to Chris when I first reached out to invite his feedback on my manuscript. Besides being unknown, the manuscript itself also voices a number of criticisms of Chris’s work. Chris might have responded briefly, dismissively, or not at all. Instead, he sent detailed notes to me, and more than that, he adapted a chapter he had already drafted for *Mission of God* in order to address this new material. All this is testament to Chris’s character—and his passion for the subject matter. I hope I can show the same grace if (when?) my writing occasions similar criticism.

I am grateful as well to the editors of the *Journal of the Evangelical Missiological Society* (JEMS) for this opportunity to make a written response to Chris’s comments, which he first prepared for a book review panel at the 2025 annual meeting of the society. Chris has helpfully organized his thoughts into three sections. These concern, respectively, architecture, theme, and obsolescence, i.e.: the most adequate “architecture” for understanding the Bible; the principal theme or themes of God’s

mission in the Bible, and their relationship of opposition or complementariness; and the necessity of discriminating between the everlasting and the occasional elements in the Bible. I will address each of these individually. But it strikes me that the first (architecture) is most decisive and probably the most fundamental bone of contention between Chris and me, so I will spend relatively more time there.

Architecture. Chris argues that the Bible is not unilinear like a canal. But it is, he urges, unidirectional: like the River Amazon, it contains many twists and turns, bends and eddies, and yet its waters all flow into the Atlantic Ocean (cf. *Mission of God*, pp. 55–56). Likewise, the Bible holds multitudes but flows, ultimately, in a single direction. Notably, Chris understands this direction *chronologically*. It is not just that the Bible flows toward Christ. The Bible flows *forward* in time toward a Christ who is *later* relative to earlier testimonies—he is the fulfilment of prior prophecies; the down payment on a previous earnest. Indeed, Chris in his response characterizes promise and fulfilment as the “core motif” of the Bible, and in the revised edition of *Mission of God*, he uses the metaphor of a clock: “Christ’s coming moved the clock forward from Israel’s life under the *paidagōgos* of the Torah into the era of the Spirit- and Messiah-focused salvific faith” (p. 266).

I can hardly deny that the forward movement of time is a real dimension of the Bible’s witness. As Chris points out, the Bible features numerous historical recitals (“Moses, Joshua, the Psalms, Nehemiah, Jesus, Stephen, Paul”), and the New Testament repeatedly leverages the concepts of promise and fulfilment to describe the unique significance of Christ’s advent. The Apostle Paul even asserts that all God’s promises find their Yes in Christ (2 Cor 1:20)! That said, I do deny that promise and fulfilment are the Bible’s core motif; and I deny that they constitute the organizational schema upon which the two testaments hinge.

I see other, stranger configurations of time in the Bible. The Apostle Paul also says that the rock from which the ancestors drank in the wilderness was Christ (1 Cor 10:3). He claims that Christ is the one through whom all things exist (1 Cor 8:6)—meaning, I take it, not that the pre-incarnate Christ ministered to the Israelites or that the eternal Son in his pre-fleshly phase created the universe, but rather that the crucified human Jesus was somehow present to the Israelites, or they to him, and that the whole world was made through his death and resurrection. In other words, times long past and more recent times are simultaneous to each other, if and insofar as Christ is in them. Or to think of another time-bending example: at his Transfiguration, the Synoptic Gospels

show Moses and Elijah appearing and talking with Jesus. If the Bible is unilinear (or unidirectional; these amount to the same thing for me), I suppose these two prophets must have come out of their spiritual retirement to make a belated encore. But if the Bible is multilinear, or perhaps better, multi-simultaneous, then Moses and Elijah weren't jumping forward in a chronological timeline. They were, rather, beholding and speaking with Christ *in their own times*. The glory Moses saw "back then" and the still small voice Elijah heard "in his day" were both in fact Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. (One student of mine called this an "Interstellar Bible," thinking of the scene in the movie *Interstellar* where Matthew McConaughey's character seeks to communicate with his daughter across time.)

My book *God Draws Near* articulates this set of relationships in terms of "equidistance" and "divine constancy." The testaments are, it says, "equidistant" to God (pp. 19, 171). One testament is not closer to God than the other. So also, one testament is not closer to *Christ* than the other. This last is counterintuitive. Most Christians are accustomed to think of the Old Testament as promissory and the New Testament as delivering the promise. As such, the New is commonly understood to offer a more direct and up-to-date access to God than the Old. But I don't think that is right, and my dissent reflects a certain doctrine of God. *God Draws Near* emphasizes throughout the constancy of God. God is self-identical: God did not *become* self-giving and sacrificial in the history of Jesus. Rather, Jesus's self-giving and sacrificial ministry in time reiterates the ministry of the Son within God's everlasting, triune life. Inasmuch, therefore, as the Old Testament testifies truthfully of God, the God it announces is already shaped like Jesus. The Old Testament can be consulted to know *this God*—its characters and testimonies are transparent to who God is, always and everywhere. The ways in which the New Testament "advances" the story, chronologically or theologically or otherwise, are inconsequential in comparison to this more basic truth of God's constancy.

By staking this position, I am not trying to be precious or idiosyncratic. What is at stake for me is the extent to which the Old Testament is an abiding resource for knowing God. I simply don't think that the unilinear or unidirectional schema can support this value. With the line as the architecture for the Bible, the Old Testament always remains an earlier segment; with the river as the governing image, the Old Testament is always the headwaters or an upper stretch but never the delta, never the ocean. At most, the Old Testament can mediate a plan God shared in preliminary form; an initial sketch of the divine purposes; a narrative catalyst for the main drama that

follows it. But one would not turn there to discern the most essential and most current lineaments of God’s mission. That is why I prefer neither the line nor the river as a guiding concept for the whole Bible. I propose instead something more solar: the Old Testament orbits the triune God—and the New Testament circles both the Old Testament and the divine sun at the center of the scriptural system. (I looked it up, a moon that orbits a planet *and* a star is called “circumbinary”; the New Testament is circumbinary)

Theme. The reason for belaboring the “architecture” of the Bible like this lies exactly in this: if the Old Testament is an abiding resource for knowing God, even and specifically for determining God’s mission, then it opens up thematic possibilities that are otherwise closed off. The Old Testament contains much that is non-reparative, non-soteriological. The dynamics of sin and salvation are well-represented in it, to be sure, but they do not encompass the whole. Several Old Testament texts foreground mutuality, enjoyment, and togetherness quite apart from the logic of rupture and repair. The Song of Songs, for example, does not problem-solve or troubleshoot. It celebrates desire and delight. Arguably, too, the Tabernacle at the heart of the Pentateuch does not principally mend a breach but rather hosts a regular, joyful meeting between God and Israel. With these data in hand, it is possible to develop a theology of mission oriented not just to the theme of *repair* but rather to *communion*, centering God’s will to bless and receive blessing; to cherish and draw close; to keep company.

If, on the other hand, the Old Testament is backgrounded—given only a preparatory or promissory role—then the New Testament with its far more obviously redemptive focus drives theology of mission. The idioms for salvation that the New Testament employs are many: Chris draws mostly on the New Testament when he highlights “the glory of the biblical language of redemption, renewal, restoration, ‘all things made new,’ regeneration, reconciliation.” Yet thematically these all share in common a sense of crisis: a problem of lostness, brokenness, deadness, apartness—and a divine initiative to rectify the problem. By applying the unfamiliar and non-biblical labels *repair* and *reparative*, I wanted to shock readers awake to this “problem-dependency,” i.e., the fact that this scriptural (but mostly New Testament) vocabulary for God and mission depends on a prior problem. I hoped that raising awareness of this problem-dependency would clarify that many Old Testament texts, by contrast, show God exercising goodwill—creating; blessing; flourishing—without any such presumption of a prior problem. God blesses in the beginning before anything has gone awry (Gen 1). God

authorizes a blessing on Israel at the midpoint of Torah (Num 6), and promises blessing after all the covenant curses have run their course (Lev 26; Deut 33). God’s will to create and cultivate, bless and draw near, is primary. It is older and more lasting than the crises of sin and evil. It is distinct from God’s will to repair.

With Chris, I affirm that these two divine “wills” or divine “projects” are complementary. *God Draws Near* spends significant time laying out the relationship of the one to the other (see pp. 164–168, titled: “The Relationship between Consummation and Salvation”). It activates various images of synthesis: braiding, intertwining, double helix. But it does insist that one will, blessing and delighting, is primary, while the other, repairing and saving, is secondary. Only one is first and last; only one describes God’s own trinitarian life of mutual blessing and communion, and only one describes the life we will enjoy with God in the ages of ages. The antithetical rhetoric of the book aims not to put these two wills in opposition to one another but to differentiate between them.

Obsolescence. *God Draws Near* seeks to differentiate repair and communion as themes of mission theology. Its motive for doing so is not academic or technical. It is pressingly practical and spiritual. By tying people’s sense of vocation and relationship with God exclusively to the divine work of *repair*, which will come to an end, we place them on an unsteady foundation. We subject them to an anxiety of closure. The book attempts to protect mission workers, pastoral leaders, educators, and other Christians against this risk—by reshoring theology of mission onto the theme that is first and final, communion. This is not to diminish repair. We ourselves and our whole world need repair! But repair applies to the present, problematic, perishable time, not for all time.

Chris is correct that the Bible depicts various progressions. The era of the ancestors differs from the Mosaic era. The time of kingship reshapes Israel’s profile and theology. The tabernacle gives way to the temple. Life under the *paidagōgos* of law transitions to life by faith. But here again, I would say that the earlier phases and forms are *chronologically* bygone; they are *historically* obsolete. But they are not theologically obsolete. They are written into scripture. They attest God; and as signs and indexes to God, they participate in God’s constancy. The tabernacle, the kingship, the *paidagōgos*—these remain viable resources for knowing God and discerning God’s mission. Again: whatever “advances” happen from former to latter are relativized by the reliable, selfsame character of God.

Still, perhaps elsewhere in print or in further interactions I need to parse out more exactly the kinds of obsolescence that concern me versus those that do not. At any rate: I close by repeating my hope, expressed in an early email to Chris, that the publication of our books in such close proximity to each other will kick off an era of renewed biblical theology of mission. May it be so!

Christopher J.H. Wright is international ambassador of the Langham Partnership, providing literature, scholarships, and preaching training for pastors in Majority World churches and seminaries.

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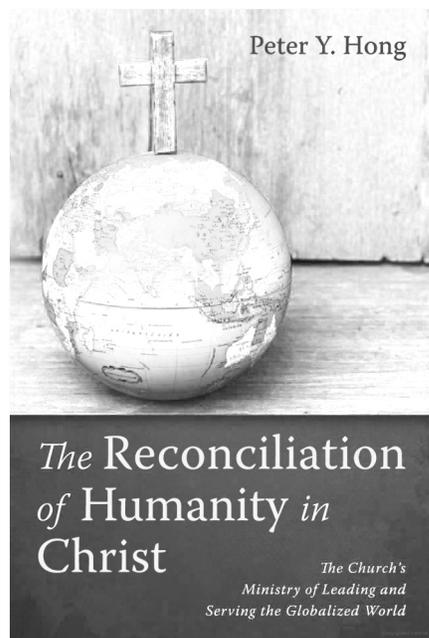
REVIEW: The Reconciliation of Humanity in Christ: The Church's Ministry of Leading and Serving the Globalized World by Peter Y. Hong



Vol 6:1 2026

REVIEWED BY
SEAN CHRISTENSEN

Hong, Peter Y. *The Reconciliation of Humanity in Christ: The Church's Ministry of Leading and Serving the Globalized World*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2024. 302 pp, ISBN: 979-8385217779. \$37.00 paperback.



In *The Reconciliation of Humanity in Christ: The Church's Ministry of Leading and Serving the Globalized World*, Peter Hong offers a strong vision and exhortation for the twenty-first century church to faithfully engage the deep problems produced by globalization and to participate in developing the social structures of a globalized world. His propositions are informed by a solid evangelical theology and an ecumenically-leaning missiology. Hong portrays a realistic view of a pluralistic society both enjoying the benefits of globalization and suffering from its failures, as well as the inadequate solutions secularism presents.

Chapter 1 describes globalization as an integration of all the domains of human life across the globe. Hong gives examples from economics, politics, and technology in a way that helps readers frame their own experiences within a global context. He introduces the ethical questions that pluralism raises, as well as an optimistic response—that the unique qualities of Christianity can provide the influential leadership to redeem globalization for God's purposes. Chapter 2 traces the history of societal advancements that have contributed to our current globalized milieu. From his own East Asian lens, Hong provides historical perspectives from the major societies east of the Mediterranean Basin. Such contributions are often lacking in Western histories and cultural analyses. Chapter 3 explains the West's hegemony over the homogenizing

forces of globalization today. Hong provides an eye-opening assessment of the failures of Western secularism to resolve the problems produced by globalization, such as the marginalization of religion and widening income disparity. He views the forces of fragmentation resulting from these problems—fundamentalism, nationalism, and racism—as working against God’s redemptive purposes in globalization.

With the problems and opportunities of globalization established, Chapters 4-6 present the solution: the church must not ignore the world’s problems, nor withdraw, nor seek to dominate the forces of globalization. Rather, the church, as salt and light in this world, must manifest true religion with a commitment to human flourishing while evangelizing the nations with the gospel of Christ. Hong encourages empathy that drives Christians to understand, care, and act. He equally encourages religious dialogue with a humble spirit, without abandoning our convictions rooted in divine revelation.

Hong’s eschatology informs his missiology, in that he sees globalization as the revealed plan of God to bring all things under Christ’s dominion. As such, the church must express Christ’s kingdom through holistic ministry, and influence individuals and societal structures in a Christ-like way to prepare humanity for Christ’s return. Hong views the church’s active involvement toward human flourishing as a living witness that may open hearts to Christ’s reign.

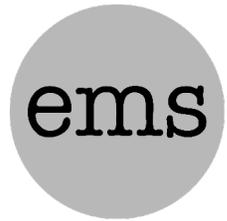
Hong cites theologians, sociologists, and journalists from every continent and with competing viewpoints. He charitably explains differing positions on the roles of religion in general, and the church in particular, in solving humanity’s problems. He calls the church to committed engagement in every sphere of human society, with the love and truth of God manifest in our actions, and the gospel explained through our witness.

Despite the subtitle, *The Church’s Ministry of Leading and Serving the Globalized World*, Hong gives very little space to the role of local churches in this holistic witness to the kingdom of God. While his principles are compelling, he gives little guidance on how churches or mission organizations can apply them in concrete, practical ways.

Hong’s writing style is engaging and easy to follow. Missions professors, denominational leaders, and mission leaders will find his assessment of globalization and the church’s missional role in our globalized environment to be worth the read. His extensive bibliography is useful for those wishing to explore this topic further.

Sean Christensen is a PhD candidate in Intercultural Studies at Columbia International University and is on the global leadership team of World Team.

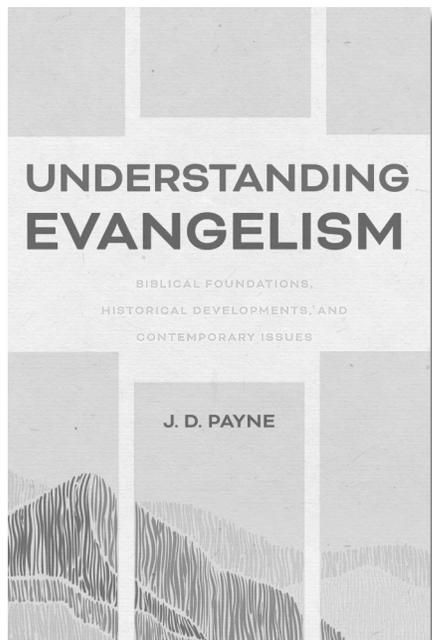
REVIEW: Understanding Evangelism: Biblical Foundations, Historical Developments, and Contemporary Issues by J. D. Payne



Vol 6:1 2026

REVIEWED BY
JOSEPH GAVIN

J. D. Payne. *Understanding Evangelism: Biblical Foundations, Historical Developments, and Contemporary Issues*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2025. 334 pp. ISBN: 9781540963581. \$23.00 paperback.



In *Understanding Evangelism: Biblical Foundations, Historical Developments, and Contemporary Issues*, J. D. Payne gives a broad overview of the biblical and historical foundations of Christian evangelism. He also offers a clarion call for the church and individual Christians to participate in the intercultural proclamation of the gospel. Payne opens by making a sharp distinction between evangelism and other aspects of the church's mission and ecclesial activities, arguing that an understanding of evangelism should be narrowly defined as verbal communication of the faith to the unregenerate. He writes, "When the act is conflated with other church functions, the result is usually a syncretistic understanding of evangelism that is

neither biblical evangelism, by definition, nor evangelistic practice in the world" (29). The remaining sections of the book examine biblical and theological issues related to evangelism, its historical development in the West, issues of cross-cultural communication, and contemporary concerns related to practice.

Payne appropriately positions the church's call to evangelism within a missional hermeneutic, beginning with the Genesis creation account and the cultural mandate. He examines the Great Commission and its significance for the church today. He also argues for a theology of evangelism clearly embedded within the Reformed tradition's understanding of justification through penal substitution. For Payne, the goal of

evangelism is the punctiliar conversion of an individual, a “one-time, instantaneous event [that] moves a person from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of Christ” (89). The book traces the history of evangelism, both in the early church and in Western European and North American contexts. Payne addresses challenges and approaches to intercultural communication, and he answers specific questions about evangelistic practices in the church today, such as the use of the “sinner’s prayer,” the value of tracts, and the ethics of evangelism toward strangers.

There are, however, some limitations to *Understanding Evangelism*. Payne repeatedly critiques definitions of the gospel and approaches to evangelism that fall outside his tradition and definitions, arguing that tampering with these universal truths “leads the manipulator to a syncretized religious message that is not Christian at all” (136). In doing so, he downplays the validity of the enculturated theologies and practices of non-Western and non-Protestant Christian traditions. Payne’s history of evangelism focuses almost exclusively on the West, and he gives no attention to early African or Asian Christianities. Similarly, Payne does not address evangelism practices in the majority world today, nor does he analyze Pentecostal approaches. Finally, Payne defines a normative punctiliar conversion experience, where a gospel presentation leads to conversion, followed by incorporation into a community of faith and discipleship. This restricted definition overlooks the increasingly prevalent experiences of those who belong to a body of believers, and even practice their liturgies and rituals, prior to belief and commitment to Christ.

Understanding Evangelism is effective in its presentation of Payne’s particular understanding of Christian evangelism, and it provides a helpful historical overview of the Western church’s evolving practices. Payne is clearly engaging with missiological voices that argue for a broader understanding of the church’s mission in the world (e.g. *missio Dei* or integral mission). Whether or not one agrees with his conclusions, his elevation of gospel proclamation can be seen as a counterbalance to approaches that neglect verbal witness. Payne includes helpful extracts from historical and contemporary writers, as well as discussion questions at the end of each chapter. These encourage the reader to wrestle with the application of his arguments, making the book appropriate for classroom or small group use.

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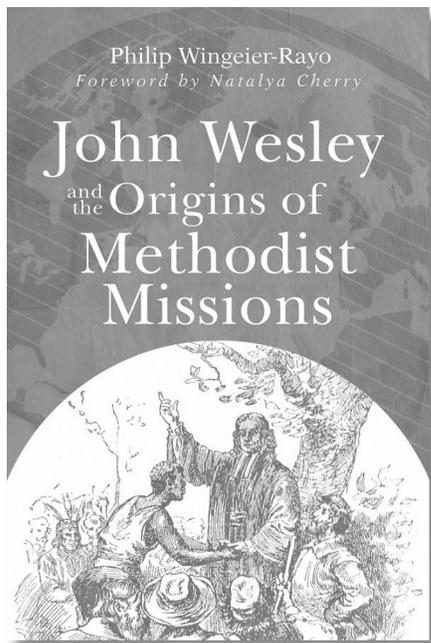
REVIEW: John Wesley and the Origins of Methodist Missions by Philip Wingeier-Rayo



Vol 6:1 2026

REVIEWED BY
KIRSTEEN KIM

Wingeier-Rayo, Philip. *John Wesley and the Origins of Methodist Missions*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2025. 339 pp, ISBN: 978-1791035167. \$29.00 paperback.



John Wesley and the Origins of Methodist Missions is a history of early Methodist missions that is alert to the global context of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, understanding Wesley and other protagonists as people of a particular time and place. This approach allows the author to convincingly explain early Methodist decision-making and mission strategies, and the theologies that informed them.

This volume is in three parts that move the story forward, while focusing on different mission topics and issues faced by Wesley and early Methodists. Part I treats John Wesley's engagement with the wider world as Britain developed an empire. This was through his well-connected home and elite education, his exposure to contemporary mission models, his life-changing encounter with Moravian Christians and missionaries, and his own travel to North America and Europe.

Part II concerns the missiology that Wesley developed over his lifetime that spanned almost the entire eighteenth century (1703–1791). The author covers Wesley's university years in Oxford where he sought holiness, to his time in the American colony of Georgia where, as a chaplain to settlers, he learned first-hand about colonial brutality. The author then describes Wesley's years in London, where he established the United Society at the Foundry along Moravian lines. Here, the author shows how Wesley

rediscovered a more genuine expression of Christianity, centered on Scripture and an experience of God’s love and grace that resonated with the people of England. These victims of the Industrial Revolution remained his primary mission and, parting company with some Moravians, his mission included works—mercy, piety, education, and support for social justice. The author also demonstrates how, through encounters with others—such as Native Americans and Jews—and his wide reading, Wesley came to understand that God’s prevenient grace was also at work in them.

The book sustains an overall argument that, while Wesley’s ministry at home in England was “missional” in the sense that “he wanted all people to be saved by the grace of Jesus Christ” (94), Wesley actively discouraged overseas missions for most of his life. The author gives various reasons for this and interprets Wesley’s mission as building up the English church so that, as it spread globally, believers would share the gospel organically, “person to person” (109).

Part III tells how Methodism did indeed grow in North America and the Caribbean during Wesley’s lifetime through people who bore faithful witness to Jesus Christ. These faithful witnesses included Europeans and Africans who traveled, emigrated, or were moved for slavery. Subsequent chapters deal with Methodist expansion into Asia, Africa, and Latin America. This expansion occurred mostly after Wesley’s lifetime, and initially as a result of the leadership of Thomas Coke, who sent missions globally. The author brings to light stories of multiple lay people, including many women and people of color, who began Methodist societies around the world.

With this well-researched book, Philip Wingeier-Rayo does the intersecting fields of missiology and world Christianity a great service. Most importantly, the perspective of Wesley and Methodism helps to fill the gap between Catholic and Protestant missions. For this reader, the strongest chapters are Chapter 2, which details the various models of mission in Wesley’s time, even before William Carey sailed for India, and Chapter 3, on what Wesley learned from Moravian missionaries. The style of this book is accessible for the general reader. There is plenty here for students, and many insights for seasoned scholars, too. I heartily recommend it.

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