



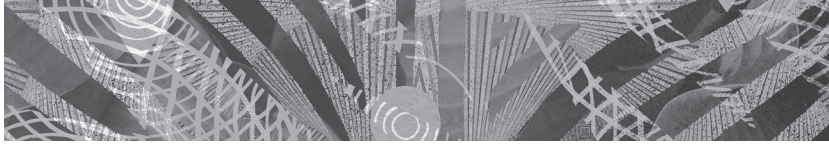
SENT TO FLOURISH

EDITED BY **LEN TANG** AND
CHARLES E. COTHERMAN

A GUIDE TO PLANTING
AND MULTIPLYING
CHURCHES

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HOW DO WE DISCERN GOD'S ACTIVITY IN SCRIPTURE AND OUR COMMUNITY?

THE *MISSIO DEI* AND THE
MISSIONAL HERMENEUTIC

CHARLES E. COTHERMAN

ABOUT SEVEN MONTHS INTO PLANTING A CHURCH in western Pennsylvania, I found myself seated across from Dan in the dimly lit back room of Karma Coffee. For the better part of an hour Dan had invited me into his story, a story filled with betrayal, loss, and a numbing sense of hopelessness. Now he looked at me, his new pastor, for a response.

Dan's pain followed a trajectory I had grown somewhat accustomed to in my small, poverty-stricken town, so one might think that I would have learned enough even in a few months to respond with an answer that was both compassionate and theologically rich. I wish I could say I did. Instead, I shot from the hip, and blurted out, "You need to run to Jesus."

Fortunately, Dan was honest (or desperate) enough to call my pastoral bluff. "What does that even mean?" he shot back just as fast. For someone who had prayed for years, seemingly to no avail, for God to save his marriage and free him from addiction and chronic underemployment, another clichéd action step was precisely *not* what he needed.

Thankfully, God was gracious to both of us. In the midst of my blundering pastoral care, God helped me see that Dan needed to develop a sense of God's active and redemptive presence, a presence that was there in the midst of his past pain and continued into his current struggles. I asked Dan where he saw the presence of Jesus in the events of his life. As Dan took a moment to reflect, I noticed his expression change. Unlike my first question, which focused on his action, Dan found my second

Mission has its origin in the heart of God. God is a fountain of sending love. This is the deepest source of mission. It is impossible to penetrate deeper still; there is mission because God loves people.

DAVID J. BOSCH

question, which focused on God's action, liberating. For Dan, considering anew the reality of a God who draws near in compassionate and redemptive presence helped shift his perspective from his own problems and failures to the goodness of a God who has always been actively working for the good of creation.

"BAD THEOLOGY KILLS"

Why begin a book on church planting with a story like this? Obviously not to wow you with my pastoral skills! My initial, emotionally charged response was hardly what Dan needed. Yet as simple as it was, my conversation with Dan illustrates one of the most fundamental aspects of church planting and every other activity of the church: God's action always precedes ours. Ministry begins with God, not us. It is his mission, not ours. Put another way, "it is not individual Christians or even the Church who has a mission in the world; rather, it is the God of mission who has a Church in the world."¹ For church planters this means that our calling is one of recognition and response. Instead of beginning with our own "failproof" strategies, custom logos, exquisite websites, and five-step action plans and then inviting God to bless them, we begin with eyes, ears, and hearts open to sensing how the living God has moved in the past through Scripture and the history of the church and is currently moving in our midst. As church planters and congregations our question becomes not What can I do? or What can we do? but How is the missional God inviting us into a mission much larger than anything we could dream up on our own?

This may seem like a small distinction, but as the rest of this book will argue, the theological lens through which we see Scripture and our calling as church planters and church communities matters. This is not always a popular stance to take in a church planting culture where the tendency to value action over reflection is pronounced and sometimes explicitly celebrated. We give our churches names like Action Church and stress activity—sometimes any activity. I have even seen a church plant boast on its website that its *modus operandi* was "ready, fire, aim." For the most part, the heart behind these sentiments is probably good. These churches want to actively spread the good news of Jesus to their community in innovative ways. What a great impulse! (Plus, truth be told, I would rather attend a church called Action Church than one called Theology Church. At least action implies some excitement and passion.) Yet what would happen if soldiers and hunters followed these ready-fire-aim guidelines? Not only would they usually miss the real target, there would likely be plenty of casualties to go around. Unfortunately, this same dynamic can be true in the church. Whether we recognize it or not, all church

¹David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 390.

planters have a theology—a way of thinking about God. The question is, does our theology help us hit our intended target by helping us better live as outposts of and signs pointing toward the inbreaking of God's kingdom, or does it lead to unintended consequences?

Whether we think of ourselves as theologians or not, what we think about God and how those thoughts translate into our actions and teaching matters. I know a professional theologian who sums up this reality in an oft-repeated three-word sentence: "Bad theology kills." At first I thought her mantra was an overstatement. Over time, however, I have come to believe that she is right. Faulty understandings of God and God's mission in this world really do stifle life and growth in both individuals and the church. Church planting is no different. So much of what we do as church *planters* is encouraging the life cycle that comes naturally to all living things (birth, growth, flourishing, reproduction). As living bodies, churches are naturally prone to follow this life cycle. The various stages of this progression—including reproduction—should not be exceptions to the norm but the natural outflow of the life of Christ's body.

However, as we see in the natural world, not all living things follow this process. Sometimes a plant can put all its energy into growing larger and larger and neglect the production of fruit that will ensure reproduction and long-term sustainability through future generations. In other cases, an outside force like disease, environmental factors, or genetic engineering curtails the regular life cycle. The same can be true for churches. A host of internal and external forces can stunt a local church's growth. Sometimes the problem is unconfessed sin or unhealthy leadership. Other times a lack of growth stems from a failure to accurately discern the local climate or wisely cultivate a healthy environment for growth and reproduction. The following chapters in this book will address these and other concerns, but more basic than them all is the theological soil into which a new church is planted. Just as plants cannot thrive in poor soil, our efforts as church planters will be stunted or wither altogether if we fail to begin with a theology that places the task of planting in right relationship to the ultimate Source of life.

MISSIONAL GOD

Over the past half century or so, theologians, missiologists, pastors, and church planters have increasingly recognized that the theological basis for church planting and all other Christian endeavors is the *missio Dei*, the "mission of God." Drawing on the meaning of the Latin word *missio* (sending), the *missio Dei* points to the sending nature of the triune God: The Father sends the Son, and the Father and Son

(or for Eastern Christians, the Father) send the Spirit to complete God's redemptive mission in creation. Only recently has the church rediscovered an appreciation for the divine origin of mission. Its earliest Protestant manifestations trace back to the work of European theologians like Karl Barth (1886–1968) in the 1930s and only began to crystallize following the 1952 Willingen Conference of the International Missionary Council. From that point on, the concept of the *missio Dei* found a ready reception. By the mid-1970s the idea that all Christian mission found its origin in the missionary (i.e., sending) God was making its way from theological classrooms and ecumenical conferences to the books of popular authors like John Stott. Writing in 1975, Stott conveyed the idea of the *missio Dei* in clear terms that readers then and today could hardly miss. “The primal mission is God’s,” Stott asserted, “for it is God who sent his prophets, his Son, and his Spirit.”² Stott even anticipated later developments by taking God’s sending task one step further—to the church. Stott pointed to passages like John 17:18 and John 20:21 as evidence that “Jesus did more than draw a vague parallel between his mission and the *model* of ours, saying ‘as the Father sent me, so I send you.’ Therefore, our understanding of the church’s mission must be deduced from our understanding of the Son’s.”³ Through his international ministry and regular speaking engagements at places like InterVarsity Christian Fellowship’s triannual Urbana Conference, Stott no doubt helped many begin to think through the implications of God’s missionary nature.

It was not Stott, however, who played the leading role in helping the church better understand the practical implications of the *missio Dei*. Though not the originator of the term *missio Dei*, no twentieth-century figure was more influential in shaping the church’s understanding of God’s sending nature than one of Stott’s contemporaries, the British missionary, pastor, author, and theologian Lesslie Newbigin (1909–1998). Newbigin was among the early advocates of God’s sending character and had been one of the most influential drafters of the 1952 Willingen statement.⁴ For Newbigin, as for Barth, mission was not simply something God did; it was part of the triune God’s very nature.

As the 1960s wore on, however, Newbigin became concerned that many in the ecumenical movement were misusing the concept of the *missio Dei* in such a way as to actually marginalize the church. In their effort “to get out into the world, find out ‘what God is doing in the world’ and join forces with him,” many were overlooking

²John Stott and Christopher J. H. Wright, *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, updated and expanded ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 21.

³Stott and Wright, *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, 21–23.

⁴For a succinct overview of the creation of the Willingen Statement, see Michael W. Goheen, “A Missional Reading of Scripture for Theological Education and Curriculum,” in *Reading the Bible Missionally*, ed. Michael W. Goheen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 302–3.

the role of the church. The problem, in Newbigin's assessment, was that "what God is doing in the world" was generally thought to be in the secular rather than in the religious sectors of human life." In practice this led both to the marginalization of the church in the world and to the church's acceptance of cultural movements that Newbigin found "bizarre" and sometimes even anti-Christian.⁵ As a case in point, he noted that for some "even Chairman Mao's 'little red book' became almost a new bible."⁶ For Newbigin this was a misuse of the idea of *missio Dei* that needed to be challenged if the church hoped to keep its bearings in the world.

Newbigin found time to set himself to the task of salvaging the idea of the *missio Dei* after he retired from active missionary work in India and returned to the United Kingdom in 1974. Newly confronted with the reality of a rapidly secularizing West, Newbigin dedicated himself to confronting misuses of the *missio Dei* and to exploring and propagating the implications of a mission-based theology in a culture that had lost its spiritual moorings. His 1978 book, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, explicitly rejected the freewheeling handling of the *missio Dei* that had defined the church's use of the concept in the 1960s. Instead, Newbigin again argued that the church needed to root any concept of the mission of God in the Trinity, specifically in the authority of Jesus, who was "sent by the Father, anointed by the Spirit to be the bearer of God's kingdom to the nations."⁷ For Newbigin, the church's duty in any context was "to go back to the original biblical sources of this [trinitarian] faith in order to lay hold of it afresh and state it in contemporary terms."⁸ Newbigin's emphasis on this basic understanding of the sending God as the source of mission offered Western Christians a means for thinking in new, post-Christendom ways about engaging Western society. It also pointed to a renewed role for the church. In a secularizing culture, the church could not simply open its doors and wait for people to stream in. Rather, the church's only viable option was to live into its primary calling as a *sent* community following the lead of the sending God. In future books like *Foolishness to the Greeks* (1986) and *The Church in a Pluralistic Society* (1989), Newbigin would further explore what it meant for the church to point to and engage in God's great mission.

In raising the profile of the *missio Dei* as a concept for mission, Newbigin pointed the way for the following generation of scholars who sought to further explore the basis and implications of a theology rooted in the nature of the sending God. Of these scholars none was more influential in shaping the conversation around

⁵Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 18.

⁶Newbigin, *Open Secret*, 19.

⁷Newbigin, *Open Secret*, 24.

⁸Newbigin, *Open Secret*, 27.

mission than the South African missiologist David J. Bosch. By virtually all accounts, Bosch's *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in the Theology of Mission* (1991) lived up to its title by reshaping the way the church understood mission. Among the most notable aspects of Bosch's work was his ability to demonstrate that the church's call to participate in God's mission did not hinge on a select few proof texts like the Great Commission, which appears at the end of Matthew and the beginning of Acts.⁹ Rather, Bosch convincingly demonstrated that the entire New Testament pointed to God's mission in the world.

At the same time, Bosch's emphasis on God's missionary action throughout the New Testament also helped underscore the importance of thinking about mission in terms of the *missio Dei*. For Bosch the church's discovery of the *missio Dei* was one of the greatest of all the paradigm shifts that had occurred in the modern understanding of mission. "The recognition that mission is God's mission" represented what Bosch described as "a crucial breakthrough." Indeed, to Bosch's mind it was "inconceivable" that the church could ever again revert to a church-centered understanding of mission.¹⁰ The Rubicon had been crossed. Theology had arrived at a first cause permitting no deeper delving. "Mission has its origin in the heart of God," Bosch declared. "It is impossible to penetrate deeper still; there is mission because God loves people."¹¹

MISSIONAL CHURCH

But what did this mean for the church and for church planting? This was the question a group of scholars led by Princeton Theological Seminary missiologist Darrell Guder took up in the late 1990s. It was one thing to state that all mission pointed back to the work of a triune, sending God, but it was another to translate this into a practical way of being the people of God. Drawing on the legacy of Newbigin and Bosch, Guder's team from the Gospel and Our Culture Network worked to chart a trajectory for the church to live into this calling. The result of their effort was the 1998 publication of *Missional Church*.¹²

The edited volume did more than simply offer a new language for talking about the church as *missional*; it also explored concrete ways in which the church was called into the sending nature of God. As Guder noted in the book's first chapter, if the church followed a "missionary God" who carried forth his mission by sending

⁹Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 36.

¹⁰Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 393.

¹¹Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 392.

¹²Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

himself and his followers into the world (Jn 20:21), it made sense that the church understand itself as “God’s sent people.”¹³ For the Western church, still struggling to find its bearings in a society where secularism was increasingly displacing Christendom’s cultural consensus, these efforts found a ready hearing. Whereas Newbigin’s earlier reflections on the theme of a church sent into the world had been influential in scholarly circles but had made fewer inroads in popular practice, Guder’s volume helped move the concept of the *missio Dei* from the ivory tower to local churches.¹⁴ In the next decade, the term *missional* took on a life of its own and became one of the most popular catchwords among North American church leaders. Within fifteen years of the book’s publication, *missional* had come to have what Timothy Keller later described as “a dizzying variety of different and sometimes contradictory definitions.”¹⁵ As Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile note, by 2011 the term *missional* had developed into four broad streams that understood missional to primarily denote either an (1) evangelistic, (2) incarnational, (3) contextual, or (4) reciprocal and communal church movement.¹⁶

While there is certainly overlap among proponents of these diverse understandings of missional theology, the fact that the term has come to mean different things to different people points to the potential for misunderstanding and confusion.¹⁷ Perhaps now, two decades out from Guder’s *Missional Church* and four decades out from Newbigin’s *The Open Secret*, it is time for church planters and missional leaders to reemphasize the basis of missional church as being found in the mission of the triune God who has sent his Son, his Spirit, and his church into the world as part of his cosmic plan of redemption. This basis in the ongoing mission of the triune God is the touchstone that a missional people must return to again and again, perhaps even daily, as a way of ongoing formation. We are *sent ones* who minister and plant churches in the power of the *sending God*. We do not wait for people to come to us; we, being the sent ones, go to them. We do not go in our own power or the strength of our ideas. Like the disciples, we follow the lead of Jesus, trying to stay close enough to hear his voice, close enough to pick up some of the

¹³Guder, *Missional Church*, 6.

¹⁴In less than fifteen years Guder’s book sold thirty-eight thousand copies; see Gelder and Zscheile, *Missional Church in Perspective*, 41, who note that three to ten thousand copies would have been good sales for a book of this type.

¹⁵Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 256; chap. 19 provides a succinct and helpful overview of the major trends in the missional movement.

¹⁶Gelder and Zscheile, *Missional Church in Perspective*, 10, 71-98. Keller offers a succinct summary of Gelder and Zscheile’s work in *Center Church*, 256-57. The labels I use here for these overlapping missional approaches are Keller’s rather than Gelder and Zscheile’s original designations of discovering, utilizing, engaging, and extending missional approaches.

¹⁷For examples, see Keller, *Center Church*, 259-60.

dust he kicks up as he walks the city sidewalks and country roads of the places we call home.

FOLLOWING THE SENDING GOD

If we are honest, it's at this point we arrive at a dilemma. It is one thing for first-century disciples to follow closely enough to be covered in the dust from their rabbi's feet; it's another to apply this analogy to our lives today in a post-ascension world in which Jesus is no longer *physically* present.¹⁸ How do we *follow* someone who is not here? Fortunately for us, Jesus himself offered some clues.

At the beginning of the book of Acts we catch some of Jesus' final interactions with his disciples before his ascension. We see Jesus, the sent one of God, preparing his disciples for (1) the sending of the promised Holy Spirit and (2) the sending of God's Spirit-empowered church into the world. How does Jesus prepare his apostles for these coming realities? Luke gives us Jesus' method at the end of his first volume, the Gospel of Luke.

The first way Jesus prepared the disciples for what was to come was through meeting them in their humanity by offering them a chance to personally *experience* him. "Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see" (Lk 24:39). The disciples needed to experience Jesus for themselves. They needed to hear his voice, see him with their eyes, and touch him with their hands. We get down on doubting Thomas, but Jesus did not. He met him in his humanity. But experience was not all Jesus offered his disciples. Experience, as important as it was, was not enough. Jesus supplemented the disciples' experience of his presence by turning their attention to *Scripture*. "He said to them, 'This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.' Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures" (Lk 24:44-45). This was nothing new. Jesus had already spoken many times about the ways in which Scripture pointed to him, but this time the disciples really got it. It was a lesson that would help sustain them as they participated in God's mission.

Together, an experience of Jesus and an ability to see Jesus as the sent one of God testified to in the entirety of Scripture were the foundation the disciples needed to participate in the next chapter of God's unfolding mission. The same holds true for

¹⁸The image of a disciple being covered in dust from his rabbi comes from the Mishnah, *Avot* 1:4: "Let thy house be a meeting house for the wise; and powder thyself in the dust of their feet; and drink their words with thirstiness." See Lois Tverberg, "Covered in the Dust of Your Rabbi: An Urban Legend?," *Our Rabbi Jesus* (blog), January 27, 2012, www.ourrabbijesus.com/covered-in-the-dust-of-your-rabbi-an-urban-legend/. For our purposes, it is enough to emphasize the extreme proximity stressed by this image.

us today. In order to discern how we can participate in God's mission as a sent people, we need both real experiences with the triune God and a deep appreciation and knowledge of the ways in which the missional God has revealed himself through Scripture. In short, we need both a *missional pneumatology* (i.e., a missional understanding of the person and work of the Holy Spirit) and a *missional hermeneutic* (i.e., a missional framework for understanding Scripture).

Developing a missional pneumatology. What does following a missional God look like when God leaves the scene? That is the reality the disciples faced immediately after Jesus ascended to the right hand of the Father in Acts 1:9. They did not have to wait long for an answer. In the second chapter of Acts, the disciples stepped into the full reality of the promise Jesus made over and over again as his time drew short: "Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you" (Jn 16:7 ESV). One can imagine the disciples hearing this in the Upper Room and thinking "How could that possibly be true? How could anything be better than actually *being* with Jesus?"

Then the day of Pentecost came.

The sending of the Spirit came with wind and fire that must have been impressive enough in themselves, but the Spirit also brought a personal connection to God and greatly expanded ministry and boldness. Thus we see Peter, only weeks after denying he even knew Jesus, filled, emboldened, and sent by the Spirit to preach a sermon in the very streets where he had previously cowered before a servant girl. In addition to boldness, the Spirit also brought cultural sensitivity and missiological tools that rejected a mechanistic, one-size-fits-all approach. When God first sent his Spirit to his church and his church to the world, he did so by speaking the language each person in the crowd needed to hear. Indeed, God launched the church into the *missio Dei* in a way that pointed to the creation-wide scope of his mission. The events of Pentecost were a foretaste of the *telos* (end goal) of God's cosmic redemptive plan that Israel's prophets pointed toward and that the book of Revelation describes in sweeping fashion in passages like Revelation 7:9, where John is shown a vision of people from every tongue and nation worshiping the Lamb.

This is the heart of the sending God, a God who calls and sends the particular for the sake of the many. It is a calling that we see unfolding in the book of Acts as the fledgling Christian community works through ethnic and social divides. It is a calling that God's sent church still symbolizes in the world. Like Abraham, who was sent from his home in Genesis 12 in order that God might bless him and thereby make him a blessing by which God would bless "all the peoples on earth" (Gen 12:3),

so the church is called to follow the Spirit of the living, sent, and sending Christ as a participant in God's great mission.

The fact that the mission is God's and not ours means that the most important thing we can do as people called to participate in God's mission through planting and working to sustain communities of faith is to cultivate in our own hearts an ability to hear, see, and sense the presence and the hope of God's Spirit. It is impossible to be missional in our communities without knowing the One who invites us to participate in his mission and who gives us wisdom and power for mission. Jesus is alive, but he is at the right hand of God. We can only experience him through the ongoing presence of his Spirit. Our ability to discern God's mission requires that we *experience* the One, the Spirit of God, who is sent to us. This is why the whole second section of this book is devoted to developing a missional spirituality that cultivates Spirit-centered discernment.

Developing a missional hermeneutic. As essential as an experience of God through his Spirit is to our participation in the *missio Dei*, experience alone is never enough of an anchor to hold us steady in our missional task. Our experience of God is more like the chain that holds the anchor to a ship. The chain is an essential part of the whole apparatus. Without a chain the anchor is simply one more piece of sea litter. Conversely, a chain without an anchor, though it might give the impression of stability (if one does not look below the surface) leaves us at the mercy of whatever wind catches our sails.

For two millennia Scripture has been the anchor that has helped the church hold fast to its identity. This is certainly not to say that the church has always interpreted Scripture well or actually obeyed the truth of Scripture even when it was correctly understood. But even when the church has missed the mark and fallen short of utilizing Scripture well, Scripture endures and contains within itself the potential to point the church toward repentance and healing. In American history perhaps no issue bears this out more than the practice of slavery during the centuries preceding the Civil War. In antebellum America, folks on both sides of the issue used the Bible to underscore their opinion. At first, a literal reading of the Bible that seemed to condone slavery appeared to have won the day. Eventually, however, the Bible played a major role in undercutting the false biblical argument used to condone the evil of slavery.¹⁹

For modern Christians, it may be surprising to hear that the Bible's use in relationship to the church's engagement in mission has a somewhat similar history,

¹⁹For a good discussion of the way both slave holders and abolitionists argued their case from the Bible, see Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); and Charles F. Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity: White and Black Evangelicals in Colonial and Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

especially in the Protestant world. While Reformation principles like *sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone) emphasized the authority and primacy of Scripture for the church, this did not mean that the church always managed to read Scripture well or as a whole. It certainly did not entail that the church picked up on the Bible's missionary impulse. Within the Protestant world, a focus on particular parts of the biblical narrative related to salvation, the sacraments, and theological concepts like election took up much of the church's attention from the time Luther penned his Ninety-Five Theses in 1517 until 1706, when Bartholomew Ziegenbalg and Henry Plutschau began missionary work in India.²⁰ Other Protestant efforts soon followed the work of these Danish pioneers. In 1731 Nikolaus von Zinzendorf's Moravian movement launched its first missionary. Only a few years later a group of Moravians on a boat to the British territory of Georgia deeply influenced two brothers named Charles and John Wesley, thereby playing a part in the later rise of Methodism.²¹

As missionary efforts gained momentum throughout the eighteenth century, these efforts derived their impetus for mission from a variety of sources. For some like Zinzendorf's Moravians, the motivation for mission stemmed from the influence of German Pietism, a renewal movement that stressed the importance of cultivating deep feeling for God. For many, mission was linked to global trade as chaplains accompanied European traders around the world. For a few, such as the Puritan settlers in New England, missionary work was a secondary feature of their efforts to avoid religious persecution.

What all these groups lacked, however, was a systematic, biblically based way of thinking about their missionary practices. For modern readers who take for granted the importance of biblical texts like the Great Commission found in Mark 16, Matthew 28, or Acts 1, it may come as a shock to learn that a biblical rationale for missionary work did not emerge until 1792, when an English cobbler named William Carey penned a short volume (with a long title) called *An Enquiry into the Obligation of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens*.²² With Carey's biblically reasoned approach, which stressed that Christ's Great Commission applied to all Christians and not simply the apostles, Protestant involvement in cross-cultural mission turned a corner.

²⁰Scott W. Sunquist, *Understanding Christian Mission: Participation in Suffering and Glory* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 79-80.

²¹Dale T. Irvin and Scott W. Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2012), 2:356-58.

²²This was only the first portion of the title, the rest of which read: *In Which the Religious State of the Different Nations of the World, the Success of Former Undertakings and the Practicability of Further Undertakings, Are Considered*. For more on Carey's tract, see Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 245-47, and Sunquist, *Understanding Christian Mission*, 80-81.

Following Carey's groundbreaking *Enquiry* and the subsequent formation of independent missionary societies like the London Missionary Society, Protestant missions—and the church planting that almost always accompanied it—experienced a century of dramatic growth.²³ But even as Protestant missionary efforts expanded, the rationale for mission remained tied to a handful of proof texts, the most notable of which was always the Great Commission. This remained the case for over a century following Carey's groundbreaking work. The entire missionary task of the church hinged on a handful of biblical texts pulled from their context and lumped into a list.

It was only the church's discovery of the *missio Dei* in the second half of the twentieth century that propelled a more sustained, more holistic approach to identifying traces of God's mission throughout all of Scripture. As noted above, while British voices like Newbigin and Stott initially pointed toward this type of hermeneutic, or way of reading the biblical text, it was David Bosch who provided the most important early work in this direction. Yet as influential as Bosch's mission-centric reading of Scripture was, it came with significant shortcomings. Most notable among them was his relative neglect of the Old Testament as a missional document. In 2006 the British Old Testament scholar Christopher J. Wright published a massive text that addressed this glaring lacuna in Bosch's work head on. Wright's *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* provided a nearly six-hundred-page defense of the centrality of the *missio Dei* in both the New and Old Testaments. Wright's background as an Old Testament scholar enabled him to place the major emphasis of his book on God's missional nature and Israel's missional call in the Old Testament. For Wright it was not simply the imperatives (commands) like the Great Commission that pointed toward the mission of God; the indicative (narrative) portions of Scripture also gestured toward God's unfolding mission.²⁴ Israel was a called-out people, sent out as a priestly nation for the sake of the world.

Like Bosch's earlier work, Wright's missional reading of Scripture provided a new landmark in missional theology. The idea that the entire Bible was a missionary text inspired by a missionary God raised the stakes by making the *missio Dei* and the missional church movement it inspired not merely a biblical side story but the centerpiece of the entire narrative. Since then a widening circle of scholars including N. T. Wright and Joel B. Green have weighed in in favor of a missional hermeneutic. What stands out about this hermeneutical approach is its ability to make sense of the diversity of the canon within the unity of the *missio Dei*. In a

²³On Carey and the rise of missionary societies, see Walls, *Missionary Movement*, 241-54.

²⁴Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 61.

fragmented, sound-bite age, this coherence makes for a welcome and empowering approach. Most importantly, the idea of a Scripture-encompassing hermeneutic actually seems to fit well within the approach of the resurrected Jesus, who supplemented the apostles' post-resurrection experience of him with a biblical hermeneutic that demonstrated how the entirety of Hebrew Scripture pointed to the fact that Israel's God had planned all along to send himself, *via* his Suffering Servant, to his people. By emphasizing the Bible's holistic focus on the centrality of the *missio Dei*, modern advocates of a missional hermeneutic are doing much the same thing.

MISSIONAL SENSIBILITIES, MISSIONAL STORIES

So far, this chapter has focused on exploring the historical, theological, and scriptural basis for grounding our efforts as church planters in the *missio Dei*. As essential as this theological orientation is, theology—even good theology—divorced from action is not enough. Time and time again Scripture directs God's people to *know* God and then *live* in light of that knowledge (e.g., the Shema, Ten Commandments, Great Commandment). These twin imperatives still apply to us as twenty-first-century church planters. Orthodoxy (right belief) and orthopraxy (right practice) go together. To return to our earlier agricultural analogy, sustained growth and reproduction take good soil (theology) but also require good gardening practice. Weeds grow without cultivation, but good things usually take more intentionality. In light of this we are left with two primary questions: How do we intentionally cultivate the eyes, ears, and hearts that can *discern* the ways in which God is carrying out his mission in our communities, and then how do we equip ourselves and the communities we are leading to *participate* in what we see God doing?

On a basic level, answering these two questions is the project of the rest of this book. Each of the coming chapters builds on the theological foundation of the *missio Dei* by pointing to ways in which church planters and church communities can practically discern and intentionally participate in the unfolding mission of God. The scope of this chapter cannot possibly encompass the wide variety of ways in which an understanding of God's missional character informs and undergirds all our efforts to follow this sending God as individuals and local churches. What it can do is point to the importance of some *missional sensibilities* that prepare us to discern and participate in the mission of God in our community.

Missional sensibilities. Over the years I have found myself drawn time and time again to the story of Jesus' healing of the demon possessed boy in Mark 9:14-29. From the goodness and power of Jesus to the father's heartfelt plea, "I believe; help my unbelief" (ESV), there is a lot to love in this story. I have always had a deep appreciation

for the plight of the disciples as they struggle in the face of desperate need. While Jesus is up on the Mount of Transfiguration with his inner circle, the rest of the disciples are trying desperately to help a boy in the throes of demonic possession. It is loud and chaotic, and a crowd is gathering. The disciples have experienced success in similar circumstances before (Mark 6:7-13), but this time their efforts fall flat. The boy is not healed, and the crowd takes note. Eventually, Jesus comes and saves the day, and the disciples are left asking what went wrong. I have always had a lot of sympathy for their question: “Why could we not cast it out?” Jesus answers by saying, “This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer” (Mark 9:28, 29 ESV).

Easy enough, right?

No way! If you’ve ever been in a situation in which you felt you were completely in over your head, you can identify with the disciples here. You know that nothing drives us to prayer like emergencies, especially when a crowd of people is watching. My guess is that quite a few prayers were offered up in that moment as the crowd pressed in and the boy’s condition remained the same. What it seems the disciples lacked was a lifestyle of prayer—the kind of lifestyle of connection and intimacy with the Father that Jesus embodied. When Jesus showed up he did not have to drop to his knees in that moment because he was steeped in prayer. Prayer was the fabric of his life, a habit of the heart built intentionally over a long time.

Sports offer an analogy that can help us understand what seems to be the difference between the disciples and Jesus in this account. I love sports and spent much of the first twenty years of my life playing sports, especially basketball. As a young athlete, I always wanted to get through the portion of practice that involved drills as fast as I could in order to get to the “real” practice, the end-of-practice scrimmage. Growing up I always assumed that as one advanced to higher levels of competition at some point practices would pretty much consist entirely of scrimmage time. Imagine my surprise when I stepped into my first collegiate basketball practice and found we did *more* drills than in high school! Time and time again my college coach used the term *muscle memory* to emphasize that we did repetitive, sometime very basic drills to train our bodies to do the right thing by habit. By building intentionality into our everyday practice lives, we were actually freed up to live in the moment during the game. Our bodies knew what to do. Good habits had become second nature. If I had been free to follow my own inclination to downplay drills and devote all my time to playing games of pick up, or even an organized scrimmage, I never would have been ready for the real game. One cannot develop muscle-memory on the spot or by focusing only on the big picture or the end result. Developing muscle memory requires that we devote sustained, repeated attention to the small things.

A spiritual version of muscle memory is what we are aiming for in our Christian lives and in our work as church planters. We want the ways of Jesus to become second nature. This means that we work to make things like the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23) or traits like mercy, justice, and humility (Mic 6:8) habitual practices that shine through even in our knee-jerk reactions. Similarly, we prepare ourselves to participate in the mission of God by developing missional sensibilities based around what we see first in the life of Jesus and the testimony of Scripture, but also in the lives of those who have learned to follow in the way of Jesus. We can start developing this sensibility by asking a question like, What traits does Jesus develop to help him stay firmly grounded within his Father's mission? We've already mentioned prayer. Jesus spent a great deal of time communicating with his Father, both talking *and listening*, so that he learned to hear and clearly recognize his Father's voice. This was a practice that he, the Good Shepherd, then urged his followers to develop too—"his sheep follow him because they know his voice" (Jn 10:4). Jesus also cultivated eyes capable of *seeing* the ways in which his Father was going about his mission in the world. Jesus then turned this act of seeing into practice. "Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing" (Jn 5:19). Jesus saw what his Father was doing and then he joined in.

By listening to his Father's voice and watching what his Father did Jesus also developed a heart capable of feeling what the Father would have him feel. Sometimes this meant that Jesus' heart felt anger in the face of blatant injustice and corruption (Lk 19:45-48; 20:45-47). More often, however, having a heart shaped by the concerns of his Father entailed feelings of compassion and mercy. With a heart attuned to his Father's loving, missional heart Jesus could extend mercy to social outcasts in one moment (Lk 19:1-10) while weeping over the city that would soon prosecute him unjustly (Lk 19:41-42) or praying for the forgiveness of the very people who murdered him in the next (Lk 23:34). Jesus had seen his Father in action and heard his Father's voice for years. All of this shaped his heart, conforming his sensibilities and his actions to those of his Father. When the moment of decision, crisis, or opportunity came he was ready.

If we are going to be missional church planters who can help the communities God has called us to lead into discernment of and participation in the *missio Dei*, we have to develop missional sensibilities that become the disciplines of our individual and community lives. There is no better place to look for these sensibilities than in Jesus. So what do we see Jesus doing?

Jesus cultivated a lifestyle of prayer. Everything starts with prayer. As noted above, prayer was not simply something Jesus did from time to time. Prayer was a practice

that made up the fabric of Jesus' life in a way that the Gospel writers wanted to be sure no one would miss. Time and time again they highlight Jesus' practice of retreating into silence and solitude (e.g., Mk 1:35; 6:46; Lk 6:12). By repeatedly emphasizing this, they demonstrate that prayer was not an occasional retreat from the real world or a threat to building the momentum of a successful ministry. What we see instead is an emphasis on prayer as the source of Jesus' connection with the heart and mission of his Father and the source of his fortitude in the face of temptation and looming despair. A key part of Jesus' prayer life was his ability to take time not just to talk to God but also to *listen*. When he had to choose his twelve disciples, he stayed up all night praying, listening for God to tell him whom to choose (Lk 6:12-16).

This type of sustained, listening prayer is essential for us as missional church planters. So often we develop good missional theologies that emphasize God's ongoing mission in this world and then act as if God does not want to communicate with us about it. We have a fully formed trinitarian theology and pneumatology, but we easily become practical deists with what amounts to a clockmaker God who winds the clock and then walks away. A deistic God is not a sending God. We cannot afford to transform the living and active God into a benign, unknowable force. When we neglect a life of listening prayer, this is exactly what we do. Discerning and participating in God's mission in the on-the-ground realities of our local context requires that we cultivate ears to hear the voice of God's Spirit in our midst.

Jesus was at home in Scripture. Jesus did not only hear the voice of God in prayer. Throughout his ministry Jesus demonstrated that his ability to understand the mission of his Father also stemmed from his deep knowledge of Scripture. Throughout the Gospels Jesus constantly made reference to Scripture, often, as in the Sermon on the Mount or during his temptation or crucifixion, he even quoted portions of the Hebrew Bible by heart. During his moments of deep testing, Scripture functioned as his compass for discerning the truth in the midst of the enemy's lies. When Jesus was seeking to define his mission, it was Isaiah's account of God's servant that he turned to. Even as a young boy, Jesus confounded the religious leaders of his day with his knowledge of Scripture. When he was on the verge of death, Jesus quoted from Psalm 22. The soundtrack of Jesus' life and ministry was Scripture. From the first to the last, Jesus' life and ministry were defined by his familiarity with God's story and God's voice as recorded in the Torah and the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures.

If Jesus, the one human being who had a perfect connection with God, relied heavily on Scripture in times of trial and in the framing of his participation in God's mission, how could we expect to be able to really hear God and understand his

mission in the world apart from a deep knowledge of Scripture? It is Scripture that helps us learn to recognize the Shepherd's voice in our prayerful listening and the Shepherd's ways as we discern how God is carrying out his mission in our world. Through stories, poetry, commands, and direct teaching, Scripture builds our missional sensibilities by alerting us to major themes that have defined God's mission from the beginning. Scripture presents us with a God who models covenant faithfulness, compassion, grace, and righteousness, a God who draws near by sending his Son and his Spirit. Scripture gives us stories to fuel our missional imagination. Scripture gives us words to speak that are founded on a rock that is higher and more secure than we'll ever be.

Thus, like listening prayer, regular engagement with Scripture is essential if we hope to develop the ability to discern the ways the unchanging God adapts his mission to a dizzying array of contexts. We should not only read Scripture but sit with it, even memorize large passages of it, so that it is woven into the fabric of our hearts. This is the way of Jesus. Jesus did not pull out his scroll or concordance (or iPhone!) when he was tempted in the desert or as he languished on the cross. No, Scripture had made its way into Jesus' heart. This scriptural awareness made all the difference as Jesus discerned the contours of his Father's mission and then participated confidently in what his Father was already doing.

Jesus walked the streets. And participate he did! Jesus' life was lived in total and perfect participation with the mission of his Father. We see this especially in the three years of his life and public ministry that are documented in the Gospel accounts. Like Jesus' intentionality in the area of prayer and scriptural awareness, Jesus' actions provide us as church planters with a helpful example of how we might set about the process of discerning what God is doing in our communities and how we as individuals and congregations might meaningfully join in. As with the first two points, this is not really new, but it is often deemphasized or simply neglected in favor of canned strategies or less time-intensive means.

As simple as it sounds, walking the streets was one of the missional practices that Jesus seems to have used to both discern and participate in his Father's mission. At this point you may be thinking, Give me a break. Jesus walked the streets because he lived in the first century, not because walking has some inherent value. Perhaps you are right. Maybe today Jesus would have a car or even a private jet (!) to carry his rabbinical entourage. But it is not just the fact that Jesus walked that matters. The *way* he walked is also significant. That walking was more than simply a means of transportation for Jesus can be seen in his willingness to be interrupted. Jesus' journeys were full of interruptions of all kinds. From a Roman centurion and

chronically diseased people to religious rulers, hungry crowds, faith-filled mothers, and annoying (at least to the disciples) children, Jesus chose most frequently to travel in a way that kept the realities of life before his eyes, in his ears (and nose, I might add), and sometimes directly in his path. This practice helped him translate what he heard in prayer and read in Scripture into tangible participation as he joined in the kingdom-centered mission his Father was working on the ground.

Jesus knew his context. Walking the streets also helped ensure that Jesus, like any good sent one (i.e., missionary), knew his context. What motivated people in first-century Palestine? What fears plagued their imaginations? What thoughts fueled their hopes? How did they see themselves in relation to their neighbors both next door and across the border? What hardships did they face? By refusing to sequester himself in a quiet corner (or rabbinical study), Jesus opened himself up to experiencing the real condition of the places and people he encountered as he journeyed. What first-century Jewish man would spend time talking to a Samaritan woman? Jesus (Jn 4). What rabbi would make time for a late-night chat with a member of a religious group that hated him? Jesus (Jn 3). What rabbi would let a ceremonially unclean woman touch him and offer healing and grace rather than rebuke? Jesus (Mk 5:25-34).

Being out among the people his Father had called him to serve allowed Jesus to know their hearts and participate in God's mission among them in a way they were able to understand. His parables referenced agriculture, family, indebtedness, and other realities of their lives. His teachings were geared to the religious and political context of his times. He who had been forced to flee Herod's wrath knew the weight of Roman oppression and unjust rulers first hand. He who had been in the temple among the moneychangers and sectarian feuds of the religious elite knew the corruption of the systems that dominated first-century Jewish life. He knew the way all these realities fueled the people's messianic hopes—hopes that could work both for or against God's mission depending on how they were turned. If God's people could discern and participate in God's mission, these hopes could bring life. If God's people got impatient or failed to discern God's plan correctly, the results could be devastating.

Jesus trusted in God. In the face confusion, oppression, and violence, Jesus drew on the missional sensibilities that had defined his entire life to discern what his Father was doing and then participate in that action with faithfulness and clarity. Even then Jesus did not get the immediate results many of us would hope for or even expect if we successfully managed to discern God's mission in our communities and act accordingly. This is at once a freeing, sobering, and sometimes perplexing reality. As church planters in twenty-first-century contexts, success often seems to mean fast

results and more seats filled every week. Success for Jesus meant something different. It meant faithfulness, faithfulness to God and faithfulness to persevere in our call as ministers of his gospel. Jesus demonstrated and called his disciples to cultivate “a long obedience in the same direction” because of one primary fact: He knew and trusted his Father.²⁵ Even with perfect discernment of and participation in his Father’s mission, Jesus’ ministry did not seem to meet with sustained success. Indeed, the major stage of his public ministry ended with a trusted friend betraying him, his right-hand man denying him, and his own people handing him over to be killed by an oppressive foreign regime. Nothing pointed to success—at least not before Easter, and even then some, like Thomas, had doubts. Jesus, however, was able to keep his bearings because his hope was in his Father, the only one who could truly measure success.

Missional stories. Of course, Jesus’ apparent lack of immediate success is relatively easy to talk about now, over two thousand years removed from the events that shaped the life of God-made-flesh. But the story still matters. It still has power to orient our efforts. Now after two millennia of church history we have a treasure chest of stories of others who have followed the story of Jesus’ participation in God’s mission. People like Paul, who called the church to imitate him as he imitated Christ by cultivating a life of prayer, a deep Scriptural awareness, a willingness to mingle with people on the streets and thereby understand his context, all the while trusting himself and his success to God alone. Church history is full of stories like this. From Francis of Assisi’s missionary trip across Crusade battle lines to the throne of the sultan in 1219, to the efforts of missionaries like Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) in Imperial China, Jean de Brebeuf (1593–1649) in Canada, and Sadhu Sundar Singh (1889–1929) and Amy Carmichael (1867–1951) in India. Of course, this only hints at the great “cloud of witnesses” (Heb 12:1) that have lived lives defined by long-term faithfulness to God and compassion for the cultural sensibilities and individual needs of those they met. How many more have lived faithful lives attuned to the sensibilities of a missional God in their local churches, villages, and daily lives? Their stories seldom register on our modern scales of success, but their faithfulness is not lost on God or those their lives touched. Whether known by many or few, their missional stories continue to ripple out, impacting eternity in a myriad of ways.²⁶

²⁵Eugene Peterson introduced this phrase to the English-speaking Christian world in 1980. He got it from Friedrich Nietzsche and applied it Christian discipleship; see Eugene H. Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society*, 20th anniversary ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 17.

²⁶For instance, colonial missionary David Brainerd could never have imagined that the biography Jonathan Edwards wrote about his brief but faithful and passionate missionary experience would never go out of print and would influence an English cobbler named William Carey, who would eventually be known as the father of modern mission.

As church planters, part of our calling is to know, tell, and add our own local narratives to these stories. Building on a theology that takes into account the triune, sending God who remains actively committed to carrying out his mission in the world, we move forward by committing ourselves to discerning God's mission in our local communities and then participating in it. We are sent people. We are Spirit-empowered people. We are listening people. We are scriptural people. We are people who walk the sidewalks and country roads where we live and take time to know the names, needs, and hearts of our neighbors. In it all we entrust ourselves to God. It is his mission, not ours. May his kingdom come, may his will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In what ways have we sensed God moving in our community?
2. What practices can we develop to help us better discern the heart of God for our context and the local needs?
3. Do we balance a missional hermeneutic with a missional pneumatology? If not, which comes more naturally to us?
4. What stories have shaped our individual lives, worshiping community, and local context?

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