

The Missional Movement

Clarion

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what's inside

Does the church do *mission work* or is the church simply *missional*? That's one of the many questions that have arisen in recent years as the ideas of the missional movement have made their way into Reformed churches, including those of our own federation. While a missional church model has developed in Reformed settings in the last couple of decades or so, the roots of missional thinking go back to at least the 1950s and the writings of Lesslie Newbigin. In this special theme issue we take time to dig into some of the key ideas of certain influential missional thinkers in order to begin to understand and evaluate missional thinking. However, as I try to convey in my editorial, it's important to note up front that Reformed missional efforts may not be following these thought leaders in every respect, and so care must be taken to understand each other well as we discuss these matters among ourselves.

To help us get a grip on some main missional thinkers we are thankful to present the following articles: Arjan DeVisser on Newbigin's core ideas, Reuben Bredenhof on Christopher J.H. Wright's contributions, Cornelis Klein on key ideas in Alan Hirsch's thinking, Wes Bredenhof on how Mike Goheen works out the missional concept, and finally myself on James Hunter and Tim Keller's promotion of something called "faithful presence." We hope that these pieces will invite conversation across our federation about all things related to mission, and that ideas for improving our efforts can be shared.

To help further such conversations, you'll also find several articles on current Reformed mission efforts, both domestic and foreign. You'll read about Chris Boersema's mission aid work in Brazil, Eric Watkin's church planting in Florida, Bethel church's outreach experiences in Toronto, and Tim Schouten's reflections on how the whole church may engage in mission work with peace. May the Lord make us all increasingly zealous to "go and make disciples of all nations!"

Also, don't miss the story of a persecuted sister rescued from Iran or Jake Torenvliet's advent meditations or the God-given strength of spirit of a special young woman named Ava. Enjoy your reading!

Peter Holtvliuwer

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To equip God's people for his glory, in faithfulness to Scripture, as summarized in the Reformed confessions, Clarion adheres to the following core values:

Confessionally Reformed
Loving in manner
Attuned to current issues
Readable and Reliable
In Submission to Scripture
Open to constructive criticism
Nurturing Christian living

MISSIONAL TALK

Whoever begins to dig into the missional movement will soon discover that it has its own distinct vocabulary—and this can be confusing. There are new terms like “incarnational ministry” and “missional” itself, but there are also a number of terms which are very familiar in Reformed circles. The challenge is that when such terms are used in missional settings, you might think you know what is meant only to realize later on that some words are being used with a different meaning. As missional church practices are being considered and discussed in our federation, it’s important that we learn to understand how terms are being used so that we don’t speak *past* each other but *with* one another.

CHURCH

For instance, for many readers the basic definition of “church” is well understood. It is based on our confession that the catholic, or universal, church “is a holy congregation and assembly of the true Christian believers, who expect their entire salvation in Jesus Christ, are washed by his blood, and are sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit” (Belgic Confession, Art 27). This church is recognized by three well-known marks: pure preaching, pure administration of the sacraments, and Christian discipline (Art 29). The church is separate from the world. As the church reaches out to the community with the gospel, by God’s grace some people come in and join the church.

But missional leader Alan Hirsch defines the church this way: “a community of God’s people that defines itself, and organizes itself around, its real purpose of being an agent of God’s mission to the world” (*The Forgotten Ways*, 82). This seems quite different from the Belgic Confession. For Hirsch, mission is not just an *activity* of the church but rather it belongs to “our essential *identity* as God’s people” (82, emphasis added). Each way of thinking about the church has consequences and a practical outworking for mission work.

MISSION

Hirsch’s definition of church relates closely to the way “mission” is defined by missional writer Christopher J.H. Wright: “It is not so much the case that God has a mission for his church in the world, as that God has a church for his mission in the world.” According to Wright, the church, by its very nature, in all aspects of its existence, is working out the mission of God.

Again, this seems different from what we find, for instance, in our Church Order, which speaks about how the “churches shall

endeavour to fulfil their missionary task” (Art 51). In our Form for the Ordination of Missionaries we state, “It is the calling of the church, through this testimony of the apostles [i.e. the preaching of the gospel], to move people to believe in Christ crucified. From the time of the apostles, the Holy Spirit has commanded the church to set men apart for the work to which he has called them” (*Book of Praise*, 622). Mission would appear to be presented as *one* of the church’s tasks—no doubt a key one—but the same Church Order and Forms lay out other tasks of the church as well, such as the ministry of mercy (via deacons) and shepherding the flock (via elders).

DISCUSSING DIFFERENCES

So, clearly there are differences in understanding foundational terms when it comes to our task to make disciples of all nations. Are these differences incompatible? That’s part of what needs discussing. The other part is: when Reformed folk take over missional ideas and practices, are they making any distinctions from missional leaders like Hirsch, Wright, or others? Do they make any adjustments? Certainly, Reformed people are capable of taking on good, biblically sound ideas from within a movement and incorporating them into church life while leaving aside the problematic or objectionable bits. As we discuss these matters in our church community, let’s not assume that where the term “missional” is used that everything from that movement has been imported.

It’s so important to seek to understand one another and not make assumptions up front. It’s clear that everyone wants to find ways to share the gospel of Jesus Christ with our neighbours at home and abroad, a challenge the church has been working out since the Lord gave us his Great Commission. So let’s talk together, listen well, work to grasp what is being said, define our terms, exchange ideas, and together search the Scriptures as ideas and strategies are considered. From all sides, let’s be open to both change and critique, using the light of Scripture to guide us while praying for the wisdom that comes from above. 



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Lesslie Newbigin:

FATHER OF THE MISSIONAL MOVEMENT

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Lesslie Newbigin is considered the father of the missional movement. He worked as a missionary in India for almost forty years. During that time, he played a role in the unification of various denominations that resulted in the formation of the Church of South India. At the international level, he was active in the World Council of Churches. After retiring and returning to the United Kingdom in the 1970s, Newbigin started a second career as a theologian and author. He became known as a critic of modern

western culture and a prophetic voice that encouraged the church to stand firm and live up to its missionary calling.

Already before Newbigin's death in 1998, people were writing books and dissertations about him, and during the last few decades many more have been published. Michael Goheen's doctoral dissertation on Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology was published in 2000. Goheen has since written and spoken on Newbigin on many occasions. He followed this up with the book *The Church and*

Its Vocation: Lesslie Newbigin's Missionary Ecclesiology (Baker Academic, 2018).

For the purpose of this article, I have used Goheen's book as a window into the theological views of Newbigin, especially his missionary ecclesiology. I have also consulted two books by Newbigin himself: *Foolishness to the Greeks* (1986) and *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (1989).

UNIQUENESS OF CHRIST

An aspect of Newbigin's writing that we can appreciate is his defense of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as the Saviour of mankind. We see this, for example, when Newbigin described his position as "exclusivist in the sense that it affirms the unique truth of the revelation in Jesus Christ" (*Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 182). He rejected the kind of inclusivism which regards non-Christian religions as vehicles of salvation. It was courageous on Newbigin's part to take this position. It must not have been easy to defend the uniqueness of Jesus Christ within the circles of the World Council of Churches at a time when pluralism was gaining the upper hand. Although Newbigin's struggle in the World Council of Churches did not have the desired effect, we can appreciate that he spoke up against the views of pluralists like John Hick and Paul Knitter.

WESTERN CULTURE

Another aspect of Newbigin's writing that we can appreciate is his ability to analyze modern western culture, as he did for example in *Foolishness to the Greeks* (1986). Having lived and worked in India for close to forty years, Newbigin was able to see western culture with the eyes of a foreign missionary. He considered western culture to be the most dangerous foe the church has ever faced (Goheen, 164). He also judged western culture to be more resistant to the gospel than any other culture in the world (165). In Newbigin's judgment, the church in the west has become syncretistic: "Instead of confronting our culture with the gospel, we are perpetually trying to fit the gospel into our culture" (167). Newbigin offered a penetrating analysis of modern western culture: how it has been influenced by the Enlightenment, how it has relegated religion to the category of values (not facts), and how it is based on hidden faith assumptions even though it claims to be neutral and objective. In sum, Newbigin did a good job unmasking western culture as idolatry.

SALVATION

This brings us to a key aspect of Newbigin's theology: his view of salvation. It is here that we start to feel that Newbigin moves outside the boundaries of confessional Christian faith. Goheen

observes that Newbigin wanted to stay away from an individualistic understanding of salvation, as if salvation were limited to the personal salvation of individual people. Newbigin would not deny that there is some truth in this, but he would insist that "this is an entirely too reductionistic view of the gospel" (Goheen, 41).

Newbigin describes the gospel message in much broader terms. In his view, it is a message "about the fullest revelation and the final accomplishment of the end of universal history—the comprehensive restoration of all creation and the whole of human life in the kingdom of God—present and coming in history in Jesus Christ and by the Spirit's power" (Goheen, 42). The biblical support for this view is taken from the announcement by Jesus, made at the outset of his public ministry: "The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:14–15). But what is the kingdom of God? In Newbigin's view, the kingdom of God consists in *corporate and cosmic renewal*. In Newbigin's words, the very essence of salvation is "that it is corporate and cosmic, the restoration of the broken harmony between all men and between man and God and man and nature" (p. 59).

Newbigin's view of salvation contains biblical aspects but, in my estimation, the emphasis is problematic. It appears that Newbigin's aversion against an individualistic understanding of salvation has caused him to be one-sided. He focuses on Christ's announcement of the kingdom and interprets this in very broad terms ("cosmic renewal"). But he says little about the atonement, the need for personal faith in Christ, the promise of forgiveness of sin and guilt, the promise of indwelling by the Spirit, and the coming wrath of God for those individuals who do not repent. I am aware that one should be careful with criticizing a theologian for what he is *not* saying. At the same time, when certain aspects are always highlighted and other aspects largely ignored, things get out of sync.

In this regard, I found Goheen's observation to be revealing: "Newbigin does *not* move from Christ to the application of Christ's work and the distribution of various salvific benefits to individuals" (Goheen, 54; emphasis added). This is illustrated by Newbigin's discussion of the work of the Spirit. Goheen observes that Newbigin describes the work of the Spirit in eschatological, missional, and communal terms. While Newbigin acknowledges that Christ's work brings benefits to individual people, Goheen nevertheless feels that Newbigin's references to the Spirit's work in individuals are "infrequent" at best (54).

ELECTION

Another aspect of Newbigin's theology that needs scrutiny is his understanding of election. In his book *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, Newbigin devoted a chapter to this theme entitled "The Logic of Election." Here Newbigin takes pains to point out that the doctrine of election should not be understood as some people having a privileged status before God while others don't have that status. He said: "To be chosen, to be elect, does not mean that the elect are the saved and the rest are the lost" (*Gospel in Pluralist Society*, p. 86).

One wonders how Newbigin would feel about the statement in the Canons of Dort that election is the purpose of God whereby, before the foundation of the world, out of the whole human race, *he has chosen in Christ to salvation a definite number of specific persons...* (Ch. 1, Art. 7; emphasis added). Once again, Newbigin seems to be fighting against what he considers to be an individualistic view of salvation.

What, then, is Newbigin's own understanding of election, stated in positive terms? In his view, "to be elect in Christ Jesus means to be incorporated into his mission to the world . . ." (*The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 86–87). It seems to me that this is a reductionist view of election. To be God's elect means more than being sent on a mission! It means to be adopted as sons of God through Jesus Christ (Eph 1:5)—this sets the elect apart from the lost. Our Lord himself, in the prayer that is recorded by the apostle John, said that the Father had given him authority "to give eternal life to all whom you have given him" (John 17:2).

CHURCH

Newbigin's view of salvation and election influences his understanding of the nature of the church and its calling in the world. Goheen quotes a statement by Newbigin to the effect that the church "does not exist for itself or for what it can offer its members" (Goheen, 122). Rather, the church exists to carry out God's mission in the particular place in which it is set. When the apostle Paul writes to the church in Corinth or Ephesus, Newbigin takes this to imply that the church exists *for* Corinth, *for* Ephesus, etc. The church must be church "for its particular place" (123). This does not mean that the church simply goes along with the world. Rather, the church will live in a painful tension: the church is *for* the world and identifies with the world; at the same time the church is *against* the world and confronts its idolatry. Newbigin has a high view of the calling of the church: The church has to claim the high ground of public truth. It is called to represent the kingdom of God in the life of society (*Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 222, 226). In order to do this, the church will be "a community that

does not live for itself but is deeply involved in the concerns of its neighborhood" (239).

We can appreciate Newbigin's call to the church to be relevant and active and to confront the world. At the same time, he seems to be overstating the case when he says that the church exists "for" the place where it is planted. The church exists for God and for its Saviour, and therefore it is called to build itself up to the measure of the fullness of the stature of Christ (Eph 4:13). The church should not feel guilty when it invests lots of time and energy in the edification of its members, worship, pastoral work, and diaconal work. After all, the church is the bride of Christ. He gave himself up for her, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish (Eph 5:27). In other words, the church is not merely an instrument in the hands of the Lord to reach the world! God gave Christ as head over all things to the church, which is "his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all" (Eph 1:22,23).

CONCLUSION

In sum, we can appreciate that Newbigin defended the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as Saviour of mankind. We can also appreciate his efforts to unmask the idolatrous nature of western culture and the task of the church to take a firm stand on this. There is a lot that is good about his call to the church to reclaim its missionary calling. At the same time, Newbigin's views of salvation and election are lacking in biblical balance. His aversion against a so-called "individualistic" view of salvation goes hand in hand with a view of the church that sees its *raison d'être* mainly in what it does for the world. The church fathers and the Reformers (see Calvin's *Institutes*, Part 4) were more balanced and emphasized that the church is called to be the "mother of believers." She is called to nurture her children! As a result, we cannot help but draw the conclusion that there are significant weaknesses in Newbigin's ecclesiology. 



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The Great Story and the Great Commission



PARTICIPATING
in the BIBLICAL DRAMA of MISSION

CHRISTOPHER J. H. WRIGHT

Mission Drift

REUBEN BREDENHOF

The Great Story and the Great Commission. Christopher J. H. Wright. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2023, 156 pages. \$29.49.

Have you noticed how words lose impact by overuse? Take the word “journey.” It has become a catch-all for personal experiences, like a “fitness journey,” or a “grief journey,” even a “skin care journey.” As a metaphor, it has become almost meaningless.

The same thing can happen to theological words. Years ago, the missiologist Stephen Neill said: “If everything is mission, nothing is mission.” That is, if we use the term mission to describe all kinds of church activities, like fighting abortion, teaching Scripture, and alleviating poverty, we deplete the force of the word—and, more seriously, we might neglect what God intended mission to be.

Neill’s dictum kept echoing in the back of my mind as I read Christopher Wright’s recent book *The Great Story & the Great Commission*. In it, Wright wants us to see mission as something much larger than gospel proclamation. To make his case, he turns to the classic text for mission, the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18–20.

WHAT IS MISSION?

This isn’t the first book Wright has penned on the theme of mission. Neither is it the only book in which he argues for a broadened understanding of the church’s calling in the world. The present book is an abridgment and restatement of views that Wright has been promoting for decades. In fact, this conversation has been ongoing for years, prompted by people like David Bosch, Michael Goheen, Wright, and others.

There have also been books written in response to their ideas, like *What is the Mission of the Church?* (by Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert—a recommended read, by the way). Wright is well aware of how his views have been critiqued, and in this book he responds to some of the critique. He even refers to how Neill’s

well-known slogan has often been quoted (I’m not the first!) to warn against this expanded view of mission.

So, is Wright persuasive? As a reader, I wanted him to succeed, to put forward an argument that would help the church see the urgency of her task in the present time. And Wright certainly writes with an engaging warmth and passion. There can be little doubt that he loves the gospel, cares for the church, and wants to see restoration in this broken world. But I couldn’t escape the conclusion that his approach could actually weaken the cause of mission as it is presented in Scripture: the verbal proclamation of the gospel of salvation through faith in Christ.

THE BIG STORY AND THE BIG JOB

Before getting there, I should back up and summarize Wright’s approach. In his book, Wright wants to help individual believers and churches integrate their life and witness around the centrality of the gospel and God’s mission. Early on, he explains his use of the term “mission.” He acknowledges that mission can have both a broader and narrower sense. The narrow (and traditional) sense is the church’s announcement of the gospel, while the broad sense refers to the church’s overarching objective—think of being “on a mission.” It’s this latter sense in which Wright uses the term. The Bible is the declaration of the single, overall “mission” of God. His grand purpose from Genesis to Revelation is to rid his whole creation of evil and to create for himself a people who are redeemed from every tribe and nation. It is now the church’s privilege to share in this cosmic mission of God.

In the first few chapters, Wright shows how all of Scripture tells the single story of God’s purpose in this world—this is the “Great Story” of his title. This material is delightful, as Wright argues compellingly for Scripture’s unity and demonstrates that

it tells one coherent story. The story is this: God's mission to bring healing, reconciliation, and unity to the whole creation in and through Christ.

From this "Great Story," Wright turns to the "Great Commission." For a long time, these words at the end of Matthew have been taken as fundamental to the church's mission. In obedience to Christ, the church has gone out to make disciples of all nations, and she has done so by preaching and teaching his gospel. Wright says that, while this is certainly an aspect of the Great Commission, Jesus was mandating us to do other things too. In fact, three interrelated dimensions of missions are implied here: building the church, serving society, and caring for creation. Because all three—church, society, and creation—are broken and suffering because of sin, God includes all three in his redeeming mission (or purpose). Consequently, all three must be part of the comprehensive mission of God's people.

Obedience to Christ's three-fold mission will see his church busy with preaching the gospel, as well as promoting justice and compassion, and living responsibly in God's created world. In other words, the church's mission is doing things like evangelism in our neighbourhoods, fighting human trafficking, and protecting endangered wetlands. Wright argues that all three dimensions of mission flow out of the Great Commission. Mission is everything that we do in Jesus's name to address the needs of this fallen world.

RESPONDING

So, is Wright correct that each of these activities can be drawn from the Great Commission? Without being able to get into detail here, his exegesis of Matthew 28:18-20 is weak in some key respects. For instance, he draws his assertion that ecological action is part of our mission from Jesus's words about "all authority in heaven and on earth" being given to him—that's a big stretch. That Wright has strained the reading of this text might be confirmed by considering how closely his interpretation aligns with what he mentions as (his own denomination) the Anglican Communion's "Five Marks of Mission." Alongside proclaiming the gospel and nurturing new believers, they put loving service, fighting injustice, and safeguarding creation at the core of the church's mission. Strikingly, these five marks correspond with Wright's own (faulty) exegesis.

None of this is to say that Wright diminishes gospel preaching. He affirms that he is utterly committed to the importance of evangelism and church planting through bearing verbal witness to what God has done in Christ. But he insists that evangelism and church planting simply are not all that the Bible includes in the mission of the church. He prefers to speak of the centrality of the gospel

rather than the primacy of evangelism. He insists that the gospel must be the non-negotiable center of all, not in a way that makes the other activities peripheral, but in a way that holds everything together. He laments how the church has taken an overly narrow view of her role in this world: getting people into heaven. Together with Paul, Wright insists that "a knowledge of the truth leads to godliness" (Titus 1:1). That is, a disciple of Christ will always be deeply engaged with the world by serving others, fighting injustice, and being a good steward of creation.

Such godliness, such "salty living," is basic to following Christ. If only we as believers and churches together would grow more deliberate in our witness in this world! And Wright is correct that there are many worthwhile tasks in God's kingdom, not just official preaching or personal evangelism. Each of us should want to see the restoration of all things and the salvation of many sinners.

But *how* will this come about? This is the core weakness of Wright's book. His generalized idea of the church's mission threatens to sideline the real catalyst of life-change and world-change. Only people who have believed in Christ's gospel by the power of his Spirit will live differently. Good things like compassion, justice, and stewardship are all fruits of a deeper root: the gospel's transformation of the sinner's heart.

For this reason, the church must maintain not just the "centrality of the gospel," but the *primacy* of mission and evangelism. God has entrusted preaching to the church, whose purpose it is to declare his praises. It remains the church's unique mandate in this world to send out preachers and teachers of Christ's gospel.

Let's keep a definition of mission that is unique enough to maintain its unique message, and its unique way of being shared in this world

So Stephen Neill was right: to call everything mission reduces the urgency of mission as it has been traditionally—and scripturally—understood. It would be the worst case of mission drift. Let's keep a definition of mission that is unique enough to maintain its unique message, and its unique way of being shared in this world. 



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ALAN HIRSCH & THE FORGOTTEN WAYS

CORNELIS KLEYN

Have you ever wondered why the early church, despite persecution, expanded so rapidly—from as few as 25,000 Christians in AD 100 to as many as 20 million by AD 310? Or how in China, between 1949 (when the communist revolution expelled all missionaries) and the late 1970s (when some returned), the church grew from about 2 million to around 60 million?

These questions about what makes such explosive church growth possible led Alan Hirsch to explore what he calls “Apostolic Genius”: the essential elements behind dynamic, missional movements. Hirsch’s book *The Forgotten Ways* best encapsulates his approach to revitalizing the church for mission.

THE CHURCH IN A POST-CHRISTENDOM WORLD

Hirsch argues that the world today increasingly resembles the world of the early church. Christianity is no longer mainstream or culturally respected, as it had been since the days of Constantine, the first Christian emperor. Though many traditional churches still exist, they are often declining, inward-looking, and overly protective.

Hirsch calls us not to build institutions, but to join in God’s mission. He urges the church to recover and release the power of *Apostolic Genius*, so that the gospel might again spread rapidly in our time. But how does Hirsch propose we do this? And how should we evaluate his suggestions? Below, we’ll examine the six core components of what Hirsch calls the “missional” or “apostolic DNA”:

1. Jesus is Lord
2. Disciple-Making
3. Missional-Incarnational Impulse
4. Liminality and Communitas
5. APEST Culture
6. Organic Systems

1. JESUS IS LORD

Hirsch begins with a critique of the sacred/secular divide common in western Christianity: we go to church on Sundays,

but live “secular” lives the rest of the week. Quoting Abraham Kuyper, he reminds us that: “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, ‘Mine!’”

Hirsch believes that “Jesus is Lord” should be the central creed of the church. He warns that our faith is often buried under doctrinal clutter and competing theological emphases, which obscure this core truth. As he puts it: “There is so much clutter in our religion, so many competing claims, that this central unifying claim that lies at the heart of the faith is easily lost” (*The Forgotten Ways*, 107).

While I agree that our doctrines must not distract from Christ himself, I also affirm the value of the creeds and confessions that articulate our faith. Heretics such as the Pelagians and Arians also confessed that “Jesus is Lord,” yet were rightly excluded from the early church for their false teachings. So, the phrase cannot stand alone as the definitive creed.

However, Hirsch’s concern is a good warning. Reformed churches can sometimes become more fluent in their doctrinal formulations than in Scripture itself, which may limit our engagement with those outside our circles. Doctrine must never become a substitute for devotion. The central question remains: Is Jesus truly Lord over every part of our lives?

2. DISCIPLE-MAKING

The second element of missional DNA focuses on the church’s purpose: not simply to make converts, but *disciples*—people who are becoming like Christ. According to Hirsch, institutional and overly academic leadership often hinders this process. Drawing from his Jewish background, Hirsch contrasts the Hebrew approach of action-oriented mentoring with the Greek preference for theoretical knowledge, conferences, and academic learning.

While I affirm the importance of discipleship, I also ask: is not the glory of God the ultimate purpose of the church, encompassing worship, teaching, service, mercy, and mission? And could Hirsch’s de-emphasis on formal education in leadership potentially

open the door to false teaching—something Scripture repeatedly warns against?

Still, Hirsch's challenge to rethink leadership in terms of discipleship is valid. Are we training members—especially our youth—in the practical obedience Christ commands? Do we, for instance, equip our catechism students to cross cultural boundaries, serve the needy, and share the gospel with confidence?

3. MISSIONAL-INCARNATIONAL IMPULSE

Just as Christ left the comfort of heaven to dwell among us, so we too must step out of our own comfort zones and enter the lives of others. Hirsch argues that churches should move away from “seeker-friendly” attractional models and instead go out to the lost, adapting the church to the context of the community.

Though Hirsch may be too dismissive of traditional church structures, his call to embody the gospel and be present in our communities is biblical. Jesus said, “Go and make disciples,” and Paul wrote, “I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some” (1 Cor 9:22).

How might we be a true blessing to the cities and towns where God has placed us?

4. LIMINALITY AND COMMUNITAS

“Liminality,” in Hirsch's terms, refers to the experience of being pushed out of our comfort zones, which often leads to a deeper sense of mission and unity—what he calls “communitas.” Comfortable, middle-class churches, Hirsch warns, are often too focused on safety, security, and convenience, which undercuts their missional effectiveness.

Of course, the church should provide a nurturing environment for raising children and fostering community. But Jesus also said, “If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you” (John 15:20). Often, when churches prioritize outreach and church planting, they experience trials—but also renewed unity and vitality.

5. APEST CULTURE

Hirsch believes that traditional churches often suffer from rigid, centralized leadership. Instead, he champions what he calls APEST leadership, derived from Ephesians 4:

- **Apostles** – pioneers and visionaries
- **Prophets** – truth-tellers and justice advocates
- **Evangelists** – recruiters and gospel-sharers
- **Shepherds** – pastors and carers
- **Teachers** – instructors and clarifiers of truth

While Hirsch's reading of Ephesians 4 may overextend the text and downplay the biblical roles of elders and deacons (e.g., 1

Timothy 3), he rightly emphasizes the priesthood of all believers and encourages a broader view of church leadership. Churches could benefit from thinking more about the *apostolic* role—those with vision for outreach and multiplication. This might take the form of church planting committees, missionary boards, or an extra minister focused on missional strategy.

6. ORGANIC SYSTEMS

Finally, Hirsch urges churches to adopt flexible and reproducible systems. He criticizes churches that have become overly institutionalized—focused on buildings, budgets, programs, policies, and staff—rather than on mission. Although his critique may at times be too sweeping, Hirsch has a point: biblical metaphors for the church are inherently dynamic—a body, a vine, living stones, yeast, a field. Our structures must *serve* the mission, not *stifle* it. Our long-standing traditions are a gift, including our Church Order, but can we not sometimes be too rigid in how we do things, especially if it begins to undermine Christ's direct commands?

CONCLUSION

As we seek to obey Christ's Great Commission—to “go and make disciples of all nations”—we must recognize that mission is both risky and essential to remaining faithful as the church. Hirsch offers many valuable insights in this regard. Yes, his work is more descriptive than exegetical, often relying on historical case studies and missional models rather than biblical exposition. Yet his six core elements each reflect important truths we should consider seriously:

1. *Do we acknowledge Christ's lordship in every aspect of life?*
2. *Are we actively making disciples, not just converts?*
3. *Are we stepping into the lives of others with the gospel?*
4. *Are we willing to be uncomfortable for the sake of mission?*
5. *Do we empower all members to serve in their gifts?*
6. *Are our structures flexible enough to serve the mission, not hinder it?*

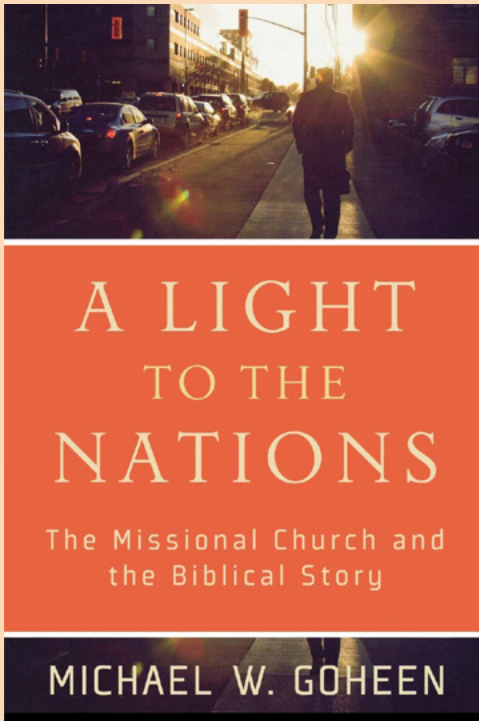
May the Lord give us wisdom as we raise our children for his glory in a secular world—without compromising his call to go and make disciples. The reality of hell is sobering, and the return of our King is certain. Are we preparing for his coming by faithfully seeking the lost and advancing his kingdom? 

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What does it mean to be a **MISSIONAL CHURCH?**

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A Light to the Nations: The Missional Church and the Biblical Story, Michael W. Goheen.
Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011. Softcover, 242 pages. \$34.50.

Over the years, I've often promoted the need for our churches to be missional. When I did that, I came at it from a particular understanding of what "missional" means. Basically, my understanding has been that "missional" means a church that cares about the plight of the lost and looks outward to share the gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ. A missional church wants to bring the good news through preaching and witness so that unbelievers will repent and be saved from the wrath to come, and then also join the church.

I started reading this book thinking it would be along similar lines. I was wrong. After reading *A Light to the Nations*, I've come to see that there is another, quite distinct, understanding of "missional" and I'm not convinced that it is more biblically faithful.

MISSION IS "BEING"

Goheen traces the development of "missionality" through the Old and New Testaments. On the face of it, this seems like a good method. If one were not aware of the background of some of the ideas Goheen introduces along the way, his conclusions might be persuasive.

The definition of mission is crucial. Missiologist Stephen Neill famously quipped, "If everything is mission, then nothing is mission."¹ Goheen quotes Peskett and Ramachandra who wrote, "...mission is not primarily about *going*. Nor is mission primarily about *doing* anything. Mission is about *being*" (p. 25). Similarly, Goheen quotes Martin-Achard, "The evangelisation of the world is not primarily a matter of words and deeds: it is a matter of presence" (Goheen, 47). Lesslie Newbigin was an enormous influence on Goheen (being the subject of his doctoral dissertation) and he is quoted as saying that the church "has no life except in this sending . . . The church's being is in that sending" (116). Finally, discussing the Gospel of Luke, Goheen writes, "For Luke, mission in Jerusalem is not about *going* but about *being*."

Our author attempts to develop this out of the Old Testament fact that Israel was to exist as a contrast community amongst the nations. It was to stand out just in its *being*. Goheen argues that Israel failed in doing this but, where Israel failed, Jesus succeeded, and he now leads his church to take up this missional calling. This fails to take into account, however, all the data relating to the Old Testament era. Acts 14:16, 17:30 and Romans 3:25, for example,

¹ Stephen C. Neill, *Creative Tension* (New York: Doubleday, 1959), 81-82.

reveal that it was God's will to allow the nations to go their own way in the old era while he focussed his attention on Israel as the people from whom the promised Saviour would come. In such an era, there could only be a sort of introductory, or incipient, mission-mindedness amongst God's people, even though there were signs of something bigger coming.

With the inauguration of the new covenant era and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, we see a massive shift, not in only in terms of being a better "contrast community," but especially in terms of becoming an actively outward-looking church in preaching and witnessing. To say it another way, from the Old Testament to the New, there is progress towards *going* and *doing*.

MISSION OF GOD

This idea of being or presence at the core of mission ties directly into another concept: the *missio Dei* (mission of God). This idea developed in the twentieth century out of the dangerous neo-orthodox theology of Karl Barth. It says that mission begins with God in the essence of his being. God determined to send his Son into the world. Thus, mission isn't really about something the church does; rather, it is an attribute of God, deeply rooted in the essence of his being. Since it is essential to God's being, it is essential to our being. There is a kernel of truth in this, inasmuch as God is the one who seeks out the lost. God is the author and primary agent of mission. However, Jack DeJong argued that the idea of *missio Dei* is inadequate, as it "tends to blur the specific mandate given by Christ to his church."² Though mission begins with the eternal decree of the Father, it is historically executed through the mandate of the Son given to the church.

That mandate, known as the Great Commission, is quite under-emphasized in *A Light to the Nations*. It is discussed, to be sure, but it is not central to the book. When it is discussed, we're told that it's not about cross-cultural missions. Liberal theologian Gunther Bornkamm is quoted as saying, "Matthew 28:18ff bears primarily on the life of the church itself, and not on the practice of mission" (Goheen, 114). However, there's nothing in terms of exegesis to support such a bold statement. In fact, what he writes on the next page seems to contradict Bornkamm when it says, "Now the time has come for God's salvation to go to the nations" (115). But then, a few pages later, Goheen quotes Roman Catholic priest Hugo Echegaray writing about the disciples, "He left them free to give responsible form to their mission when, after their

Easter experience, they would face new circumstances, needs, and problems" (118). Or did he commission them simply to preach the gospel with the call to repentance and faith in him?

MISSIONAL CHURCH TODAY

The book concludes with a chapter about what all this might look like today. If being missional is ultimately about being or existing, there is an opening for anything to be missional. So Goheen writes that a contrast community (like Israel was supposed to be) "would be a community of justice in a world of economic and ecological injustice" (Goheen, 209). So, buying carbon credits is missional? This is what Stephen Neill was referring to; what many today would call "mission creep." Everything becomes mission and the one thing that really is mission—proclaiming the gospel of life to the lost—is eclipsed.

Everything becomes mission and the one thing that really is mission—proclaiming the gospel of life to the lost—is eclipsed.

The trouble with *A Light to the Nations* is an old one: the influence of Karl Barth, who in turn influenced Lesslie Newbigin, who in turn influenced Mike Goheen. Some of the more objectionable ideas of Barth and Newbigin (e.g. about the nature and authority of Scripture) seem not to be there, but there are other ideas lingering and they should be problematic for confessionally Reformed readers. If you really want your church to care about the lost in your community, if you want to be missional in that sense, then this isn't the book you're looking for. 



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² J. DeJong, "Even So I Send You – Some Reflections on the Current Missionary Task of the Church – (2)," in *Clarion* 45.21.

Faithful Presence

PETER HOLTVLÜWER



When I first heard someone say, “As Christians we need to be faithfully present in our culture,” I was immediately drawn in. That sounds good! What Christian does not want to be *faithful*? Or *present* among our neighbours?

The expression I heard, however, turned out to be more than a casual one-off. I kept hearing “faithful presence” (or its variants) pop up in conversations, emails, and social media posts from various Reformed Christians. It slowly dawned on me that much of the time the folks using this expression were involved in missional churches and they were using it in a very deliberate way, so I started to look into this concept more deeply. And indeed, it turns out that this simple expression is the tip of a big iceberg of

an idea. “Faithful presence” is the brainchild of Christian sociologist James Davison Hunter and has been popularized especially within the Reformed and Presbyterian world by PCA missional pastor Timothy Keller. Because “faithful presence” is a significant part of Reformed missional thinking and practice, I would like to lay out some of the basics of this concept as promoted by Hunter and Keller and reflect on it in the light of Scripture.

WHAT IS FAITHFUL PRESENCE?

Hunter coined the term “faithful presence” in his 2010 book *To Change the World*.¹ You might recognize Hunter as the fellow who invented an earlier now-famous term, “culture wars,” in his

¹ James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). In a dense read over 336 pages, Hunter offers a profound analysis of American culture and introduces the layered concept of “faithful presence” as the way forward for Christians in this culture. In this article I can only touch on the basics of his findings and his proposed solution.

1991 book of that title. In that book, Hunter describes American society as largely the struggle for dominance between irreconcilable forces: the Christian Right (the orthodox) versus the Christian Left (the progressives). In *To Change the World*, Hunter revisits this struggle and outlines the failure of Christians on either side, or even those anabaptist Christians who withdraw altogether from influencing culture, to adequately pursue “faithfulness in our world” (Hunter, 224). Hunter believes this problem is all the more exacerbated by the fact that the historic Judeo-Christian background of American culture has essentially faded away and in its place has arisen a religious pluralism—a society of multiple beliefs and faiths.

Whereas there once was a time when unbelievers and believers in America shared many assumptions about basic moral and ethical issues (think abortion, homosexuality, euthanasia, gender), that is no longer the case. As Christians, we can find little to no common ground on such matters with our neighbours. So, believers have to find a new way to be “authentically Christian” by learning to exist “within a pluralistic world in which Christianity will never be anything other than one culture among others” (Hunter, 224).

Hunter’s answer is for Christians to chart a new way of existing which he calls being “faithfully present.” Instead of Christians engaging in politics or in high-level, influential institutions in order to affect changes in thinking, policy, and laws leading to a certain Christian worldview shaping (or “dominating”) society, Christians should abandon such efforts and simply enter into ordinary workplaces and be Christian where they are without trying to control the culture. What is the goal of being faithfully present? Hunter summarizes it this way: “Christians are to live toward the well-being of others, not just to those within the community of faith, but to all” (230). Later he calls this seeking the “shalom of God” for everyone (235).

HOW TO BE FAITHFULLY PRESENT

How do Christians go about being faithfully present in a non-Christian, multi-faith environment? By making use of common grace, says Hunter: “People of every creed and no creed have talents and abilities, possess knowledge, wisdom, and inventiveness, and hold standards of goodness, truth, justice, morality, and beauty that are, in relative degree, in harmony with God’s will and purposes. These are all gifts of grace that are lavished on people whether Christian or not” (Hunter, 232). We Christians, then, can enter into workplaces, public committees and boards, neighbourhood associations and the like and effectively work alongside and develop culture with unbelievers who have, like us, been endowed with many good gifts from our Creator.

Hunter finds a biblical model for faithful presence in Jeremiah 29:4–7, especially verse 7: “But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.” The “city” in question is Babylon, Judah’s enemy, which only recently had crushed Jerusalem and dragged thousands of Jews into exile in Babylon. The LORD’s word to them is contrary to what the Jews would have expected: they are *not* to seek to gain control of Babylon, nor be absorbed into it, and much less to isolate themselves, but rather they are to actively seek its welfare. Hunter comments, “As they pursued the shalom of Babylon, God would provide shalom for his people” (277).

ANTITHESIS

Are there challenges in such an approach? Hunter knows there are. On the one hand, we must affirm the goodness of God’s creation and culture making, that “goodness, beauty, and truth remain in this fallen creation” (Hunter, 231). Creation’s goodness is marred by sin but not negated by it. On the other hand, because of the fall into sin, “all human effort falls short of its intended potential, all human aspirations exist under judgment, and all human achievement is measured by the standards of the coming kingdom” (234). This means that Christians must be a “community of resistance” and that in our desire to “honour God in all things and to love our neighbor as ourselves, the church and all its people will challenge all structures that dishonor God, dehumanize people, and neglect or do harm to the creation” (235).

Whatever works against the flourishing of all people under the shalom of God is to be resisted by the church in a “creative and constructive” way. Hunter calls this resistance, “antithesis” (236). Christians are called to live in the tension between affirming the good of culture and resisting its evil in creative ways. Through being faithfully present in this manner, Christians will contribute to the flourishing of all humans.

GETTING PRACTICAL: KELLER

So what does all this look like in a real-world setting? Hunter is the theorist but Tim Keller is the practitioner, the on-the-ground pastor who thought so highly of Hunter’s ideas that he borrowed them and implemented them in his missional church ministry in New York City. In one blog post on how Christians should engage culture, Keller explained:

One of the balances is between the church and Christians living in society. While the mission of the institutional church is to preach the Word and produce disciples, the church must disciple Christians in such a way that they live justly and

integrate their faith with their work. So the church doesn't directly change culture, but it disciples and supports people who do. Another balance has to do with society's cultural institutions. Rather than taking them over, or avoiding them as a corrupting influence, or treating them with indifference—Christians are to be a faithful presence within them.²

Keller gives us more practical insight about being faithfully present in his 2020 book, *Uncommon Ground*.³ With direct reference to Hunter's original thesis, he lays out four practices that provide a beginning for everyday Christians to work out faithful presence. First, "Christians should not overidentify with any particular party or platform" (Keller, 195). While we vote and participate in civil society, including politics, we should not find our identity in either the Left or the Right. We are "resident aliens" in our culture and must find our identity in Christ. Second, "Christians should approach the community around them through a posture of love and service" (196). Third, "Christians should recognize that the gospel subverts rival stories and accounts of reality" (197). The idea here is to be aware that various non-biblical "narratives" in our culture which try to explain reality cannot do so accurately because they are not grounded in the truth which God reveals in Scripture. Since Christians cling to the truth, they can confidently (but not arrogantly) stick to the gospel and eventually the false narratives will be shown for what they are. Fourth, "Christians should reach out to others with humility, patience, and tolerance" (198). Earlier in the book, Keller elaborated on this point by saying that, "People should be humble rather than defensive, should seek to patiently persuade rather than coerce and marginalize, and should tolerate and respect rather than demonize" (29).

APPRECIATION

Taking a step back to look at Hunter and Keller's concept of faithful presence, there is much to appreciate. Our Lord indeed calls us to be salt and light in the world (Matt 5:13) so we may not isolate ourselves but must find ways to interact with our neighbours. Further, God's original "cultural mandate" (Gen 1:28) to be fruitful and fill the earth, subdue it, and have dominion over the animals still applies to all of humanity and especially as Christians we should be eager to obey, to raise up families and develop human culture to the glory of God. Christ is King also of human culture and he is leading us from the *garden* of Eden to the *city* that is from above, the new Jerusalem (Rev 21:2).

It is also true that although our unbelieving neighbours and co-workers have different worldviews and goals than we believers do, there may well be projects, services, technologies, or events that we can jointly participate in for cultural development to serve the well-being of the community. For Reformed Christians to serve on a hospital board, the chamber of commerce, or the local town council, to volunteer at a homeless shelter, participate in improving city parks, or help develop small businesses in the downtown core or the like, all of these have potential for Christians to shine the light of Christ into the world. By our diligent and sacrificial labour, our humble and patient demeanour, as well as by sharing our Christian perspectives, we may indeed both fulfill the cultural mandate and bring good to our neighbours in a way that honours Christ.

BIBLICAL BASIS?

Yet, after reading both authors on faithful presence, I was left with questions. Given that faithful presence is intended to give guidance to Christians in developing *culture*, I would have expected both Hunter and Keller to give attention to Genesis 1:28 (the cultural mandate) as well as the fall into sin and how that impacted man's ability to develop culture. While there are passing references in Hunter's book to the latter, there is virtually no discussion of the former—and Keller seems to follow suit. In fact, the single most important text brought up by either Hunter or Keller is Jeremiah 29:7, which actually is not about culture-building generally but is a very specific command to a very specific generation of Jews at a very unique time in their history. There the LORD calls the Jews to pray for and work for the welfare of one particular city (Babylon) for a limited time (70 years) until the time of God's punishment on his people is complete *and the time for Babylon's destruction is at hand* (Jer 25:12; 29:10). The seeking of Babylon's welfare is not intended for Babylon's flourishing *per se* (as a goal in itself) but is God's chosen tool to revive his beaten and exiled people in order to take them *away* from that city in a few decades. Far from seeking Babylon's flourishing for its own sake, the LORD promised to *destroy* that city (see Is 52:11–12; Ps 137:8).

The specific and time-bound nature of God's Word in Jeremiah 29 exposes a basic weakness in Hunter and Keller's concept of faithful presence: it lacks a robust biblical foundation. Hunter is a sociologist and in the first two-thirds of his book he offers a *sociological* critique of the existing ways in which Christians in the

² <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/coming-together-on-culture-theological-issues/>

³ Timothy Keller and John Inazu, *Uncommon Ground: Living Faithfully in a World of Difference* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2020).



United States have tried to influence the culture and “change the world.” To be sure, his critiques are potent and worth considering. However, he does not evaluate such Christian attempts *on the basis of Scripture* but on the *basis of their effectiveness*. He concludes that all current theories of impacting culture as Christians for long-term change are “fundamentally flawed” because they misunderstand the “nature of culture in its complexity” (pp. 18, 32).

A closely related problem with Hunter’s idea of faithful presence is that it is based on his analysis of *American* culture and seeks to answer an *American* problem. Would faithful presence work in Latin America? South Africa? Pakistan? Russia? Canada? Neither Hunter nor Keller ask such questions. The sociological nature of Hunter’s work so narrowly focussed on one nation—rather than mining the Scriptures for principles intended for *every* culture in *every* time and place—underscores the need for great care when taking over both Hunter’s critique and his proposed solution, especially in places outside of America.

This flaw is evident too when Hunter begins to construct his idea of “faithful presence.” He does not work it up from a biblical theology of how God instructs us to be busy developing culture both before and after the fall into sin. He does not begin in Genesis and walk us through Scripture to show us how God calls his people everywhere and at all times to be faithfully present. Rather, Hunter arrives at this idea piece-meal, in the main as a practical response to the failed Christian cultural efforts he sees at work in America, and in part as something he sees exemplified in the life of Christ (Hunter, 187–193) and modeled in Jeremiah 29:4–7 (276–279). Keller, for his part, appears to have simply taken over Hunter’s ideas with little critical evaluation, endeavouring to work out the application of Hunter’s “faithful presence” in his missional activities.

CONFUSING THE ANTITHESIS

Such a foundation for Christian cultural engagement that is truly missional is problematic, for it gives an incomplete and imbalanced picture of what the Lord commands of us. The first thing to note is the shifting of focus away from the primary missional command for Christians to go and make disciples of all nations, teaching them to obey all of Christ’s commands (Matt 28:19–20). Instead, the focus is on seeking the *shalom* or flourishing of all around us by being “faithfully present” within the culture. This is where Jeremiah 29 gets so heavily emphasized inside the missional movement.

To be sure, both Hunter and Keller do speak in passing of the Christian’s need to evangelize, but the dominant focus in both their books is on looking out for and contributing toward the *physical* or *environmental* thriving of our neighbours. Certainly, improving the conditions in which people live and work is part of loving our neighbour, but how can our co-workers or the community in which we live experience true peace and flourishing unless they learn to bend the knee to the Lord Jesus Christ? Can there be *any* shalom without the forgiveness of sins? In obedience to the Great Commission, do we not need to *primarily* pray and work for the conversion of our fellow citizens?

Further, did God intend Jeremiah 29 to be a model for Christians in the new covenant era? Where is that indicated in either the New or Old Testament? Why not take Zerubbabel or Nehemiah as a model, both of whom also operated in a post-exile context and had to interact with unbelievers in a pluralistic society but who were directed by God to take quite a different route, frequently opposing those of different religious beliefs and practices? (See Ezra 4 & Neh 4.) It would appear that they are not mentioned because they do not fit the *sociological* model proposed by Hunter and embraced by Keller.

Certainly, we are commanded to love our neighbours and even our enemies, to pray for those who curse us, and to do good to all men. But does their concept of “faithful presence” prepare us for heavy resistance from the world, even persecution?

This selective use of supporting texts for the idea of “faithful presence” leads to an incomplete picture of the antithesis as taught in Scripture. Again, nowhere does Hunter explain the Bible’s key text explaining the God-ordained antithesis, Genesis 3:15. Keller too leaves it unmentioned. There the LORD himself sets enmity between the seed of the serpent (followers of Satan) and the seed of the woman (followers of God). This enmity is for the good of God’s people since God used it to break up our alliance with the devil and to keep us from falling back into league with him.

Hunter and Keller only speak of the need for Christians to resist *structures* and *ideas* in society that work against human flourishing. But ideas are lodged in the minds of humans and it’s those humans who erect and support such structures. When Christians oppose such ideas and structures, they will be opposed by *humans*—or as the Lord Jesus says, hated by them just as they hated him (John 15:18).

PREPARED FOR HATRED?

Hunter and Keller are optimistic. They make it seem like common ground can be found in many instances with most unbelievers. Yet missing from their writings on faithful presence is an effort to prepare for the inevitability that Christians will meet hostility, insults, and other forms of persecution. Certainly, we are commanded to love our neighbours and even our enemies, to pray for those who curse us, and to do good to all men. But does their concept of “faithful presence” prepare us for heavy resistance from the world, even persecution? How would they have us believers maintain the antithesis that God imposed between the church and the world even while we engage with those who belong to Satan? For while some of God’s elect are among the unbelievers around us and need to be reached with the gospel, so are the reprobate who all their lives follow Satan in hating Christ and his church.

Christ himself warns us to expect a hateful reaction. Just before calling us to be salt and light in this world, he pronounced, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 5:10). Toward the end of his ministry he returned to this theme: “You will be hated by all for my name’s sake” (Mark 13:13). Paul is equally clear that “all who desire to live

a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim 3:12). And Peter, who writes so much about us being “sojourners and exiles” in this world, exhorts us to keep our “conduct among the Gentiles honourable, so that *when they speak against you as evildoers*, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation” (1 Pet 2:11, emphasis added). While some unbelievers may well cooperate with us in certain ventures, many more will speak against us, slandering us as “evildoers.” What then will we do?

The reality of facing enmity from a hostile world must colour the way we are faithfully present. If our goal is first of all the human flourishing of all around us, might we be tempted to keep certain Christian ideas quiet so that we do not upset and offend? If we knew that speaking up against LGBTQ initiatives or abortion or unjust DEI hiring would so upset people around us that they would not experience any kind of shalom, would we not be tempted to keep quiet? And if we kept quiet about such evil, how would we be following Christ? How would we be sharing the light of the gospel or bringing the salt of Christ’s teaching to the world? Would we not run the risk of our faithful presence becoming guilty silence? Of becoming unsalty salt that is only fit to be thrown out?

PARTING THOUGHTS

Faithful presence is an idea worth pondering and Hunter and Keller have given us some valuable pointers toward cultural engagement. Yet, is Jeremiah 29 really the model God wants us to follow? And how do we work out the God-imposed division between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent (Gen 3:15) while we aim to bring the gospel to the nations and develop culture in cooperation with our unbelieving neighbours? We need more biblical reflection on how the Lord God would have his people be faithfully present in this and *every* culture and age. 🇬🇧



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Time of Harvest: Lessons from Years of Mission Work

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The Canadian Reformed Churches have been involved in some way or another with mission work in South Africa during the past decade or more. I thought it worthwhile to share some of our experiences with you, now that these mission churches are being instituted.

At present, we are blessed with a harvesting time. Since last year, three mission churches became self-governing, two in the city of Soshanguve (northwest of Pretoria), and one in Nellmapius (east of Pretoria). Hopefully another mission church will be instituted soon. We experienced joyful church services in which hands were laid on new elders and deacons. We are experiencing a harvesting time indeed. After several years, we are privileged to see tangible results. Praise the LORD!

When looking back, are there lessons to be learned? Yes, almost too many to mention. In this article I would like to highlight a few, without claiming that they are the only or most important ones.

FOLLOW-UP CARE

There is no such thing as an independent church—young or old. A mission church that is instituted receives office-bearers but does not become independent. Even after years of mission

work, such a congregation might still seem to be in its infancy. There are usually only a few office-bearers, and as missionary or sending church, one might be quite concerned about the future, perhaps like an anxious mother when her child leaves home for the first time.

Ongoing care is essential. One of the best forms of follow-up care is for a newly instituted congregation to be fully integrated into the broader church federation—through classis, synod, joined Bible studies, conferences, and the like. Our experience is that classis is indispensable to the healthy functioning of every congregation, both old and new. It's a place where joy and sorrow can be shared, sermons discussed, difficult matters deliberated, and support offered. A classis is a beautiful demonstration of the fact that churches are not *independent* but *interdependent*. This of course applies just as much to long-established churches. In a federation with many young congregations, it is beneficial for the classis to meet regularly. Furthermore, we should actively involve one another—across language and cultural lines—in regional events, youth programs, pulpit exchanges, and more. It is a blessing that our newly instituted congregations are close to home and not, say, in a distant country.

MONEY: BLESSING OR CURSE?

Money is a blessing—but it can just as easily become a curse. Over the years of mission work, there has generally been enough funding. But that hasn't always been a good thing. Simply knowing that money is available has at times made both sending churches and mission churches complacent. Is this a typical pattern when churches from economically prosperous areas do missions in financially struggling contexts? Yes and no. Church planting efforts in prosperous settings often wrestle with the same issue. It all reminds us that it's a privilege to grow up in a church and family where sharing your gifts with the church is a natural part of life.

Opening your wallet in service of the Lord is part of a believer's ongoing sanctification—an acknowledgment that all your money belongs to God and that, in gratitude, you give a portion back. Giving is done to show thankfulness, not as a lever to get even more from the Lord, as is the case with the so-called prosperity gospel. To give with a thankful heart is something both new and seasoned believers must learn, and it often takes time. Knowing that the mission had enough money has, at times, hindered this growth in stewardship.

A HUNGRY STOMACH

There's an old saying: you can't preach the gospel to someone who is starving. This is the principle behind the integration of word and deed. Alongside mission work there is also relief work, development initiatives, and social support. Over the years, we've seen many examples of this: care for the sick, financial aid for students, social services, schools, and more.

Looking back, it's clear that these projects have often been a blessing, but they've also occasionally been an obstacle. We must be honest about that. A well-known book that deals with this issue is *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor... and Yourself*.¹

All these efforts are *secondary* goals intended to support the *primary* goal. That primary goal, in my view, must remain the conversion of unbelievers and the planting of churches. Paul's missionary journeys involved preaching the gospel, calling people to repentance, and establishing churches by appointing elders. When he performed miracles, it was to focus the attention on the primary goal.

Let me give a practical example. During my years as a missionary, we started a preschool in the church building. The aim was to make the church more visible in the community. A secondary benefit was that it provided income for a few unemployed church members.

The preschool grew and thrived. The church became better known; children began attending Sunday school and worship services as well; even parents started coming.

Then came the challenges. Some staff members were dishonest with money. Subsequently, the preschool couldn't pay for electricity and water anymore. A few staff had to face church discipline. The congregation became weary of the preschool, feeling that it was "killing" the church. In the end, the congregation decided to shut it down. Was this the right decision? Some staff took the matter to the local governor and played the race card against me. The councillor organized a meeting. But the congregation calmly explained the situation, and the false accusations disappeared like mist before the sun. I saw it as God's providence, how this young congregation defended me against these false accusations. Through that crisis, the church gained more respect in the community—in a positive way.

AIDING THE POOR WISELY

There are many examples of how well-intentioned secondary initiatives have done more harm than good in Africa. *When Helping Hurts* contains several case studies. Good intentions do not always lead to good results. I often drove with Westerners through shanty towns, passing beggars at each street corner. I remember the question mark on their faces—why don't I as a missionary give something to these wretched people? And honestly, I never get used to it either. The fact is, however, that the mayor of our city has warned motorists not to give to beggars on the streets. Many of them are drug addicts and will misuse your well-intended money. Even if you give them a hamburger, some will go and sell it to get money for drugs.

Rather, as a Christian, faithfully give your tithe, and if possible, more. Support reputable organisations who help the poor in a responsible way. Don't succumb to so-called compassion fatigue, which has hit the western world lately. Africa might seem like a bottomless pit, yet let us not grow weary to do good. It doesn't help to dish out money. It hurts. Rather, it helps to send out missionaries who teach people a God-fearing life: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations . . . teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matt 28:19–20).

There is an old saying along the lines of "Don't give the poor a fish, but a fishing rod." But it goes even deeper than that. Teach them also to maintain the fishing rod, to save some of the income generated by the rod for maintenance. Money isn't the biggest gift to Africa, but active involvement, walking the way of daily

¹ Written by Steve Corbett & Brian Fikkert (2009)



Ordination of office-bearers in Nellmapius

Laying on of hands in Soshanguve

repentance with them and the renewal of their lives and worldview through the Holy Spirit.

In my experience, people in the townships sometimes saw the mission as a means of easy economic empowerment. But South Africa's greatest problem is not physical poverty, but spiritual. And isn't that the case in many countries? Jesse Jackson, perhaps an unbiased witness in this regard, once said: "Nobody, but nobody... is too poor to turn off the TV two hours a night."²

If new members don't yet have the right priorities, secondary initiatives might become their first reason for being a church member. A secondary initiative shouldn't harm the primary focus of mission work.

If we could do it over again, I would not rule out these initiatives but would be more cautious with secondary projects. While I am not opposed to them—and was personally involved in several—I believe that in South Africa's context, it is wiser to invest more time and money in preaching the gospel, teaching new members, doing home visits, and developing biblical material. Let us therefore not hold back on sending out missionaries!

CONFLICT & NEGLECT

Over the years, the mission work has at times been hampered by conflicts, also between missionaries. This should not surprise us; it is as old as the mission itself. Think of the fall out between Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15:36–41). It is a sometimes painful but important lesson for us as missionaries and pastors to cultivate humility, invest in strong relationships with colleagues, and set an example as peacemakers. Too often, cooperation is not the strongest trait of pastors and missionaries.

Another factor that sometimes contributed to disunity was the mission work being treated as the "stepchild" of the sending and partner churches. Important matters weren't always discussed thoroughly, and not enough time was devoted to listening to challenges on the mission field. Church councils, committees, and congregations have busy agendas—and things can be rushed.

CONTINUITY

New believers often form a strong attachment to their missionary. This is understandable, but it can also be risky. When

the missionary leaves, members can leave too. In almost every case over the past years, when a missionary departed, the church lost several members. And it took considerable effort for a new missionary to gain trust. Even in established congregations, the departure of a pastor is sad, but it doesn't come close to the impact it has on a mission congregation.

What would we do differently if we could? Ideally, missionaries would stay with a mission church all the way—but this is not always possible. There have been cases where missionaries passed away or had to be deposed. Perhaps more could be done to help new converts build relationships of trust with other missionaries and pastors within the broader church federation, and especially with the future office-bearers. But with hindsight it is easy to see what went wrong—the reality in the moment is often complex.

THE WORD WON'T RETURN EMPTY

Let me end with this. Over the years, we have sown the Word—both in preaching and in deed. The Lord promises that his Word will not return to him empty. This is a fact, and we have seen it time and again. To him be the glory!

We often tend to focus on everything that still isn't right in the mission churches. But we all know the saying: is the glass half empty or half full? Let us focus on the good work that Christ has begun—even if it doesn't always fit neatly into our schedules or expectations.

We must also accept that when the gospel is planted and begins to take root somewhere, the church that emerges will not be a carbon copy of an established congregation, even if the foundation of Scripture and confessions is the same. We must give our fellow believers space to grow and sometimes to learn from their mistakes, just as believers in long-established churches are still doing.

Together in one church federation, at the same classis table and—even more important—at the same Lord's table, we may grow together. 📖

Pieter G. Boon

Former missionary and pastor of the Free Reformed Church Maranata, Pretoria

² Quoted via Michelle Obama's autobiography *Becoming* (2018)

CHRIS BOERSEMA: *Mission worker in Brazil*

ILSE VANDERMEULEN



Chris Boersema and family in Brazil

With a career change from construction worker to mission worker, Chris Boersema proves that many gifts and talents are needed on the mission fields—not only theological studies. Chris (50) started his work in Brazil in 2011. He assists in the mission work of the Aldergrove Canadian Reformed Church, working in Brazil alongside pastors Jim Witteveen and Jonathan Chase. Together they support the Igrejas Reformada do Brasil (IRB), a federation of nine instituted Reformed churches and ten mission congregations throughout Brazil. Chris and his wife Thécia, along with their seven children, attend the Reformed Church in Maragogi, where he serves as an elder and chair of council.

CONTEXT

Brazil is the largest country in South America, making up roughly half of the continent, with a population of 213 million people. The Canadian Reformed Churches have a long history of mission work in this Portuguese-speaking country. Rev. Abram de Graaf (sent out by Hamilton Cornerstone CanRC) currently works there alongside three different congregations. The Aldergrove Mission Board, which employs Rev. Witteveen, Rev. Chase, and brother Chris Boersema, recently celebrated its 50th anniversary of mission work in Brazil. Much of the effort of the Aldergrove Mission Board focuses on the theological seminary of the Reformed Churches of Brazil, known as the John Calvin Institute. Aside from that, the three men each also work in one of the local churches in an effort to strengthen these congregations in different ways.

WHAT DOES A MISSION AID WORKER DO?

“For several decades there were two separate boards working side by side [to coordinate mission in Brazil]: the Mission Board in Surrey and the Mission Aid Brazil board. Just a few years ago, these boards merged to become one, known as the Aldergrove Brazil Mission Society. This is a similar structure to some other federations, including the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. In this concept, missionaries work with mission aid workers to bring the gospel in word and in deed,” Chris tells *Clarion* from his home in Brazil.

“The primary difference between a missionary and a mission aid worker begins with the preparation for our work. Missionaries are called to be ministers of the Word, men who studied and prepared at a theological seminary, and who preach the Word of God and teach theology at the seminary. While in my unique role I do lead services on a regular basis, and lead Bible studies and teach catechism classes, I am not a minister but work in this calling as an elder.”

Over the years, the role of the mission aid worker (or “associate worker”) in Brazil has shifted from primarily providing aid and

Christian education to the training of leaders in the churches. Chris explains that this is partially due to a shift in what is needed. “Poverty and the need for medical assistance in the seventies and eighties was very different from what we see today. Today, there are more medical programs and such available. The established churches in the IRB have been able to take over providing for the needy through their deaconry. Now, the most urgent need for the churches here is finding and training men for the offices to build up the churches. There is greater value in me spending my time on teaching and training more men for leadership.”

Chris’s work therefore also consists of administrative tasks. “Besides organizing and speaking at conferences for office bearers and my work at our local church, I am one of the directors of the property administration for the seminary. Along with the missionaries, we make decisions on renovations and construction, as well as all the financial aspects.” He also oversees the Mission Board’s Student Bursary Project for young adults in the IRB who would like to further their education, and the “Leaders Library Project,” a fund accessible for office bearers who would like to purchase study books for their personal libraries.

The missionaries and mission worker aim to come alongside the Reformed Churches of Brazil to establish a self-governing and self-sustaining independent federation of churches. Chris explained that “the primary project that the Aldergrove Mission focuses on and funds today is the John Calvin Institute, the seminary of the IRB. In the past the institute had five or six students, but lately numbers are lower, proving again the challenge in finding suitable men.”

Besides the work at the John Calvin Institute, the missionaries and mission worker assist local Brazilian missionaries in the establishment of new mission congregations throughout Brazil. Chris shares, “One of the highlights for me in supporting the IRB is seeing congregations that learn about the Reformed faith, break away from Pentecostal or Baptist churches, and decide to join the IRB federation as an entire church. That’s something I imagine we would rarely see in North America, but here we’ve witnessed several examples.” There is a formal process that these congregations follow, and when they officially join, it is a great joy for everyone involved.

THE PULL TO MISSION WORK

Chris has always been very familiar with mission work in Brazil—he spent much of his youth in Brazil as a son of missionary Ralph Boersema. “I lived here from 1979 to 1993. Knowing the language and culture of Brazil is a huge benefit in better knowing how to relate to and serve the people here.”



Concilio IRB Brazil

Chris has a deep love for the South American country, people, and culture of Brazil. It's also a bonus that he (and his five sons) love to play and watch soccer. "The Brazilian culture is very lively and shows a mixture of many different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, including African, European, and native Brazilian. The food is also very good, including quite a variety of flavours due to the cultural background."

Chris, who was born in Calgary and also lived in Pennsylvania, often misses Canada and the U.S. "The primary things that I miss are relationships with family and other dear friends of years ago. I also miss a lot of the cooking, the changing of the seasons, roads with no potholes, and well organised parks and cities!"

But Chris is grateful for the work he can do to serve the IRB. "Looking at the past fifteen years, the major development I have seen is the growth of the churches in the south and south-east of Brazil. Mission work began in northeastern Brazil in the seventies and eighties, and later the city of Recife became the focus. In the last ten years, we have seen new churches in the south-east, including the church of Pastor Elienai Batista, missionary in Campinas." According to the mission worker there are not very many Reformed churches in that region, but people are very dedicated to finding Reformed preaching. "We know of various people who are very committed to Reformed preaching and regularly drive two hours to church!"

Chris hopes more men will be found interested and willing to serve on the mission field, not only as ministers. "I always had a heart for mission. I've always enjoyed work as an elder and pastoring others. When I was in consistory in the OPC, I was on the Foreign Missions Committee of that denomination as well. When the opportunity came up to do this work, I wanted to give it a try. Of course, it helped that I knew the country and the language so well."

Chris encourages men to consider the mission field for their career, not just in Brazil. "You do not need a Masters of Divinity degree," he says, "but some theological education would certainly contribute to serving well in such a calling. There are many opportunities and skillsets needed. Most importantly, you must be a godly man who is truly willing to serve others." 🇧🇷

To learn more about the work in Brazil, follow updates on <https://reformedmissions.net> and the website of Aldergrove Missions: <https://missionbrazil.ca>



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Reformed, Confessional, & Evangelistic:

PLANTING & STRENGTHENING HEALTHY CHURCHES

ERIC WATKINS

What might evangelism look like for a church or church plant that is committed to being Reformed and confessional, while also being outward facing and mission-minded at the same time? Is there a necessary tension between being Reformed and confessional, and being healthfully evangelistic? Finally, what might some practical and fruitful efforts to reach the lost look like that do not compromise our theological identity? In this article, we will engage each of these questions with an eye to being as practical as possible.

It is likely worth stating that this article is written from the perspective of church-planting. In my twenty-five years of pastoral experience, the majority of that time has been spent church planting in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. I am now serving as an evangelist in the third church I have planted in Daytona Beach, Florida, where we now live. We moved here a year ago, not knowing anyone in the area. We now have a small group of about fifty people who are worshipping and serving together in Salt and Light Reformed Church (saltandlightopc.org). Before telling some very practical stories about evangelism and outreach,

I want to address the perceived tension between being Reformed, confessional, and evangelistic.

ZEALOUS REFORMED MISSIONS

There is a sense in which it makes me a little sad to have to play ‘defense’ on this subject. I do not believe for a moment that there is a tension between Reformed theology and a healthy evangelistic mindset. The history of western missions, including fruitful evangelistic ministry, is dominated by Reformed people. Just think of some of the missionary hall of fame: William Carey, Hudson Taylor, John Payton, Charles Spurgeon, George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, Martin Lloyd Jones . . . on we could go! The simple point is this: Reformed people have dominated the playing field of missions. From a historical point of view, to be zealous for evangelism and missions is at the heart of what it means to be Reformed. Whoever first earned the nickname “frozen chosen” betrayed the Reformed faith, and the fact that we sometimes must persuade people “Oh no, Reformed people really do believe in evangelism” is sad. To be Reformed *is* to be evangelistic.



What about John Calvin and the Reformed Confessions? In a word, John Calvin was remarkably evangelistic. His “Ministerial Company” in Geneva was nothing less than a missionary training centre committed to sending out Reformed gospel preachers to all parts of Europe and beyond. His ministry at the church in Geneva abounded with evangelistic fruit, and even in his own home, he and his wife took in orphans and seminary students, whom he trained for faithfully Reformed, evangelistic ministry. When the plague ravaged Europe, Calvin visited sick, dying people, sharing the hope of the gospel with them. Our beloved John Calvin was far more evangelistic than most Calvinists who claim his name. I find this to be humbling and convicting.

John Calvin’s evangelistic zeal is embodied in the Reformed confessions. One of the reasons I love the Reformed confessions is how heartily evangelistic and outward facing they are. Canons of Dordt 2.5 says, “Moreover, the promise of the gospel is that whosoever believes in Christ crucified shall not perish, but have eternal life. This promise, together with the command to repent and believe, ought to be declared and published to all nations, and to all persons promiscuously and without distinction, to whom God out of His good pleasure sends the gospel.”

The way the confessions talk about God’s Spirit “gathering” (not just protecting!) his church is simply beautiful (see Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 84 and Westminster Shorter Catechism 89). The point is—and there is much more that could be said here—the Reformed confessions are heartily evangelistic. They desire and promote the idea that God has a plan to reach the nations, locally and abroad, through the work of the church. Our God is sovereign, and he uses means—and his means of gathering his church *is his church!* So, what does this look like in the life of a local church, especially a church plant?

EVANGELISM A MINDSET

If you are looking for something formulaic or programmatic here, you may be disappointed. I don’t see evangelism as a formula or a program, but as a way of life. In many ways, it is a mindset that sees every person we encounter as a bearer of the image of God, who is capable of being converted by the Spirit of God; evangelism

is embodied in a desire to engage people in gospel conversation. Most of my more fruitful conversations with strangers tend to happen much more naturally than something planned; like when my kids and I are at the park or the beach. I’m fairly convinced that most people have some sort of recreation in their lives, and that people are most “evangelistically accessible” where they recreate. Everyone has hobbies that they enjoy doing, Christians and non-Christians, and if we look at these activities as opportunities to befriend and engage non-Christians, doors will eventually open up to talk about what matters most to us—the gospel. Over the years, much of the evangelistic fruit I have personally seen, and people in our church(es) have seen, have come from relationships built in these contexts.

Relatedly, hospitality is hugely important, and we should think about it in two ways. First, think about how much evangelistic conversation took place in the New Testament in homes. Our homes are our fortresses—but they are not meant to be impenetrable. Friendships formed outside the home should lead to hospitality in the home. Many of our young people have friendships with people they know from sports, school, work, and elsewhere. What if we thought about opening up our home one Friday night a month and inviting people from outside the church over? So often, one of the fine things we do together during mealtime is read the Bible and pray. Imagine the effect that would have on a non-Christian who is unfamiliar with such a practice.

HOSPITALITY ON SUNDAY

A second but very important way to think about hospitality is in connection with our churches on Sunday. When visitors come to visit our church, does anyone invite them over? Or do they find our churches insular and unwelcoming? There is much more to being a welcoming church than just serving coffee in the foyer before watching everyone scramble back to their own homes. If a visitor comes to church and is not invited to someone’s home the first Sunday, they may likely still come back. But if they come to two, maybe three, services and are still not invited into anyone’s home, they just might get the feeling that they are not welcome.

Cultivating hospitality as a church is hugely important and may even come with some measure of discomfort or sacrifice. Years ago, my elderly mother took my wheelchair-bound older sister to church. They got there early (as my mom always does) and found a spot about halfway down the aisles. As people began to file in, my mom and sister were greeted by a family who politely informed them that they were seated in “their” pew—and they actually asked my mom and sister to move. They did so, a bit embarrassed, only to have the exact same thing happen five minutes later! They ended up sitting near the front of the church. After the service, only a couple of people spoke to them, and no one invited them over. Such things should never happen in our churches, but often, our sense of comfort and familiarity sits at odds with being welcoming and hospitable. One practical way of becoming a hospitable church is by creating a rotation list, so that every Sunday, a different family is on standby with a lunch plan to invite visitors over. This is very manageable and ensures there are no cracks in the floor of our hospitality.

HELPING THE HURTING

A word about pain. If we think about the way Jesus did ministry, he often took the ordinary stuff of everyday life (water, bread, even brokenness) and used them as opportunities to talk about what people really needed (Living Water, the Bread of Life, or the Good Physician). I find this approach very helpful and worth imitating. Life is filled with many ups and downs, bumps and bruises, joys and sorrows. We don’t want to be opportunistic, but we do want to seize the opportunities Jesus gives us to meet people where they are at. An older couple in our church, some years ago, would often go to Walmart together to shop. They were not capable of walking very far, and so would stop and sit on several of the benches throughout the store. They would take tracts with our church’s info on them and would strike up casual conversations with people who were walking by or sitting beside them. Their approach was very natural, and we saw people come to church through their “Walmart ministry.”

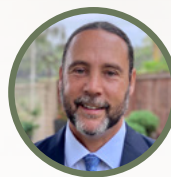
Many of our churches are now situated very close to neighborhoods filled with broken homes and people of various ethnicities. Some of these neighborhoods are bereft of fathers. Many of these kids struggle with their schoolwork and need tutors in multiple subjects. What would happen if capable members of our churches offered to spend time with “latch-key kids” helping them with their schoolwork as a means of building evangelistic relationships? This is exactly how Sunday School first began. Orphaned kids on the streets of England (whose parents died in the plague) were taught how to read by Christians—and their text was the

Bible! Over the years, churches I have served have been blessed by people who are willing to share some of their time and ability serving people outside the church in one area or another toward an evangelistic goal. Such servanthood-based relationship building is an effective means of using our God-given talents and resources toward a gospel end.

LEADING AND PRAYING

What about the pastor and church leaders? Most pastors are spread way too thin and have very little bandwidth in their weeks to do evangelism. They often preach twice a week, do catechism, Sunday School, visitation, elder/deacon meetings, etc. I once led an elder’s retreat in which I asked each of the elders to write down what they thought the pastor should be doing in order of priority on one side of the page. On the other side, they were to give a number of hours to each of those items. When they were done, everything was tallied up. Sadly, evangelism was at the bottom of the page and, without realizing it, they had given the pastor about a 100-hour work week! If we really want our pastors to have time to do evangelism and lead the church in it, we may have to sit down and think about what other parts of his work can be shared by other leaders. Otherwise, we are simply asking for more bricks with less straw.

A final word about prayer. In Ephesians 6 and Colossians 4, Paul asks the church to pray that he would be faithful in his evangelistic calling and duties, and that the church prayerfully find their part in this as well. While not everyone is called to preach or to be evangelistic in the same way, we are all called to play our part in the drama of the Great Commission, and that begins with prayer. We should be praying for the ministry of God’s word from the pulpit to build up the saints and to convert the lost. We should be praying for unsaved family members and friends. We should be praying that God would open doors of opportunity for us all to be what Jesus calls his whole church: the salt of the earth and the light of the world. 



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His Harvest Among Us:

REFLECTIONS ON LOCAL MISSION AT BETHEL IN TORONTO

KWANGYOUNG PARK

Bethel Canadian Reformed Church in Toronto has long held a deep commitment to mission. While continuing to support foreign mission work in Papua New Guinea, we have also come to recognize more clearly the need for faithful local mission. In response, the church called me in 2022 to serve as a missions pastor.

Over the past three years, we have seen the Lord bring more than 200 visitors to Bethel. It has become a regular pattern—new guests join us for worship nearly every week. They include established Canadians and new immigrants, Christians seeking a faithful church and those who have never entered a church or heard the gospel before. This growth was not the result of new programs or changes in worship. Quite simply, God brought them in. We are reminded of Article 27 of the Belgic Confession: it is God who gathers his church—not through human strategy, but by his Spirit working through the ordinary means of grace.

Yet each new face brings a pastoral responsibility. Who are they? What has brought them here? How do we walk with them? This article reflects on those questions—not as a report of success, but as a testimony to God’s sovereign grace. We pray it may encourage other churches seeking to be faithful in the harvest field God has placed before them.

WHERE DID THEY COME FROM?

Among those who visited Bethel over the past three years, a small portion—about 10%—came from Reformed backgrounds. Some of them had moved from other parts of Canada, while others had come from overseas, already committed to the Reformed faith. They arrived with a clear understanding of what they were seeking and were eager to connect with a church that faithfully preached and lived out the Reformed confessions.

Around half came from other Christian traditions. Many shared that it had become increasingly difficult to find a faithful church in Canada. They were searching for a congregation where God’s

Word is not only preached according to the Scripture but also embodied in the life of members.

Remarkably, about 40% of our visitors had no prior experience with Christianity or came from different religious backgrounds. Some had emigrated from countries where the gospel is rarely heard or openly opposed. Others were born and raised in Canada but had never heard the good news of Jesus Christ or entered a church before.

This wide range of backgrounds reminds us that not all newcomers arrive with the same expectations or understanding.

HOW DID THEY FIND US?

Most newcomers came through personal connections—family, friends, coworkers, neighbours, or relatives. Just over half (50.63%) were invited by someone in our congregation. Notably, we’ve often seen that those who have recently come to Bethel and experienced the grace of the gospel themselves are the ones most eager to invite others.

A simple invitation—“Come and see”—is often enough. Like Andrew, who first found his brother Simon and said, “We have found the Messiah,” and brought him to Jesus (John 1:41–42), we too can invite others to meet Christ. We do not always need eloquent words or persuasive arguments. God often works through the simple personal invitation to bring someone to eternal life.

Others—about 25%—found us through online platforms such as Google search, Google Maps, our church website, or social media. In today’s digital age, the internet often functions like a signpost pointing the way to the church. Some had been specifically searching for a church, while others stumbled upon us online and decided to visit.

Approximately 15% came after attending one of our outreach events, such as the children’s soccer camp, the Lunar New Year Concert, or the Middle Eastern New Year celebration. Another 5%

joined us after simply noticing our church while driving or walking through the neighbourhood and deciding to come in.

The variety of ways people found their way to Bethel bears witness to the mysterious and sovereign hand of God. While we do not always know what will come of each visit, we give thanks for every opportunity and rejoice in what the Lord has already done.

WHAT HAS GOD DONE?

The fruit of the mission belongs to God alone. Yet we rejoice when he allows us to witness glimpses of his harvest. On August 10, 2025, the Lord blessed us with a special day: seven newcomers—three adults and four children/youth—received the sacrament of baptism, and ten brothers and sisters made their public profession of faith before the congregation. Over the past three years, by God’s grace, 16% of those who visited Bethel have gone on to receive baptism or make a public profession of faith. Among them are families from Muslim backgrounds, individuals who had lived under the atheistic influence of the Chinese Communist regime, and others who had never set foot in a church before. We give thanks and praise to God for granting them repentance and faith in Christ—a gift of his sovereign mercy.

A further 24% are currently preparing for baptism or public profession of faith through Bible study or mentorship. Another 30% remain connected to the congregation and attend worship occasionally, though they have not yet committed to the Bible study. Others, in God’s will, have gradually drifted away.

We believe that baptism and profession of faith are not our only fruits. Some of us are called to plant, others to water. It is God who gives the life and the growth (1 Cor 3:6–7). He carries out his work of salvation according to his own timing, and for his own glory. In that process, we are humbled and grateful that he would use us in any way at all. Our calling is not to measure results, but to sow the seed and water it faithfully, trusting that God alone gives the growth.

A MULTITUDE FROM EVERY NATION

Our newcomers reflect the rich diversity of Canada. A significant portion come from Chinese and Iranian backgrounds, alongside others from Caucasian, Hispanic, Korean, African, and Brazilian communities. Roughly half are Canadian citizens, while the other half are immigrants or international students.

Looking at the diversity among us, we catch a glimpse of the vision in Revelation 7: “a great multitude... from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.” In Christ, ethnic and cultural barriers fall

away, and we are united as fellow citizens of heaven and members of the household of God (Eph 2:19).

Importantly, our goal is not diversity for its own sake, but to be a faithful church gathered from all peoples. We do not seek to mirror the secular ideal of multiculturalism, but rather to seek and witness to the true unity and reconciliation that Christ has achieved through his cross. As Belgic Confession Article 27 affirms, “this holy church is not confined or limited to one particular place or to certain persons, but is spread and dispersed throughout the entire world.” Christ is the centre, and the Holy Spirit gathers his church from every corner of the world.

Our context in Canada is unique. Here, we are called to be witnesses of Christ to people from every nation. In this place, we are privileged to see a reflection of the global church—one people under one Lord, Jesus Christ, who is truly the King of all nations.

A DISCIPLESHIP FRAMEWORK

Our mission at Bethel is not merely to invite people to church, but to make true disciples of Jesus Christ (Matt 28:19–20)—those who wholeheartedly confess the Reformed faith and live it out in repentance and obedience. The church is the holy community Christ gathers out of the world. For this reason, while we warmly welcome all who come to worship, joining the body of Christ through public profession of faith is not taken lightly. It is a carefully guided process aimed at ensuring a credible confession and clear evidence of repentance and faith.

Through various experiences and pastoral challenges, we have grown in our awareness that we cannot see into a person’s heart. This has taught us to approach each profession of faith with both joy and pastoral discernment. It is not hesitation, but a deeper commitment to walk patiently with those whom God is drawing to himself.

At Bethel, the path from a first visit to public profession of faith follows a deliberate and thoughtful framework.

1. Initial visit

When visitors come to worship, a missions pastor takes time to meet with them, to listen to their story, understand their background, and share the gospel. These conversations often take place in homes, church, or cafés and help establish trust and pastoral care from the outset.

2. Bible study classes

Depending on their background, we offer two different formats of Bible study:

- Those from Christian backgrounds—particularly those already familiar with biblical truths—are generally invited to join the group Bible classes.
- Those from non-Christian backgrounds—especially those unfamiliar with the Bible or the gospel—begin with one-on-one studies, allowing for more personal engagement.

We offer three stages of Bible study, each designed to reflect a key dimension of the Christian life: gospel foundation, doctrinal formation. These correspond to what we need to know in order to live and die in the joy of our only comfort (LD 1).

- *Class A: Covenant and redemptive history*
This class is for sharing the gospel. It introduces the overarching narrative of Scripture through the lens of God's covenant. Participants come to see the Bible as one unified story of God's redeeming grace, culminating in the person and work of Jesus Christ.
- *Class B: The Apostles' Creed and the Belgic Confession*
This class focuses on teaching the Reformed faith. Through a guided study of core doctrines—including the Trinity, salvation, the church, the sacraments, and the authority of Scripture—participants grow in their understanding of, and commitment to, the Reformed confession of the Christian faith.
- *Class C: The Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer*
This is for learning a life of thankfulness (LD 32–52). The focus here is on gratitude, sanctification, prayer, and obedience. Participants are encouraged to respond to God's grace with lives marked by holiness, devotion, and dependence on the Lord.

3. Mentorship

During the Bible study, a newcomer is paired with a mature member of the church who is willing to walk alongside him/her through prayer and encouragement. After the Bible classes, mentors meet with their mentees over four sessions to teach the practical aspects of church life. At the end of this process, mentors provide a reference to the consistory, summarizing the mentee's growth in faith, evidence of repentance and belief, and readiness for a public profession of faith.

4. Public profession of faith or baptism

When there is credible evidence of faith and repentance, along with a clear understanding of the gospel and a sincere desire to learn and embrace Reformed doctrine, the newcomer is invited to submit a written application for the public profession of faith.

After discussion in the consistory, the elders have a formal visit to discern the person's readiness. When this process goes well, the newcomer proceeds to make a public profession of faith and receives baptism, if needed.

Over the past three to four years, we have arrived at our current structure through a variety of experiences and ongoing refinement. It is neither the final or perfect version. We still face many challenges, make mistakes, adjust, stumble, and by God's grace, grow. Through it all, we cannot help but give thanks—because the Lord is working. Through weak and ordinary means, he is gathering his people and building his church. To him alone be the glory.

HIS HARVEST, OUR PRAISE

As we reflect on the past three years of mission work at Bethel, our hearts are filled with praise to the Lord. In his mercy and wisdom, he has done far more than we imagined. We confess that God is faithful to accomplish his saving work through us, and we praise him for using people as weak and limited as we are to fulfill his purposes.

We sincerely hope that our experience—though limited and still unfolding—may offer some encouragement to our sister churches. At the same time, we long to learn from the wisdom and experiences of others. May God grant us more opportunities to encourage one another, learn together, and labour as one in his kingdom harvest.

Above all, we pray that through our efforts the gospel of Jesus Christ may be faithfully proclaimed, Christ's church may be built up, the kingdom of God may come, and his will be done more fully among us. May it be, by his grace, that many families from among the nations come to worship before him in our churches (Ps 22:27). And we look forward to the great day when we will stand together with a multitude from every nation, tribe, people, and language before the throne, singing with one voice. "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" (Rev 7:10). 



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A SYMPHONY OF SMALL THINGS

TIM SCHOUTEN

It is likely that many readers of this magazine know the Great Commission by heart: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt 28:19–20). It is also likely that many of the same readers wrestle with what this means for them in their own lives. For many believers, “making disciples,” is very daunting. We wonder if we are doing enough, and we wonder if we are doing it right. In this light, the present article seeks to describe a biblical framework for what might be called “whole-church evangelism.”

COWORKERS OF CHRIST

We are not all evangelists. We are not all formally called to preach and teach the gospel. The apostle Paul makes this clear in Ephesians 4:11–12. He writes that God “gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.” Just as we are not all apostles, prophets, or shepherd-teachers, so we are not all evangelists.

At the same time, every Christian has a role to play in fulfilling the Great Commission. The church, as a whole, is called to “make disciples of all nations.” This is the calling that Jesus left with his disciples before he ascended into heaven, and it has been the calling of God’s people ever since. God is redeeming and gathering a people of every tribe, language, people, and nation (Rev 5:9). This multi-national group of people *is* the church, but is also being gathered *through* the church. As Dr. K. Schilder once wrote, we are coworkers of Christ in his church-gathering work.¹

PROCLAIMING AND PROMOTING

In his book *The Best Kept Secret of Christian Mission* (2010), John Dickson makes an important distinction between *proclaiming* the gospel and *promoting* the gospel. Only some Christians are called to *proclaim* the gospel, but every Christian is called to *promote* the gospel. As John Dickson points out, “the Bible lists a whole range of activities that promote Christ to the world and draw others towards him.” Some of these activities are prayer, godly living, financial aid, public praise, and answering people’s questions. Dickson stresses that if we ignore or downplay these gifts and opportunities, we can “make those who do not have a flair for speaking feel inadequate in their contribution to God’s word in the world” (p. 23). We can accidentally create the idea of superior, more valuable, Christian—those who have the gift of speech.

We are all on the same mission, but we do not all have the same role. As the Apostle Paul wrote, “If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose” (1 Cor 12:17–18). A comparable analogy is that of an orchestra, which is composed of strings, woodwinds, brass, and percussion. Each musician plays something different, but each musician contributes to the harmony of the whole. Or, we might think of a soccer team, which is composed of goalie, defenders, midfielders, and forwards. Each player has a different focus, but each player contributes to the success of the whole.

This is not to minimize the command of the apostle Peter to “make a defense to anyone who asks for a reason for the hope that is in you” (1 Pet 3:15). Nor is it to ignore the instruction of Paul

¹ “Nineteen Theses Concerning the Church.” <https://spindleworks.com/library/schilder/19thesis.htm>



to “Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person” (Col 4:6). We must recognize, however, that these callings to promote the gospel with our manner of speech are not the same thing as the calling to proclaim the gospel. We do not all need to live with the burden of the Apostle Paul, who said, “Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!” (1 Cor 9:16)

This distinction between proclaiming and promoting is important as we consider the Great Commission and how it is worked out today. The church needs to make disciples of all nations. As part of this whole-church mission, each member needs to contribute—but with the gifts, opportunities, relationships, and limitations that God has given them. This approach is biblically faithful, and a key to joyful and effective pursuit of the Great Commission.

THE PREREQUISITE OF PEACE

Sometimes Christians feel that they are “guilt-tripped” about evangelism. This may also be the case in the Canadian Reformed Churches. In response to our historic weakness in this area (real or perceived), we begin to lay an evangelism burden on the shoulders of our members. We must be very cautious about doing so. Of course, there is always room for self-examination, confession of sin, and change of approach. In the process of repentance, being “guilt-tripped” is good and redemptive. There is also the possibility, however, that we make people feel wrongfully and perpetually guilty for not being a certain kind of person, or for lacking certain gifts. This is not only spiritually harmful, but counterproductive.

The Apostle Peter writes that we are to always be “prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks [us] for a reason for the hope that is in [us]” (1 Pet 3:15). We must notice what is assumed and essential in this calling, namely, that we have “hope.” In context, this word is a stand-in for a whole wardrobe of terms: faith, joy,

peace, and so on. In view of the persecution that was taking place, the Christians responded in a way that was noticeable in their character and demeanour. This, in turn, led to others noticing and asking about it: “Your life is really hard right now . . . why do you seem to have so much peace?”

This begs the question: if we do not have hope in our hearts, then who is going to ask us about the hope that *is not actually in us*? Or, at least, the hope that is *not at all evident in our demeanour*?

In this light, we must be very careful not to promote evangelism through any means that attacks our hope and makes us unnecessarily burdened and anxious. If every conversation with a non-believer is accompanied by the idea that we must proclaim the gospel to them as soon as possible, and ideally convert them, then every conversation will be accompanied by an elevated heart rate and an unnatural approach. Rather than “seasoning” our speech with salt, we will back up the salt-truck and unload it all at once, just to get the evangelism burden off our shoulders. Or, becoming discouraged, we will give up the project all together.

On the other hand, if we recognize the biblical truth that God has given different gifts and callings to different Christians, we will be able to be at peace. We will pray for our neighbours, friends, family members, and coworkers, trusting that it is God’s work to convict and convert them. We will look for opportunities to share the Word of God with them in ways that are suitable to our relationship. Further, we will seek the help and assistance of our fellow church members with different gifts than our own, understanding that some of them may be better positioned to lead someone into a knowledge of the gospel.

Of course, all of this is not an excuse to do nothing. This approach assumes a zeal on the part of every Christian for the mission of the church. In that zeal, however, there needs to be peace. And part of that peace is knowing that we are not all evangelists.



A SYMPHONY OF SMALL THINGS

This perspective to bringing the gospel will help us to develop a “whole-church” approach to evangelism. We can learn to intentionally identify the different gifts within our local church. For example, if a co-worker is asking challenging questions, do you know which members we could connect them with, or at least approach to get answers for yourself? If an elderly neighbour needs some painting done, do you know who has the time and ability? If someone from a local mom’s group is struggling post-partum, do you know who might be most effective at listening to her, and bringing the encouragement of God’s Word? Instead of focusing on our own limitations, we can start paying attention to other people’s gifts.

In addition, this approach will make good use of the existing strengths of the Canadian Reformed Churches. By the grace of God, there is a lot of “functional love” in most of our churches. Of course, love is always functional, but we mean that (in general) members are good at noticing and filling the needs of other members. For example, we can think of how meals will spontaneously show up on a young mother’s doorstep, or how somebody who is injured will receive many offers of help. In and through Christ we are united as local bodies, and we live out the calling to “show this to one another not just in words but also in deed” (Form for the Celebration of the Lord’s Supper). In this light, it would seem that this “functional love” is one of the most effective evangelistic tools that we have in our churches. A big part of our approach to reaching our neighbours for Christ will be directing our love just a little more outward and welcoming other people into it.

This is a biblically faithful approach, but also a culturally relevant one. People are generally suspicious of motives and are tired of being sold something. They often view truth claims as power moves and are not often open to direct apologetic arguments outside the context of a relationship. In order for them

to be willing to hear the gospel from us they need to experience something different—genuine, practical, no-agenda, one-foot-in-front-of-the-other kind of love.

This realization leads to an approach to evangelism that is manageable, steady, and sustainable. We don’t need to come in with a splash. We don’t need to turn cities upside-down, as the Apostle Paul was accused of doing (Acts 17:6). There may be some uniquely situated evangelists who can follow this approach still today, but the vast majority of Christians simply need to intentionally manifest the love of Christ in our relationships, while speaking and acting in a way that is in accord with the gospel. Imagine: if each household in your local church picked one individual to “functionally love” for the next two years, think of what an effect that might cumulatively have.

As a final note, this approach is thoroughly reliant on the power and grace of God. As we live out the love of Christ in countless acts of love, we trust that God will compose a symphony of small things that is much bigger than the sum of the individual parts. We don’t have to “get everything right.” We simply have to turn our love outwards, develop relationships, look for opportunities, pray fervently, and trust the plan and timing of the Great Conductor, our faithful Father in heaven.



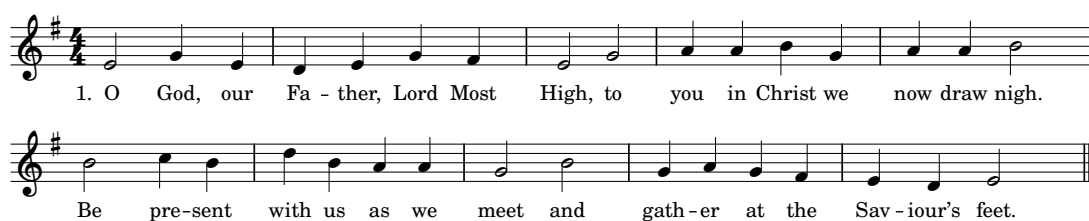
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A Prayer for the Preaching of the Word (a)



2. Your word we open in this hour—
come, bless it by your Spirit's power.
Unlock your servant's heart and mouth
that he may preach the gospel truth.

3. Enlighten him and us, we pray,
that we may learn your covenant way.
Oh, may your word take root and grow,
and shape our lives in all we do.

Text: Bedezang voor de Predikatie, 1773 Oude Berijming
Based on the prayer by Jan Utenhove, 1557
Tr. George van Popta, 2025
Tune: J. Klug's Geistliche Lieder, 1543.

LM
ERHALT UNS, HERR

Prayer for the Preaching of the Word (b)



2. Grant to your servant strength, O Lord,
to preach according to your word
Let him be guided by your hand,
to speak the truth at your command.
Equip him well to guide our way,
that none may falter nor may stray.

4. Praised be the Christ for he has won
and cast down Satan from his throne.
Send living waters from your stream—
a fount of life, a hope supreme.
Let, shining as the summer sun,
your gospel go to everyone.

3. O Triune God, O gracious King,
you hear our prayers, the songs we sing.
Illuminate our minds today,
that we may learn your righteous way.
Grant us true insight in your word,
an open ear, a heart that's stirred.

Text: Hoor, trouwe Vader, ons gebed by Lenze L. Bouwers, 1986
Tr. George van Popta, 2025.
Tune: V. Schumann's Geistliche Lieder, 1539

LM
VATER UNSER



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The Great Commission

John Smith

♩ = 110

1. Our Sav - iour Je - sus Christ, when he a - rose,
2. "Go, then: dis - ci - ple the na - tions a - broad;

blessed and com - mis - sioned the her - alds he chose.
bap - tize them in the name of tri - - une God;

He said, "All pow - er and au - thor - i - ty
teach them to fol - low the ways I com - mand.

in heav - en and on earth is giv - - en me.
And I am al - ways with you, to the end."

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FROM IRAN TO CANADA – *A Story of God's Faithfulness*

ANDREW DOUMA

Recently I had the joy of sitting down with a sister who was sponsored by a Canadian Reformed church as a refugee to Canada. This article will refer to her as Lydia, which is her “faith name”; a pseudonym used by believers in countries that persecute Christians.

CONVERSION

Lydia, the youngest of four children, was born in Iran to Muslim parents. Although they spoke Farsi, Islamic prayers had to be done in Arabic three times per day. From a young age, Islam seemed to Lydia a religion of strict rules with little comfort. The image that Allah was a strict and unforgiving god was reinforced by her father's harsh, authoritarian leadership of his family.

When Lydia was about nine years old, she and her mother were watching a Christian pastor on television which displayed a phone number for prayers. At the time, her brother had contracted hepatitis C through blood transfusions he required to treat an ongoing illness. His prognosis was poor so, with a spirit of trying anything, they called the number and the pastor prayed for their brother to be healed. Within ten days, a test showed the hepatitis C was gone. Lydia and her mother called the pastor again and he visited them and gave them a copy of the Bible in Farsi. Lydia was encouraged to pray to God and ask him to reveal himself to her. There was no memorized script, but real communication in real words.

Upon reaching out to the Lord in prayer, Lydia had a vivid dream in which she saw a man telling her that Jesus Christ was the only way to salvation. The next day marked a new beginning for her. She recalls her life being as though it was constantly spring-time; she was calm and at peace. She longed for the conversion of her family. Over time, her mother and three siblings converted to Christianity, against their husband and father's wishes. Lydia remembers the year following their conversion as extremely hard within the family home, as her father's aggression and threats escalated even to the point of reporting their “crime” to the police. Eventually, her father expelled all of them from his household.

Local saints took them in until such time as they were able to support themselves.

PRISON

For the sake of brevity, the story needs to jump a decade ahead where Lydia had a good job, supported her mother and siblings, and remained a faithful saint within Iran. On vacation, she attended a church leadership conference in an adjoining country, which led to a heartfelt conviction that God was calling her to learn how to spread the gospel within Iran. She was trained in how to approach people, how to organize believers into small communities, and how communication and aid flowed from one saint to the next.

God worked strong discipleship skills in Lydia and at the time of her arrest she was leading and connected with almost 300 believers. Yes, she was arrested and interrogated and kept in solitary confinement for at least a month, although Lydia recalls it wasn't easy to keep track of exactly how many days had passed. She spent time in prayer and, using a stone, scratched the words of Psalm 23 into the cell wall.

The authorities wanted to discover the underground Christian network and who the other leaders were, so they repeatedly interrogated Lydia. She continued to rely on the promise of Luke 12:11-12: “And when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what you should say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say.”

When their questioning proved futile, Lydia was moved to a larger prison until her trial, at which time she was sentenced to ten years of prison for crimes against Islam. Surprisingly, they allowed her out on bond for a brief twenty days to appeal the sentence. Instead of reporting to prison, the bond was forfeited and Lydia fled Iran with no passport or any other identifying documents.

MORE MIRACLES

Two miracles occurred during Lydia's escape from Iran. First, to cross the border out of Iran, Lydia had to walk through mountainous terrain. Exhausted at one point, she was unable to walk any further and lay down to rest. Two young men appeared and offered to help her to where she was going. Lydia was immediately gripped with fear of being molested or worse. But a deeper voice told her to just trust when the offer was made by one of them to carry her on their shoulders while the other offered her his sweater. At a meeting point outside the border, Lydia told others of the generous men who carried her. And yet, they were never to be seen again.

The second miracle occurred just as the bus of migrants was arriving at the refugee camp inside Turkey's borders. A Turkish national who had organized the journey approached Lydia and told her that she could stay with his family. With childlike trust, Lydia accepted the man's offer and was welcomed into his home. The next morning, the man who had taken her in told her that after they left the camp the night before, Iranian authorities crossed the border into Turkey and arrested every one of the migrants who had arrived earlier in the day.

Today, Lydia lives in Canada with her mother and siblings. All are members of a Canadian Reformed Church. She hopes to help the church in Iran from Canada by collecting aid and forwarding it through the network of contacts she's developed over the years. Having lived in Canada for a number of years, she has had opportunity to share her faith and, to my great surprise, she said that it is easier to evangelize to Iranians than to Canadians. The message of Matthew 11:30, that Jesus's yoke is easy and his burden light, is sunshine to one living under the heavy oppression of the works righteousness of Islam. Canadians, on the other hand, are blessed with freedom and wealth which blinds them to their need for a Saviour. Let's love our neighbours by encouraging them to offer prayer to God while he may still be found. When the rush of great waters come it will be too late (Ps 32). 



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RECTIFICATION:

In William Helder's article "The Genevan Psalter: Setting the Record Straight," which appeared in the October 31 issue of *Clarion*, one of the sentences was printed incorrectly. It should have included a phrase that was inadvertently deleted and was intended to read as follows: "The proposal to aim for an exclusively Genevan Psalter met with some initial resistance at GS 1968 from its advisory committee, which was 'of the opinion that our Churches need a Book of Praise which can be sung by old and young, and is used in school as well as church, at the campfire as well as in the meetings of our societies.'" Without the re-inserted underlined phrase, the sentence in question wrongly creates the impression that General Synod 1968 was the body resisting the adoption of an exclusively Genevan Psalter.



Lamentations 4: **THE CLARITY OF PAIN**

JAKE TORENVLIET

Editor's note: This is the fourth in a series of advent reflections on the book of Lamentations. The Lord willing, one reflection will appear in each issue of Clarion leading up to Christmas.

As we journey through the season of Advent, themes of waiting, longing, and hope resonate deeply within us. Advent invites reflection on our hearts and the state of our world. Yet, amidst the anticipation of Christ's coming, we encounter a unique passage in Scripture: Lamentations 4. This chapter, the final acrostic in the book of Lamentations, serves as a striking reminder of the depths of sorrow and despair experienced by the people of Jerusalem. Its structure, a rhythmic progression through the Hebrew alphabet, encapsulates the essence of lament—a heartfelt cry to God in times of trouble.

The acrostic nature of Lamentations, akin to a song that repeats itself, teaches us the ABCs of biblical lament—"Now I know my ABCs, next time won't you sing with me?" Each letter represents a sorrow, a loss, a deep yearning for restoration. As we arrive at this fourth chapter, we sense a weary voice echoing a profound exhaustion. The emotional weight is palpable. Kathleen O'Connor observes, "The poem expresses diminishment, a shrivelling of feelings, a closing of horizons."¹ Here, the survivor's strength is nearly spent. The lesson is clear: lament unveils the idols we cling to when life falls apart.

¹ O'Connor, Kathleen. *Lamentations and the Song of Songs*. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992

SPIRITUAL DOMINOS: THE FALL OF IDOLS

In verses 1–20, we witness a rapid succession of reversals, where cherished idols collapse like a line of spiritual dominos. What was once treasured is now treated as worthless. In verse 1, Jeremiah laments, "How the gold has grown dim, how the pure gold is changed!" This imagery starkly illustrates the loss of value placed on what was once precious. The holy stones lie scattered, forgotten among the ruins. What has become of financial security, human leaders, and spiritual authorities? They have failed to deliver, exposing the frailty of these idols.

Lament plays a crucial role in this realization. As John Piper once remarked, "When you are full to the brim, you will spill when bumped. What do people feel, acid or grace?" When suffering jolts our lives, what spills out reveals our true trusts and values. It is in these moments that we must ask ourselves: Why did I respond with anger? Why does my life feel like it's falling apart? Lament allows us to confront our idols.

The painful bumps in our lives expose what we have been clinging to. In verses 3–4, Jeremiah paints a harrowing picture of despair, depicting mothers resorting to unimaginable actions in the face of starvation. The reality of this brokenness reveals a deeper truth about our own hearts. In moments of crisis, self-worship leads to a collapse of compassion. Societal values disintegrate, and we become more barbaric than the wild animals that care for their young. As we confront the reality of suffering, we must recognize our complicity in this decay.

A WHISPER OF HOPE

Yet, amidst the darkness, a whisper of hope emerges in verses 21–22. The chapter culminates with the powerful proclamation: "The punishment of your iniquity, O daughter of Zion, is accomplished; he will keep you in exile no longer." Adele Berlin describes this moment as "the most helpful note in the entire book of Lamentations."² In these lines, we catch a glimpse of redemption, a slender hope that dares to rise in the midst of despair.

Six hundred years before Christ's birth, Lamentations 4:22 declares, "It is accomplished!" Thinking of the cross of Christ, we might remember his cry of victory, "It is finished!" This phrase resonates deeply with the message of Advent. While the exiles faced bleak circumstances, the dawn of hope began to break through the despair. The promise that God would not abandon

His people signals that the story does not end in darkness. Instead, it hints at the coming light.

In reflecting on this passage, we find that God's faithfulness transcends our darkest moments. The echoes of this promise remind us that the idols we cling to cannot save us. The true Savior comes not from our own efforts or the leaders we idolize but from the One who fulfills every promise. Lamentations 4 ultimately teaches us to see the folly of clinging to our idols and invites us to place our hope in Jesus, the man of sorrows, who enters our pain and brokenness.

EMBRACING LAMENT IN OUR LIVES

As we reflect on Lamentations 4 during the Advent season, we are called to examine our own hearts. To whom or what do we turn when trouble comes? What idols might we need to lay down? How can we find hope amidst our laments? The questions invite us into deeper reflection and encourages us to allow lament to soften our hearts.

In this season of waiting, let us not shy away from the uncomfortable truths of our lives. Lament is a necessary part of our spiritual journey, one that connects us to the heart of God. As we engage in this process, we can begin to see that through our tears, we are also led to hope. As Michael Bruce writes, "In every pang that rends the heart, the Man of Sorrows has a part. He sympathizes with our grief, and to the sufferer sends relief."³ Jesus is God's answer to the brokenness and sin in this world. He is our breath of life; under His shadow, we will dwell among the nations. 

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

1. What idols in your life have been exposed through times of suffering?
2. In what ways can you lean into lament during this Advent season, allowing it to deepen your relationship with God?
3. How can you find hope in the promise that God sees your pain and is faithful to redeem?



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² Berlin, Adele. *Lamentations: A Commentary*. Old Testament Library. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002.

³ This is one of the verses omitted by the *Book of Praise* version of Michael Bruce's hymn, "Where High the Heavenly Temple Stands," found in the *Anglo-Genevan Book of Praise* (2014), Hymn 42.



AVA'S STORY

Ava's story is one of strength and determination. From the beginning, she has faced life's challenges with courage and a smile that seems to light up every room. Those who know her quickly discover that her spirit is every bit as remarkable as her journey.

Over the past few years, Ava has continued to grow into the vibrant, determined young lady we know and love. Her personality shines brighter than ever, full of humour, creativity, and courage. She faces new challenges with the same spirit that's always defined her, but with a deeper sense of confidence and joy.

Ava now works part time at a local second-hand store, where she carefully sorts clothing and takes great pride in doing her job well. It's a role that suits her perfectly—organized, hands-on, and full of opportunities to connect with people.

Ava's interests have also grown and changed. She still loves to colour anything and everything, bringing her bright imagination to life with every page. Ava now enjoys puzzles, delighting in the challenge of fitting pieces together and seeing the picture come to life. She has also developed a wide appreciation for music, often filling her days with everything from upbeat rhythms to gentle melodies that reflect her many moods. Often she will burst into song, praising God while colouring a page or fitting puzzle pieces together.

Her quick wit and infectious laughter continue to draw people in, while her determination inspires those who walk alongside her. Whether she's working, making friends, or finding creative ways to do things her own way, Ava reminds us all that strength isn't about perfection, but perseverance.

Throughout Ava's life, God's love and mercy have been unmistakable. Ava's journey continues to reflect his faithfulness—a living reminder of joy in the face of challenge, and of blessings that overflow through one extraordinary child. We remain grateful for the many ways he's cared for her and for the light she continues to bring into so many lives.

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10

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Happy Birthday James and Ava! We wish you both the Lord's blessing as you continue to shine your light to everyone around you in the coming year. Keep singing and praising God in all you do.

