

Transformed by Missions: Studies in the Sacrificial, Formational, Holistic,  
and Transformational Aspects of Missions

by

Amy Lynn Rinehults

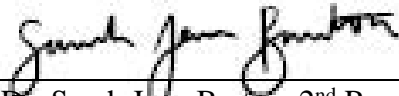
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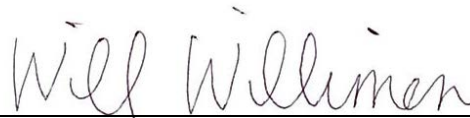
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Dr. Jerusha Neal, 1<sup>st</sup> Reader



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Dr. Sarah Jean Barton, 2<sup>nd</sup> Reader



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Dr. William Willimon, D.Min. Director

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry  
in the Divinity School of Duke University

2022

ABSTRACT

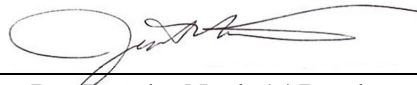
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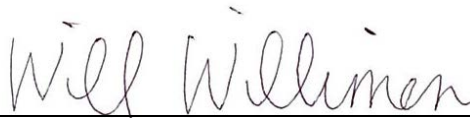
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## **Abstract**

The work of missions has been integral to the church's identity since Jesus commissioned his followers to make disciples, to teach, to baptize, and to tend to the needs of his people. In the long history of the church, missions is a complicated story full of both success and failure. It is also an aspect of the church's identity that has at times been misunderstood, even by those within the church. This project is a response to one local congregation whose attitudes about and participation in missions revealed an opportunity to develop a more complete understanding of missions.

Using Jesus' last words to his disciples and the apostle Paul's writings to the church at Corinth, this project builds the case that biblical missions is sacrificial, formational, holistic, and transformational. In Luke-Acts, Jesus tells the disciples to wait for the Holy Spirit before they go into all the world. They sacrifice their control, their comfort, and their preferences. In Matthew, Jesus tells the disciples not merely to go into the world, but to make disciples as they go, by baptizing and teaching. Their work is formational, as they make more disciples in the same way Jesus formed them. In John, Jesus tells Peter to tend to the physical needs of his people. The work of Peter and all subsequent disciples of Jesus is to treat the needs of others holistically, nurturing the body as well as the soul. Finally, in 2 Corinthians, Paul explains to the Corinthians how giving to the collection for Jerusalem will open the door for their own transformation. This transformation – more than the benefit to the believers in Jerusalem – is what Paul puts forward as a motivation for benevolence.

Taken together, these four truths about missions paint a picture of how and why the modern church still ought to engage in missions. The product that came out of this

congregational and biblical research is a 4-session Bible study with Leader Guides that is designed to teach each of these truths. At the culmination, the Bible study participants will have the opportunity to learn more about specific missions opportunities and to find a way engage in missions through the local church.

## **Dedication**

For my “Church Ladies” – the wise, strong, courageous, beautiful women who have been wrestling through the Bible with me for years. You have laughed with me and cried with me. You have celebrated my highs and sat beside me through the lows. You have spoken hard truths and prayed for big miracles. You have helped me grow from an over-confident teenager into an appropriately-uncertain pastor, wife, and parent. You love me well, and your friendship is one of life’s sweetest gifts.

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To the people of Corinth Reformed Church. I remain humbled and in awe of the wonderful privilege it is that you call me "Pastor," and of the great joy that is mine in living and serving among you. Our stories have been intertwined for nearly 20 years, and I can think of no place I'd rather be for the next 20. And to my fantastic colleagues on staff at Corinth – I could not have completed this degree or this project without your encouragement and support. The sacrifices you have made matter. To my colleagues in the 2019 DMin cohort at Duke – if I had known in August of 2019 what the next two and a half years had in store for us, I would have never had the courage to begin this journey.

I'm so glad I can't see the future. You have challenged me, encouraged me, and shown me unending mercy as we have learned together how to "fumble with love."

To my adviser, Dr. Jerusha Neal, who read many drafts of this work and helped me chisel the shape of this project out of a sometimes-unyielding boulder. Thank you for helping me sift through my thoughts and put them together in meaningful ways. And to my second reader, Dr. Sarah Jean Barton, who guided the congregational research portion of this project. I am certain I would still be stuck somewhere in the IRB process without your wisdom and insight. Lastly, to all the exceptional theologians and church leaders who have led me along this path – the faculty of Lenoir-Rhyne University, the M. Christopher White School of Divinity at Gardner-Webb University, and the Duke Divinity School – thank you! My love for God, the church, and this weird and messy thing called ministry would not be what it is today without your investment in my life.

## **Chapter 1 – Introduction**

### The Presenting Questions

“We have 2,000 people in this church, and we can’t get 20 of them to help with this project! What’s wrong with these people?” “We promoted this work day every week for a month, and we still only had eight people sign up! Why doesn’t anybody care?” “How much longer do we wait for people to sign up for this mission trip before we cancel it?” I have been getting phone calls, text messages, and emails like this regularly since the spring of 2016 when I became the staff liaison to my church’s Board of Missions. These frustrations normally come from lay leaders who try to organize missions events only to end up disappointed at the congregation’s response (or lack of response) to their efforts. These leaders are passionate people who are deeply committed to the causes they champion. They see obvious and immediate needs in the world and believe that we can and should be addressing those problems. From their perspective, we are a large congregation full of people who have plenty of time and energy and money. Our resources abound in almost every imaginable way, yet we fail to get “successful” responses to many of our appeals to share those resources. This raises a series of difficult questions: Why do we struggle to get our people to put their time and effort into the important work of missions? Does the congregation not care about others? Why do they respond quickly and efficiently to some needs, while seeming to ignore others?

I have been standing in the gap between the needs of others and the resources of my congregation for about six years, and bridging that gap continues to be as challenging as ever. Perhaps the most valuable lesson I have learned in those years is that the issues that lie beneath participation in missions are deep and complex. On the surface, the

leaders' observations and questions are fair and valid. It can be very difficult to get our congregation to show up for a work day or commit to going on a mission trip. The people who do participate in these ways include a significant amount of repeat participants from prior trips or projects. As the old adage goes, it seems that 10% of the people are doing 90% of the work. Though I join my lay leaders in wishing more people would get involved in more ways, I am encouraged by the high rate of retention we have for those who have been involved in missions. It is that initial hurdle to active, visible engagement that occupies the attention of my lay leaders. Since that type of participation is what is most easily observed and most easily tracked, I understand the desire to get that type of response and the frustration that comes when it does not happen. On a deeper level, I also know that this perceived lack of participation or interest in missions is almost entirely incongruous with congregation I know. In my years on staff, I have seen countless financial needs met joyfully and immediately, often behind the scenes and without any pomp and circumstance. Although we have challenges showing up for work days, we also have a congregation that controls a significant amount of wealth and is willing and able to fund a wide variety of meaningful projects that are presented to them. This is a strange blessing.

As a pastor, I feel it is my responsibility is to be a non-anxious presence that brings some measure of calm to difficult situations. I often remind our missions leaders that not everyone serves in the same way. I have a well-rehearsed speech about being thankful for those who do participate, and the importance of being patient and attentive to where God is moving in the world. Although I wholeheartedly believe what I say to others, my own series of questions has been churning deep in my soul for years. Why is

embodied participation so low, while financial giving to missions is so high? Why are the same people signing up over and over again for mission trips and projects? What prevents new people from signing up or serving? Is there something about the opportunities we offer that is unappealing or inaccessible for my people? Are the ministries and causes we support as a church different from what our individual members care about? Are the opportunities to serve in missions too physically demanding, too expensive, or offered at the wrong times? What do these trends in participation show about what my congregation believes about missions? What could the trends show about what my congregation believes about themselves?

### The Search for Answers

My search for answers to these questions led me first into congregational research and then into biblical studies. My congregational research began with a survey<sup>1</sup> that I sent to over 1,800 adults who are members or regular attenders of my church. I invited all participants who completed the survey to schedule a follow-up interview with me if they wished to share more of their thoughts and experiences. By the time my research window closed, I had received over 400 surveys and conducted more than 55 interviews. Many interesting findings emerged from that research, which will be discussed in more detail in chapter 2. The biggest takeaway from that work was the realization that I had misunderstood my core problem. Rather than a motivation problem or an accessibility problem, it became obvious that the trends I was seeing were better understood as the

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<sup>1</sup> This survey, its parameters, questions, and results will be explained in greater detail in chapter 2.

results of an educational problem. The first trend I noticed was that less than half of the people I interviewed could provide a definition of missions that aligned with what I understand missions to be.<sup>2</sup> In addition to that – and likely because of that – there was also a lot of inconsistency around what they understood as the purpose or motivation behind missions. Third, and perhaps most pervasively, many people did not fully understand the breadth of ways that they could participate in missions. Those findings illuminated my observed problem in a new way. It makes perfect sense to me that missions participation might not look like what my lay leaders and I want it to be if the congregation doesn't understand what missions is, why they should do it, or how they can do it. With those revelations in mind, I set out to write the rest of this thesis as a tool for my congregation. In this work, I am attempting to give my people what they have shown me they need – a crash course in the biblical understanding and motivations of missions, and some practical ways to apply that information in our shared ministry context.

Transforming the way that missions is done in every church or creating a comprehensive educational program about missions that will suit all contexts is well beyond the scope of this thesis. I am intentionally limiting my work to what my congregation seems to need right now – a clearer understanding of what missions is, a better presentation of why missions matter, and a fuller picture of how they can participate. Although my program will not translate to every other church, I do believe that this one church with all its peculiarities could provide a framework that might have

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<sup>2</sup> Defining “missions” is a complicated question that presents challenges far beyond my local church. In the next chapter, I will provide a brief discussion of the history of missions which will include my working definition.

value in other settings. I think it is unlikely that mine is the only church where resources are underutilized because of lack of clarity about how, why, and where they might be applied. What those resources are and the specific strategies for engaging them in other contexts need to be determined by each church's leaders. My goal is to offer one tool that I hope will make missions better in my own church, not a formula designed to produce a universally relevant missions program.

### The Road Ahead

Chapter 2 will address the challenge of defining "missions." First, I will offer a brief review of academic conversations about missions. Next, I will paint a picture of my congregation's demographics and practices, including a description the missions program as it has existed during my tenure at the church, and observations about participation. This will explain some parts of the challenge of defining "missions" in my local church context. I will further explore that challenge by reviewing my survey and interview findings. Through this congregational research, I discovered that many people in my congregation did not yet have a clear idea of what "missions" means, why missions matters, or what it looks like to participate in missions. Hearing them express their lack of clarity was the ironic way that I gained my own clarity from this research. The field of missions is full of complex questions and difficult tensions. My congregation does not need for those questions to be answered or tensions to be resolved; they need a tool to help them engage the questions and navigate the tensions. The congregational tool that will be produced from this project is a Bible study. Before offering the study, I will



provide my interpretation and reflection on the four biblical texts that will inform the Bible study.

Chapters 3-5 will focus on Jesus' teachings on missions, which are often revealed in his last words to his disciples.<sup>3</sup> There is a certain significance that comes with "lasts." When we know we have one last conversation with a loved one, we make sure it's about the most important things we want them to know. When people are no longer with us, we tend to cling to their last words, the last time we saw them, the last meal we ate together. As Dean Flemming wrote, "Last words matter. A person's final words are often remembered and continue to influence those who remain behind. Sometimes they endure."<sup>4</sup> I contend that Jesus' last words to his disciples matter, and that they reveal a tremendous amount of information about what Jesus wanted these men to do with the rest of their lives. In the post-resurrection accounts of Jesus in Matthew, Luke-Acts, and John, Jesus has some of these "last words" conversations with his disciples. In each case, Jesus' last words have something to do with missions. These passages, like so many others in the gospels, do not mirror one another but rather create a beautiful prism together.

John Howard Yoder suggests that Matthew 28:18-20, Acts 1:8, Luke 24:46-49, and John 20:21-23 can be interpreted as "roughly parallel" passages.<sup>5</sup> I will adjust his pericopes slightly, but I agree with his basic point that there is clear similarity in purpose

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<sup>3</sup> The importance of last words seems to resonate across ethnic and national borders, though it takes a slightly different shape in each culture. In the *Africa Bible Commentary*, Paul Mumo Kisau writes, "A parent's final words to his children are always important. All the family members - and especially the eldest son, who will take over the leadership of the family - listen attentively. Jesus' disciples would have done the same as he spoke to them for the last time." (Paul Mumo Kisau, "Acts of the Apostles" in *Africa Bible Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006], 1326.)

<sup>4</sup> Dean Flemming, *Why Mission?* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015), 12.

<sup>5</sup> John Howard Yoder, *Theology of Mission* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2014), 76.

and vision in each of these narratives. It is sloppy scholarship to flatten the gospel accounts and assume they can be assimilated into a single narrative or a single theology. That is not my intent. But I believe that these three scenes can be held together, allowing each to paint a portion of a compelling picture of missions. When they are considered together, these passages make it clear that “the last thing Jesus did was tell his disciples to go to all nations. So they did. In terms of history, it is assumed that they consciously fulfilled this command.”<sup>6</sup> Jesus’ process of discipleship with his first followers culminated in a call to missions. These final words of Jesus, the disciples’ response to those words, and the implication of those words to faithful discipleship in the church today loom so large that I will devote an entire chapter to each version of the risen Jesus’ final interactions with his disciples.

Chapter 3 will use Jesus’ last words in Luke-Acts to show that missions is sacrificial. When the disciples ask Jesus what his plans are after his resurrection, he tells them to wait in Jerusalem until they receive the Holy Spirit. Once the Holy Spirit comes, Jesus tells them to “be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8)<sup>7</sup> In this chapter, we will first consider the importance of waiting for God’s empowerment and direction. Then, we will turn our attention to what it means to be a witness, before moving on to the questions of to whom we witness and where we witness. In this chapter, we will see a clear pattern of outward movement away from places of comfort that continues indefinitely in all directions. This model of outward motion will demonstrate that dislocation is key to a biblical understanding of missions.

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<sup>6</sup> Yoder, 76.

<sup>7</sup> All scripture quotations are from the 1989 New Revised Standard Version, unless otherwise noted.

Jesus teaches his disciples in Acts 1 that being his follower in a post-resurrection world entails the risk of witnessing outside our comfort zones. The theme of chapter three is that we are faithful disciples when we wait on the Holy Spirit and then make the sacrifice of bearing witness to Jesus wherever we go.

In chapter 4, we will turn our attention to Jesus' final words in the gospel of Matthew to show that missions is formational. Jesus' familiar "Great Commission" in Matthew 28 has often been handled as though the word "go" were the driving verb. As such, it has been a popular call to missions, especially overseas missions to unreached people groups. Though there is value in taking the Gospel to those who have never heard it, I will argue that this is not the main point of Jesus' words in this passage. The imperatives that Jesus uses – make disciples, baptize, and teach – illustrate what he expects his disciples to be doing as they are going throughout the world. Whereas in Acts 1, Jesus told his followers that they would be his witnesses, Matthew 28:19-20 gives shape to what it means to bear witness. Specifically, Jesus is explaining that the work of the church is not just to go places as if the church were a Christian travel agency. The church's job is to create more disciples as it goes, which consists in baptizing and teaching. Chapter 4 will focus on the fact that we are faithful disciples when we form more disciples of Jesus.

Chapter 5 will use Peter's exchange with Jesus in John 21 to establish that missions is holistic. In his final post-resurrection appearance in John's gospel, Jesus reinstates Peter to full standing in the fellowship of the disciples. Through a didactic series of questions, Jesus asks Peter three times if he (Peter) loves him (Jesus). Each time Peter responds in the affirmative, Jesus gives him a simple command. "Feed my lambs"

(v. 15), “Tend my sheep” (v. 16), “Feed my sheep” (v. 17). Though this passage is often read and interpreted as a lesson in Christian leadership, I see leadership as a secondary application of Jesus’ words. In this passage, Jesus explains how all believers should view and respond to other people. Although Jesus’s commands can be read symbolically, I think the simplest reading is that Jesus is telling Peter to meet the physical needs of God’s people. This element of missions, sometimes called benevolence or altruism, is of critical importance. Much like how the “going” in chapter 3 is not particularly valuable apart from the disciple-making in chapter 4, the “feeding” in chapter 5 is inextricably linked with the disciple-making in chapter 4. Trying to make disciples without caring for the whole person and their whole environment is short-sighted; caring for physical needs apart from making disciples fails to be a uniquely Christian endeavor. Missions involves both the physical and spiritual. Chapter 5 will focus on the fact that faithful discipleship requires us to see and respond holistically to the physical and spiritual needs of God’s people.

In chapter 6, we will leave the gospels and focus on Paul’s writings, where we will learn that missions is transformational. In 2 Corinthians 8-9, Paul reminds the Corinthians about the needs of those in Jerusalem and calls them to generous, sacrificial giving. Throughout this passage, he makes a multi-pronged argument to convince the church at Corinth to embrace this task not merely because it benefits others, but because it is good for them too. Specifically, Paul points out that although the Corinthians’ gifts are for the physical benefit of those in Jerusalem, the spiritual benefits will be for the Corinthians themselves. By looking at this example from the first century, we will see that from the very beginning of the church, missions has been understood as

transformational for all parties involved and as a critical part of the discipleship of believers. Although the language traditionally used around doing missions and being the recipients of missions can be problematic, the categories are still somewhat helpful here. Those who “do missions” reap the benefits of obedience and discipleship as much as those who “receive missions” reap the benefits of material and spiritual aid. Paul’s call to the Corinthians is a perennial call to the church to embrace missions for the sake of others and for the transformation of our own souls.

Chapter 7 will be my translation of these biblical principles into an educational program for my congregation. Chapters 3-6 will each be condensed into one lesson of a 4-week Bible study for congregational use. I will adopt a template of inductive Bible studies that has become familiar to my congregation. For each week, I will make a study sheet for the congregation and a leader guide. In addition to explaining the biblical texts, these resources will attempt to overlay the questions of what missions is, why we do missions, and how to participate in missions. The studies will conclude with a wrap-up session that will allow participants to debrief and choose their next steps in missions.

Finally, chapter 8 will recap the key findings and arguments in chapters 3-6, and offer questions for future consideration and research. With this roadmap before us, we turn first to the history of missiology and the challenge of defining a word as complex as “missions.”

## Chapter 2 – Missions in Modern Corinth

### The Challenge of Defining “Missions” in the Academy

One of the significant challenges that I had to address while working on this thesis was the difficulty of defining the word “missions.” I learned quickly in my interviews that a lot of different definitions of “missions” exist within my congregation. Some of my interviewees offered similar perspectives to one other; others were unable to offer any kind of definition at all. As I completed more and more interviews, I began to imagine what would happen if my interviewees tried to talk to one another about missions. There would probably be some pleasant and productive conversations; others would be almost incomprehensible. That inconsistency that I heard from my congregation around what it means to talk about “missions” and our differing ideas of how and why the church should engage in missions are all happening within a much broader conversation. These challenges have also occupied the attention of scholars and academics for decades. The result has been an ever-growing catalogue of excellent scholarship about missions.<sup>1</sup>

One of the great challenges of talking about missions is the language we use. The simple truth is that many words mean different things to different people. The universal church has been a church on a mission since its inception, but the academic study of missiology only gained traction in the West in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> With the rise of the academic field came the introduction and reappropriation of words like mission, missions, missiology, and missional. Darrell Guder and his team, who did ground-

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<sup>1</sup> For a thorough review of the study of missiology, see David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile, *Participating in God's Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 2.

breaking work for modern missions, chose to arrange their work around the word “missional” in the late 1990s because it was unfamiliar to many people. This unfamiliarity meant that the language could be redefined however they wished and could shape a conversation without bringing too much unwanted baggage.<sup>3</sup> Guder’s work is widely known in the field and his contributions to modern conversations about the church and missions are vast. Nonetheless, just a few decades after he entered the conversation, the confusion his team sought to avoid is now appearing as various groups of people have adopted and adapted this language to mean many different things. In my work, I use the word “mission” to refer to the universal church’s overall purpose, “missions” to refer to the specific activities that further that purpose, “missional” to describe an outlook of people who are working toward that purpose, and “missiology” to talk about the study of a missional church that is engaged in missions to advance its mission. These are imperfect definitions that fail to capture all the nuance of the conversation, but it is perhaps a workable starting point. When I talk with my congregation about “missions,” I want them thinking about God-inspired, sacrificial work (Chapter 3) that helps to make disciples of Jesus (Chapter 4) and meets both the spiritual and physical needs of others (Chapter 5). I also want them to participate in missions with the expectation that while they help others, they will also be transformed into more faithful disciples (Chapter 6).

Even after language – however insufficient it may be – is agreed upon, there is another level of uncertainty around what it means to say that a church is “missional” or oriented toward missions. Sally Brown offers a helpful, succinct summary of the four

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<sup>3</sup> Darrell L. Guder, *Called to Witness: Doing Missional Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eermands, 2015), 63.

core commitments of what she calls the “missional initiative” as it has developed since the 20<sup>th</sup> century: (1) a “robustly Trinitarian understanding of God’s redemptive work in the world,”<sup>4</sup> (2) a view of the church as a “sent” community, (3) “the conviction that the Spirit of God continues to work redemptively not only in the church, but also in the wider world,”<sup>5</sup> and (4) the belief that God’s purposes in redemption include the whole person and the whole of creation. Though not always described in these exact terms, these basic principles are widely accepted by many academics working in missions and its related fields. As I consider these core commitments from my context, I see opportunities for growth within my congregation. We are not as “robustly Trinitarian” as we could be, we are not consistently inclined to see ourselves as a “sent” community, and we sometimes hold too rigidly to the distinctions between the church and the world, the body and the spirit, the sacred and the secular. I am sure that my congregation is not alone in these challenges, and I am equally sure that this project will not be the final solution to the deep, complex identity issues at stake.

### *Robust Trinitarianism and the missio Dei*

At the 1952 International Mission Council meeting in Willingen, Germany, the groundwork was laid for a Trinitarian view of missions, which developed into what is referred to today as the *missio Dei*.<sup>6</sup> The term *missio Dei*, much like the terms “mission,” “missions,” and “missional” which were mentioned above, has been widely embraced but

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<sup>4</sup> Sally A. Brown, *Sunday’s Sermons for Monday’s World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 10.

<sup>5</sup> Brown, 12.

<sup>6</sup> Van Gelder and Zscheile, 175.



inconsistently applied. From its origins, the conversation that gave life to this phrase put forth the idea that the Trinity reveals God as a sending God.<sup>7</sup> God sent Jesus and the Holy Spirit, and this same God also sends the church. This new understanding moved the locus of initiation of the church's work from the church to God. "Instead of viewing the church as having a mission, the [new] understanding was that God's mission has a church."<sup>8</sup> The *missio Dei*, informed by a "robust Trinitarianism," places primary emphasis on the movement between the persons of the Trinity and extends that movement into God's interaction with creation. Although I believe that every person in my congregation would affirm the existence of the Trinity, I am less sure they would draw a connection between the Trinity and missions. In my years at Corinth, these two concepts have generally been presented as distinct ideas.

In my congregation, primary focus is usually given to the life and work of Jesus. A Jesus-focused church is not a bad thing, but it can lead us to appreciate and identify with the redeeming work of God apart from life-giving and life-sustaining roles of the Trinity. It can also leave us without a proper notion of God as a sending God, which in turn limits our ability to understand our place in missions. If we do not think about the ways that all the persons of the Trinity are engaged in sending, we can easily miss seeing ourselves as the "sent community." Changing this perspective would require a long process, but I have a few initial steps to offer here. In chapter 3, I will attempt to reclaim

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<sup>7</sup> For a very concise and accessible description of the Father as the sender of the Son and the Spirit, the Son as sender of the Spirit and the Apostles, and the Holy Spirit as the sender of Jesus and the Apostles, see Christopher J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God's People* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2010), 210-211.

<sup>8</sup> Van Gelder and Zscheile, 177.

the importance of the Holy Spirit in our understanding of missions. In chapter 5, I will look at missions as a holistic effort that is designed to care for both the body and the soul that God created. In an indirect way, I hope these chapters begin to spark a somewhat more “robust Trinitarianism” among my people and to begin to get them thinking about God’s movement in and through the world.

### *The “Sent” Community*

In its classical use, the *missio Dei* shows us that a sending God directs the work of a sent church. Writing this thesis has illuminated for me that my congregation does not yet consider itself a “sent” community. There are some congregants who would certainly agree that being the sent community of God is at least a component of the church’s role, but this is not the church’s perspective on a large scale. Thinking of ourselves as “sent” is not part of our congregational DNA. As I will describe in more detail later in this chapter, my congregation grew out of a small group of German Reformed settlers who came to the “new world” to escape religious persecution. They came to the Catawba Valley with their prayer books and hymn books in search of a safe place to practice their religion. Translating their worship into languages others could understand was not a top priority; evangelism and church growth did not concern them.

Our founders’ deep desire was to have a church that would serve as a refuge from the world outside, which they had experienced as a harsh and hostile place. Today, in what we hope are the closing chapters of the Covid-19 pandemic, we still hear the cries of some of our people who want the church to be a place of safety where they can seek solace from the concerns and troubles of the outside world. They are looking to the

church as place of security. Those voices do not represent everyone in the congregation, but the question of whether we are sent into the world or a refuge from the world is a point of unspoken disagreement. In reality, we are probably trying to be both.

### *This or That*

The tension between seeing ourselves as sent or secure highlights the part of missions discussions that I find most challenging and most fascinating. In nearly all areas of the human experience, we face the temptation to try to classify things and put them into separate buckets, assuming each reality is different from the next. Our world is the tidiest when things are black or white, good or bad, right or wrong. The practice and study of missions have left us with only one possible conclusion: all those buckets are leaky. The reality of God's work in the world refuses to let us use simple organizational structures. Instead of black and white, we see a lot of gray. We have a host of theological problems that are difficult to unravel, but get far more complicated if we try to force false dichotomies upon them.

As soon as the church begins to think of itself as a "sent" community, there is a community of outsiders that is necessarily created. It is impossible for the church to go out as a sent community without drawing lines around who is in and who is out, and without some boundaries around what is church and what is not church. This stands not in contrast to, but in tension with, the core belief of the missional movement that says that God is at work throughout the world and in all of creation. Almost immediately, it becomes obvious that there is a certain delicate balance that is required to have any kind of meaningful conversation about missions. There is something distinct about the church

as the people of God. But thinking of the church as a “sent” community can lead us to hold too firm a distinction between the church and the world. From there, it is a short distance to the unhealthy divisions between “us” and “them,” “insiders” and “outsiders.” Thinking in these terms can lead to some dangerous and destructive outcomes.

Historically, the Western missionary movement was prompted by a desire to go to all corners of the world and save the lost, making converts to Christianity. Although some missionaries achieved this goal, the history of Western missions is not an entirely positive story. Indeed, the successes of the movement have often been overshadowed by the scrutiny of its unintended negative outcomes.<sup>9</sup> Missionaries brought humanitarian aid, but they also brought disease. They helped preserve and codify languages, but they also stripped cultures of their unique practices and rituals. They spread the Gospel, but they also paved the way for colonization. Thankfully, some of these trends are beginning to change as people of different backgrounds are invited to conversations about missions, and as issues of race, power, and culture are dealt with more directly and more honestly.<sup>10</sup> At this point, there are some changes happening in how we think about and do missions, but change can be slow and difficult. Guder, reflecting on the decades since he first wrote about the missional church suggests that “the ancient doctrinal traditions of Western Christianity, which have looked upon themselves as normative Christian thought for a very long time, are to be seen as one culturally defined cluster of theologies interacting

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<sup>9</sup> For an excellent summary of many of the critiques of the missionary movement, see Dana L. Robert, *Christian Mission* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), especially chapter 4, “The Politics of Missions: Empire, Human Rights, and Land.”

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Sharon Bieber’s *Outside the Margins* (Tellwell Talent, 2020); John Perkins’ *With Justice for All* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2014); or Kanat Yesmagambetov’s *What’s Wrong with Western Missions?* (Greenville, SC: Ambassador International, 2021).

with other growing clusters of culturally diverse ways of doing theology.”<sup>11</sup> Widening this concept of what is normative for Christian faith and life is difficult, messy work. Yet at the same time, it is essential work, especially for the Western white church. Voices of non-white, non-male, non-Westerners are relatively recent additions to missions, but they are beginning to emerge. When possible, I have tried to engage those voices in this thesis.

As for me, I have at times been hesitant to contribute to the conversation around missions. Part of that hesitation comes from my awareness of my youth and inexperience; another component is my awareness of my own privilege. The voices that have driven this conversation over the past several decades have represented many of the groups of which I am a member – white, evangelical, protestant, American. I have been left to wonder what I could possibly contribute to the conversation that would be of any real value. Yet as I wrestled through the core purpose and conviction at stake behind this project, I realized that it was perhaps the voice of an “insider” that was needed. That is because I see my work as a pastoral message to my own congregation, not a proclamation to the universal church.

My hope is that my voice will communicate to my congregation in a non-threatening way that our old categories are no longer serving us. We can no longer think of missions as something us “haves” do for those unfortunate “have-nots” in our world. We cannot think of missions as the tool by which we shape those around us into our own image. We cannot stand within the walls of the church, looking at the outside world with fear or contempt. Our God is up to something that is at the same time both beautifully

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<sup>11</sup> Guder, 45.

complex and shockingly simple. Participating in the mission of God in the world is a process that is transformative as it transgresses those boxes and boundaries. Now is the time for the church to re-think what it means to be holy<sup>12</sup> and what it means to be faithful. For congregations like mine, that means getting messy in the world and having the humility to learn from others around us. My congregation doesn't necessarily need to be told to do missions, but we do need to reflect on how and why we do missions and to adjust some of our expectations. This requires a paradigm shift, in which we are not coming to missions from a position of power, but as humble disciples<sup>13</sup> who are ready to learn both from Jesus and from the world around us. We still have so much to learn when it comes to missions.

Guder rightly notes that in our modern world, “the challenge before us now is to conduct this conversation as partners, moving beyond the imbalanced relationships of the missionary era with its ranking of “sending” and “receiving” churches and cultures.”<sup>14</sup> Many other excellent voices have joined him in this call, and many have begun the good work of reframing missions for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In my context, we have begun to inch the conversation forward by appealing to the likes of Robert Lupton<sup>15</sup> and Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert<sup>16</sup> to wrestle with the question of whether our well-intentioned efforts have

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<sup>12</sup> In some evangelical circles, the world is considered impure or defiled, a distinctly secular entity that ought to remain separated from the holiness of the church. I particularly appreciate Okesson's response when he says “I believe deeply in purity, but the church is pure not by distancing itself from public life” (Gregg Okesson, *A Public Missiology* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020], 26).

<sup>13</sup> Brown notes that “ironically (and sadly), missional thinkers have figuratively and literally walked right past hundreds of congregations of color from whom they could have learned much. Congregations of color have been deeply invested in the *missio Dei* beyond their sanctuary walls for decades, supporting with scant resources a costly witness for racial and economic justice before the world over generations.” (Brown, 31)

<sup>14</sup> Guder, 29.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Lupton, *Toxic Charity* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008).

<sup>16</sup> Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2012).

at times been misguided. We have had modest small-scale success engaging Jemar Tisby<sup>17</sup> as a conversation partner to consider the systemic problems of race and our role in those issues. These conversations have begun as something like grass-roots movements, with small book study groups coming together to read and reflect on topics of race and power. Though the discussions have been healthy and positive, the impact has been limited to a handful of individuals. These are good steps, but each of these efforts is a micro-shift in perspective, and each shows me how much further we have to go. That distance, however, is probably not one that we can cover in a single step. There are leaders who are far more visionary than I, who offer solutions that feel unattainable in my world. For example, John Perkins offers a provocative call to community development (which overlaps much of what I envision when I discuss missions), centered around relocation, reconciliation, and redistribution.<sup>18</sup> His vision of social, racial, and economic justice is sweeping. He paints a picture of a modern Jubilee that would be a miracle of biblical proportions if it were realized. However, his strategies are not a starting point my congregation would accept, and his voice is one that many members of my congregation would hear as accusatory. His goals are admirable, but his presentation would not connect with my people on a large scale.

This is where I find myself entering the conversation of missions. I hope that I have listened well to other voices, and I hope that I have learned lessons from those who don't look like me or live like me. I also hope that I might translate those voices and those lessons into a format that will help my congregation adopt a new approach to

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<sup>17</sup> Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019).

<sup>18</sup> John Perkins, *With Justice for All* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2014).

missions and a new appreciation for God’s relentless love for all of creation. And in the end, I hope to serve a church that sees missions as the sacrificial, formational, holistic, transformational process that it was designed to be.

## The Challenge of Defining “Missions” in Corinth

### *Corinth’s History and Identity*

One of the titles that I bear proudly is that of Associate Pastor of Corinth Reformed Church in Hickory, North Carolina. Corinth is an amazing church that defies all simple categories I can imagine. I have yet to come up with a short answer to the question “Corinth Reformed Church - what kind of church is that?” My answer usually begins, “How much time do you have?” Corinth is the largest congregation in the Western North Carolina Association of the United Church of Christ (UCC). Yet, to call it a “large” church does not feel quite right, and to call it a “UCC church” also misses its heart and soul. I will do my best to write a fair and honest description of this place I have chosen to call home, but I take up this task knowing that any description I offer of the church, its people, its programs, or myself will be hopelessly incomplete.

In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the area now known as Hickory, North Carolina was called Hickory Tavern. In its early days, the town had little more than a railroad stop and a tavern, which lent the area its name. Some members of the German Reformed Church decided to settle in the region and sought a pastor to conduct Reformed worship services in Hickory Tavern. They found Dr. Jeremiah Ingold, who was willing to lead outdoor services under a brush arbor in the warm months and in a private home in the cooler months. On May 22, 1869, twenty-two charter members founded Corinth Reformed



Church. For the first five years of its official existence, Corinth's worship services were held in a local school as the church worked to establish itself. The church did not have a building of its own until 1874, when a member donated land and \$500 was raised to build the first structure. In 1887, Corinth's second home was built in downtown Hickory. It was the first brick church in Hickory and contained the first pipe organ in a place of worship in Hickory. As the congregation grew, they realized their second building was too small. In 1909, the cornerstone was laid for Corinth's third building, another brick church in downtown Hickory that was noted for its beautiful architecture and stained-glass windows. The congregation loved this church and moved out of it only when the space again proved to be too small. By the 1950s, it was obvious that an expansion or a move would be necessary. Land was again donated, this time 10 acres in the woods about a mile north of downtown Hickory. On September 6, 1959, the congregation held a dedication for its fourth and current home – a Gothic-style stone church. The church that began as a handful of worshippers and a borrowed pastor under an outdoor arbor had turned into a thriving congregation with arguably the most beautiful and ornate facilities in the area.

While these geographic moves were happening, there was also a shift in denominational identity taking place. At its founding, Corinth's name was Corinth Reformed Church. In 1934, the Reformed church merged with the Evangelical Synod of North America, and the Evangelical and Reformed Church was born. Corinth Reformed Church became Corinth Evangelical and Reformed Church. In 1957, the Evangelical and Reformed churches merged with the Congregational and Christian churches to form the United Church of Christ. Corinth changed its name to Corinth Reformed United Church

of Christ, as a nod to both its Reformed past and its new UCC affiliation. In the first decade of the 2000s, spurred by controversy in and around the denomination, the church had its own conflict about affiliating with the UCC and being identified as a UCC church. After a lengthy process of discernment, Corinth decided to remain in the denomination, but returned to its original name – Corinth Reformed Church.

The changes in the church’s name have been a decent reflection of the changing theology and outlook of the church’s leadership. Over the past 60 years, Corinth has been served by a progressive, moderate, and then conservative pastor (now often referred to as the “senior pastor” to reflect the larger church size and the increased number of ordained pastors on staff). Corinth has been many things during its 150-year history, and it now has the unusual role of providing a home for many who consider themselves evangelical, conservative, orthodox or traditional within one of the most socially progressive and politically liberal denominations in the country. While there are many points of disagreement between the prevailing views of the denomination at large and this local congregation, there is a deeply-held belief among most of Corinth’s leadership that it is both possible and profitable to remain in fellowship with those who understand God, the Bible, and the world differently. As every prospective member of Corinth has heard in the past 10-15 years, “we need them, and they need us.”

Corinth declines to provide any comprehensive statement of faith or beliefs, choosing instead to focus on the centrality of Jesus as Lord, and the truth contained in the historic Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds. These are deemed “Essentials.” Everything else is classified as “Non-Essentials” – those things which Christians can disagree about, but should not divide over. Though it creates an imperfect unity, the driving motivation

behind this is to keep the people of God together and to help them live in peace with one another. After nearly 30 years under the leadership of the same senior pastor, Corinth has become known as a place of stability and has often served as a refuge for those leaving other churches in times of conflict. As of late 2021, it is a congregation of nearly 2,000 members<sup>19</sup> whose attendance is split between three very different worship services – including two that happen simultaneously at 11am, and one that is marked by two pastors preaching a shared sermon at 8:30am. One service meets in a multi-purpose space that is outfitted with state-of-the-art audio-visual equipment, where the worship is led by a full band with electric guitars, keyboards, and drums. At the same time, there is a service happening under the soaring ceilings of a Gothic sanctuary, where worshippers are led in hymns by a choir and accompanied by an 80-rank pipe organ.

It's a beautiful, complicated, strange place full of all sorts of Christians from different backgrounds. At Corinth, the unofficial slogan is “You Matter. You Belong. You Serve.” The “You Matter” part points to each person’s intrinsic worth as someone who has been created in the image of God. “You Belong” indicates that there is a place for each person in the community. That place is most fully realized by participation in some type of small group (class, Bible study, life group, etc.). “You Serve” indicates that each person in the church body has something to offer, and that their gifts are valued by the church. The goal is for each person to be actively involved in one small group and one place of service, but neither is required. Each person – member or attender – is

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<sup>19</sup> In Corinth’s tradition, adolescents are permitted to join the church through the process of Confirmation, a class which can be taken in 6<sup>th</sup> grade or later. This number of members, then, includes only those in 6<sup>th</sup> grade and up who have chosen to join the church; there are also hundreds of children who are classified as “Children of Members” in our church records.

encouraged to seek God and to respond to God's calling and movement in their lives in the most faithful way they know how. Our job as a church staff and leaders is to provide many different opportunities, to encourage people to take advantage of those opportunities, and to constantly remember that one size does not fit all when it comes to church involvement.

### *My Story Joins Corinth's Story*

In April 2016, I joyfully and fearfully accepted a call to serve as an Associate Pastor to the lovely, messy mix of people that make up Corinth. Though I had been a member of Corinth for nearly a decade and a regular attender of the church for several years before that, the job that came out of those familiar surroundings felt foreign to me. What I was being offered was a newly created position that had been invented because I was available and looking for a job and the church leaders felt I had something they needed. I have often affectionately referred to this position as a hybrid of a missions pastor and an executive pastor.

According to the job offer, I would provide support for the church's Board of Missions, while also having primary oversight of the church's support staff and directing the communications and technology efforts of the church. The staff I knew; the communications and technology I felt confident I could learn. The idea of taking over a missions program was utterly terrifying. Prior to stepping into this role, my experience with any kind of church-based missions was limited to one youth mission trip I had chaperoned in 2005 that was a comedy of errors. I had only foggy ideas around the concept of "missions," and I felt underqualified and unprepared for this mysterious

component of the job. Nevertheless, I was certain God had led me to this place for some reason and I trusted the discernment of the church leaders who had offered me a call to this position.

My own understanding of missions has grown tremendously during my time at Corinth. I have learned how to articulate what I understand to be a biblical view of missions. I have gained a deeper appreciation for the variety of missionaries and missions organizations that exist in the world. I have seen first-hand the ways that missions can transform communities and individuals. I have watched as lives are miraculously redeemed and restored. I have debriefed mission teams and heard dozens of people have the realization, “I think this helped me more than I helped anyone.” It is a beautiful, unpredictable process that defies my efforts to control or manage it. And with remarkable speed, this terrifying part of my job offer became my favorite part of my job.

Although I now deeply love the “Missions Pastor” hat that I don, I wear it while fully aware of the tensions that exist all around me. Despite serving a large church with significant congregational assets, involvement in missions has been far less robust than I have expected or hoped. Our programs are not failing; quite to the contrary, there has been a steady stream of trips and projects, and financial giving toward missions continues to grow year over year, even during a global pandemic. What is curious to me is how a certain subset of my congregation is deeply invested in missions, while others seem happily disconnected. Anecdotally, I have observed what seems to be a perception that missions is the responsibility of a small group of people who do a very specific set of things. Those who physically go and participate in trips and work days have consistently been the same members of the congregation. Those who support missions in less tangible

or visible ways don't always consider their parts to be "real missions." This has led me to wonder what my people actually believe missions is, what they perceive their role to be, where everybody else is, and why more people aren't participating in various missions efforts in whatever ways they are able. I have to imagine that these questions are not unique to my congregation; how they are answered and what to do with those answers is.

I write this thesis as a case study based in my own congregational context. The people within my church are overwhelmingly white, well-educated, theologically and politically conservative evangelicals, the majority of whom live well above the median income of the United States. Most of the adults are straight and married with children. Of the two-parent households with minor children, many families have one parent who works outside the home and one parent who focuses on home and family responsibilities. There are some outliers within the congregation, and those people are critical to my congregational research. My outliers are not necessarily representative of those who would be considered marginalized in the broader American society. My outliers could be single parents, senior citizens, people with physical disabilities or chronic "invisible illnesses," and low-income earners. They are generally not people of color, immigrants, or people with under-represented/minority gender and sexual identities. Although it is a valid and interesting question, I am not trying to determine through this project why the outliers in my congregation are not a more diverse group that more fully represents the diversity of the church in America. I am also not going to offer strategies for diversifying my congregation. That is a different issue that demands a different project. My intent is to look at the congregation as it exists today and try to figure out what factors are

influencing when, how, and why my people are choosing to participate or not to participate in missions.

There's a slogan that comes up throughout Corinth's history: "Missions Pays." In the church's history, we have been the recipients of generous giving that allowed our founders to have a pastor, then a temporary home, then land. Although it started on the receiving end of generosity, Corinth has grown over the past century and a half into a strong, thriving church that holds a prominent place in the life of Hickory. Today, the church's Gothic cathedral dominates the landscape, serving not only as an easily identified landmark, but also as an anchor point in the community. It is the site of worship services, community-focused holiday events, cultural and arts programs, school concerts, support and recovery groups, a well-respected weekday preschool program, and much more. Corinth has come to be known throughout the community as a place of internal stability and strength that mirrors its great stone façade.

Many years ago, Corinth stopped understanding itself to be the recipient of missions efforts and shifted into a provider mentality.<sup>20</sup> Within the church today, financial and material resources abound. Though there are many ways to engage in missions, one of the easiest to quantify over a period of years is financial giving. Corinth has a reputation in the Hickory community of being a wealthy church.<sup>21</sup> There is some

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<sup>20</sup> The distinction between the recipient and provider of missions efforts is a false one, which will be discussed in later chapters. The *perception* of the roles being distinct, however, is very real and very deeply felt by certain segments of my congregation.

<sup>21</sup> Depending on the observer, what it means to be a "wealthy church" could vary. "Wealthy" is of course a subjective descriptor. Likewise, a church could be considered "wealthy" because its individual members tend to have substantial wealth or because the church as an organization is financially secure. I suspect that those who have called Corinth a "wealthy church" have at times had both in mind. As stated above, many families within Corinth's congregation are considered "wealthy" by comparison to the median household income in America, which was \$67,521 in 2020, according to the Census Bureau

truth to that perception, as the congregation is blessed to have some of the finest church buildings and grounds in the county and to own them without debt. Even through difficult times, there is routinely money in the bank and there have been very few situations over the past several decades that have prompted financial concerns on the church level. There is an obvious upside to having this type of wealth, though it has also been misunderstood at times. That wealth has been criticized by some as being self-supporting – paying for large buildings and expansive grounds for our own glory. It is true that buildings and grounds cost money, but there has long been a desire to use the church’s wealth for the benefit of the community and the work of missions. That has been expressed by housing a community garden on the campus and providing space free of charge for support group meetings, trainings for local ministries, and meetings for para-church organizations. The wealth of the church also supports missions in more direct ways.

When I stepped into my role as “Missions Pastor” in 2016, the church had a missions budget of \$245,000. This represented 14% of the total church budget and was the penultimate step in a 5-year goal to increase missions giving from 10% to 15% of the total budget. As I write this thesis in the fall of 2021, the Board of Missions at Corinth is overseeing an annual budget of \$332,000 which continues to represent 15% of the total church budget. This is the minimum amount that the church gives to missions annually. Individual contributions to missions, special offerings, and other projects routinely make that number even higher. Over the past five years as the church engaged in a capital

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(<https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2021/demo/p60-273.html>). Although the wealth of the whole and the wealth of its component parts are undeniably connected, in this section, I have in view the perception that the church as an entity is “wealthy.”



campaign, 10% of receipts were designated for missions grants. In total, an additional \$380,000 was given as grants to several of Corinth's missions partners, over the regular budgeted missions giving. Those funds were the lead gift for the construction of a community center in Nicaragua, a gift toward the expansion of a recovery program in Hickory, an entire Habitat house in Hickory, and a gift toward the expansion of a pregnancy care center in Hickory. In my time at Corinth, I have never seen a lack of financial support for missions.<sup>22</sup> It is indisputable that the congregation is willing and able to put its financial resources behind the work of missions. What has been less obvious and less encouraging is seeing how resources other than finances are used for missions. More traditional giving – whether cash gifts or supply collections – has long been an easy task met by robust results, while getting people to give their time and physical energies has often felt more difficult.

Before I opened the first page of the first book to research this project, or wrote my first interview question, or even set pen to paper to compose the first draft of the thesis proposal, I felt a deep desire for each person in my church to see themselves as part of our missions program and to see missions as central to who we are as a church. At the outset, I didn't know where the breakdown was, but the observable participation made it clear that we had veered off track somewhere in the process. Only one type of participation (financial) was widely embraced, and more physical programs struggled to

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<sup>22</sup> As I finalize this project in the spring of 2022, I am in the midst of allocating nearly \$100,000 that was donated to support our mission partners in eastern Europe as Russian forces invaded Ukraine. The congregation gave generously and immediately to this cause – even before we were able to show them a plan of where the money would go or how it would help. This is merely the most recent in a long line of examples of financial generosity in missions at Corinth.

attract new participants. To begin to figure out this disconnect, I launched two parallel research projects. The first project was to review the ways we had promoted missions from 2017-2019 (the justification for that window of time is provided below). The second project, which ended up being the most time-consuming and most rewarding part of researching this thesis, involved surveying and interviewing my congregation. That research illuminated the situation before me and the work that needed to be done in my congregation.

### *Congregational Research Part 1 – Objective Data*

My first research task was to identify the missions context in which my congregation was operating. In order to do this, I decided to look back over 3 years of data (2017-2019) to see how we had presented missions to the church. I chose the years 2017-2019 so that I could evaluate what had “normally” happened under my supervision without the influence of the Covid-19 pandemic. I was assigned to oversee and support Corinth’s missions program in mid-2016, so the data from 2016 and earlier is less available to me and was not in any way shaped by me. By 2017, the programs were largely planned by me, promoted by me, or coordinated through me. Before surveying the congregation to determine how they had chosen to engage in missions, I wanted to make sure I had a good handle on what missions opportunities I had put before them. I was most interested in what we had given space to in print materials, what variety of opportunities we promoted, and how those opportunities compared to the ways our people had participated in missions.

## Communications About Missions

In looking through the available records (church newsletters, bulletins, social media posts) from my 3-year target timeline, I found many missions opportunities that were advertised. We sent teams to domestic and international destinations, organized work days in our community, hosted supply drives, and asked for special financial gifts. The opportunities ranged from quick, easy and inexpensive projects like dropping off canned foods or paper products on a Sunday morning to time-consuming, physically-challenging and expensive things like domestic disaster relief trips or medical mission trips to eastern Europe. I noticed a good variety in the types of opportunities offered in terms of the locations, the “recipients” of the mission work, and the types of projects. In the communications from 2017-2019, I found 55 announcements about domestic trips, 90 announcements about international trips, 232 announcements about one-day work projects, 122 announcements about ongoing or regular volunteer needs, 118 announcements about supply drives or collections, and 58 announcements about financial needs. There were also 55 invitations to pray for missionaries and missions projects.

## Mission Trip Participation

Although mission trips are not the only way to participate in missions or even the best way to do missions, like financial giving, they are one of the easier ways to quantify and track involvement. Many of the other missions opportunities we promoted (work days, supply drives, needs of partner organizations, etc.) did not provide enough of a feedback loop to be terribly useful for tracking participation. In those cases, people were encouraged to serve, but we had not set up any way to allow them to report back about

their service or to track their involvement. This is perhaps a shortcoming to be addressed in the planning of future missions projects. For this research, however, it means that how often we talked about those opportunities was one interesting data set, but how often people participated would need to be self-reported, as will be described below. The only type of missions project that I had the ability to analyze and evaluate objectively for participation trends was mission trips.

In 2017, we offered 4 mission trips – one to Guatemala, two to Nicaragua, and one to Naples, FL. Guatemala and Nicaragua were community development trips that focused on things like feeding and education ministries; Florida was a hurricane relief clean-up trip. There was a total of 60 participant slots available. In 2018, we offered 8 mission trips – three to Houston, TX, one to Jacksonville, NC, two to Nicaragua, and two to Moldova. The domestic trips were all hurricane relief clean-up and rebuilding; Nicaragua was community development; one Moldova team did a medical mission trip, while the other Moldova team was a business development trip. There were 68 participant slots available. In 2019, we offered 5 trips – two to Nicaragua, one to Moldova, one to Vermont, and one to Ocracoke Island, NC. Nicaragua was community development; Moldova was a medical trip; Vermont was a soccer camp VBS, and Ocracoke was hurricane relief work. There was a total of 49 participant slots available.

Over the course of those three years, we sent 17 different teams on trips, and had space for up to 177 participants. What is interesting to me is that in any given year, the number of slots used per person never goes above 1.15, meaning we had a few people take more than one trip within a calendar year, but it was a relatively low percentage of the people. Taking the three years together, and removing myself from the equation, since

I led many of the trips and was the single most frequent participant<sup>23</sup>, there were 166 participant slots and 113 participants for an average of 1.47 participant slots per person. These numbers mean that, while we were engaging a variety of people throughout each year, when looking at trends year over year, we had a lot of “frequent fliers.” This confirmed my anecdotal observations that many of the same people participate in mission trips year after year. This, however, only dealt with mission trips and it only dealt with the question of what was happening, not why. To learn more about what my congregation was doing and what their motivations were, I needed to ask them to self-report on their involvement.

### *Congregational Research Part 2 – Survey Parameters and Findings*

Under the guidance of Duke University Campus Institutional Review Board<sup>24</sup>, I crafted a survey to distribute to the congregation. My survey asked respondents to identify the ways they had participated in mission within the past 5 years<sup>25</sup> (domestic and cross-cultural trips, work days, special projects/programs, ongoing volunteer work, supply collections/drives, financial gifts, or “other” – with a space to specify what they had done). Those who reported that they had participated in missions were asked who organized or led the effort, how they heard about the need or opportunity, and why they chose to serve in the ways they did. Those who did not select any of the options in the

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<sup>23</sup> During 2017-2019, I went on 11 of the 17 trips; the next highest was a tie between two people who each went on 5 trips.

<sup>24</sup> Surveys and interviews for this project were conducted under Protocol #2021-0570.

<sup>25</sup> Although the 5-year window did not exactly align with my leadership of the Corinth missions program, I decided that this would be appropriately close, and a familiar enough number to not raise any further confusion, as a more specific time frame might.

first question were asked why they chose not to participate. All respondents were then asked to provide their age, marital status, whether or not they had dependent children in the home, their employment status, their general schedule demands, their perceived financial comfort, and whether or not they had any long-term physical disabilities or invisible illnesses.<sup>26</sup> Though some of these questions were clear and unambiguous (“What is your age?”), the majority were highly subjective (“On a scale where 1 is ‘Very Uncertain’ and 10 is ‘Very Comfortable,’ how would you describe your household’s current financial situation?”). This was an intentional move, as I wanted a mixture of objective and subjective data to help me understand the motivations behind my congregation and their areas of action and inaction.

It was important to me to distribute my survey as widely as possible, while keeping the population of eligible respondents narrow enough to make the data useful and meaningful to my research task. Using the church database, I identified 1,818 individuals<sup>27</sup> who were members or regular attenders<sup>28</sup> at Corinth, who were 18 years or

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<sup>26</sup> The question of invisible illness is particularly subjective, as not all individuals are equally aware of the terminology, and those who are familiar with the language do not always agree on what is and is not an invisible illness. For the purposes of this survey, the question was phrased, “Do you live with any “invisible illnesses,” including, but not limited to: ADHD, Anxiety, Allergies, Arthritis, Asthma, Autism Spectrum, Bipolar Disorder, Brain Injuries, Chronic Fatigue, Chronic Pain, Crohn’s/Colitis, Depression, Diabetes, Epilepsy, Fibromyalgia, Lupus, Migraines, Multiple Sclerosis, Personality Disorders, or Ulcers?”

<sup>27</sup> This report was generated on August 16, 2021 and includes all those individuals who met the inclusion criteria on that date.

<sup>28</sup> Research suggests that Millennials, even those who express a religious preference, are less likely to be members of institutions like churches than Generation X, Baby Boomers, or Traditionalists were. [For a more detailed discussion of religious affiliation and church membership by generation, see Jeffrey M. Jones, “U.S. Church Membership Down Sharply in Past Two Decades,” Gallup.com (Gallup, November 20, 2021), <https://news.gallup.com/poll/248837/church-membership-down-sharply-past-two-decades.aspx>.] Because of this trend, I chose to include those who regularly attend Corinth in addition to those who have taken the formal route of membership. The challenge of this move is that there is not a clear and consistent definition of what makes one a “regular attender.” For this project, I needed to create some sort of criteria. I classified “regular attenders” as those who had attended worship or a small group (Bible study or Sunday school class) at Corinth at least 50% of weeks that meetings were held over the previous 12 months. There

older, and who had provided either an email address or a mailing address to the church. I sent my survey by mail to all who had provided mailing addresses (1,039 households), and by email to all who had provided email addresses (1,541 individuals). In the four-week window that I allotted for people to take the survey online or by paper copy, I received a total of 406 anonymous responses representing just over 22% of the potential respondents.

Before turning our attention to the results of the surveys and interviews, a brief word of clarification about terminology may be helpful. Throughout this discussion of the survey and interview findings, the terms “respondents” or “interviewees” will be used when talking about those who completed the survey or interview, respectively. The terms “participants” and “non-participants” will refer to those who self-identify as participating in missions or not, respectively. When there is disagreement between how people classify themselves and the activities they report (i.e., someone who says they are involved in missions but refer to things that lie outside my definition of missions, or those who say they do not participate in missions but describe activities that are in line with my definition of missions), I have opted to keep the person’s self-identified label of “participant” or “non-participant.” I believe that these points of disagreement between labels and activities further underscores my overall finding that the congregation would benefit from more education about missions.

Of the 406 survey respondents, 358 (88%) indicated that they had participated in one or more types of mission activity within the previous five years. Though it is

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is nothing particularly significant about this threshold, it is merely the one I chose in order to identify my target population for survey distribution.

reasonable to assume that people who would agree to participate in a survey about missions might disproportionately represent those who care about and are engaged with missions, 88% identifying themselves as participants was considerably higher than I expected. The most frequent type of participation the respondents reported was a designated financial gift (75% of participants), followed by a supply collection or drive (52%) and work days (33%). [See Table 1.]

<b>Table 1 – Participants’ Mission Activities</b>		
<b>Mission Activity</b>	<b>Number of Participants</b>	<b>Percentage of Participants</b>
Designated financial gift	268	75%
Supply collection or drive	185	52%
Work day for mission organization	119	33%
International mission trip	83	23%
Short-term project/program for mission organization	65	18%
Regular volunteer with mission organization	65	18%
Domestic mission trip	54	15%
Other	33	9%

The most difficult type of participation to analyze was “Other.” For the 33 participants who chose “Other,” their written explanations included: working as a missionary or for a missions organization, activities that should have been classified as something else (financial gifts, supply collection), activities that I would classify as good Christian living but not missions (kindness toward neighbors), personal evangelism, and prayer. Additionally, four people checked “Other” and wrote in the response “None,” and two checked “Other” to note that some or all of the activities they were reporting had happened outside the five-year window that the question referenced. I learned by the end of the first question that my data would be imperfect and imprecise. As much as possible,



I have attempted to treat it as what it is – a reasonable representation of reality, not a perfect image of the truth.

The participants who shared their demographic information<sup>29</sup> had a mean age of 45-54, tended to be married (78%), and employed full-time (48%) or retired (22%). Over 80% of the participants indicated having a moderate to complete control over their schedules.<sup>30</sup> The average participant also reported having a significant degree of financial comfort (participants reported a mean of 8.05 on a 1-10 scale, where 10 represented a “Very Comfortable” financial situation). Only 9% of participants reported long-term physical disabilities, while 44% reported living with one or more invisible illnesses.

These results were mostly in line with my expectations. The demographics of age, marital status and employment were largely reflective of what I have observed in the congregation. I anticipated that those who participate in missions would report having a high level of financial comfort and that they would have control over significant portions of their schedule. I also expected the percentage of participants who have long-term physical disabilities to be low. One surprise in the data set was how many participants reported living with invisible illnesses. One of my early hypotheses was that disability and invisible illness could be presenting a barrier to participation. At this point in the research, it was premature to dismiss that hypothesis, but the prevalence of invisible illnesses among participants did bring that theory under scrutiny.

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<sup>29</sup> Twenty participants chose not to provide their age, 19 did not provide their marital status, 23 did not answer the question about employment status.

<sup>30</sup> Only 19% of participants who answered the question about their schedule reported that they work specific hours at a specific location. Forty-two percent selected “I have primary control of my schedule and can choose when and where I work,” and 39% selected “I have ‘normal’ working patterns, but am able to be somewhat flexible with my schedule.”

In addition to who is participating and what they are doing, I was interested in the self-reported “why” that participants might offer. The question that participants were given was open-ended, and simply asked them why they chose to serve when they did, where they did, how they did. Some respondents skipped the question, and each participant who provided an answer did so in their own words. Nonetheless, there were some common themes in many of their responses.<sup>31</sup> [See Table 2.]

<b>Table 2 – Participants’ Reasons for Participating</b>		
<b>Self-described “Why,” Grouped by Theme</b>	<b>Number of Participants</b>	<b>Percentage of Participants<sup>32</sup></b>
Convenience of opportunity	80	28%
Enjoyable work toward a meetable need	75	26%
Personal connection or invitation	58	20%
Agreement with (support of) ministry or cause	53	18%
Divine calling or appointment	45	16%

Of the 289 participants who answered this question, 80 people made reference to choosing to participate because the opportunity was convenient for them. The wording they used to express this was that it fit their schedule, it was something they could afford, etc. Whether their primary concerns were work schedules, family schedules, budgets, or health, they indicated that the opportunity to participate in missions fit into their life. The next most common response (75 participants) had to do with being aware of a need that seemed like something they could help with or would enjoy helping with. In these instances, it seemed significant that the need was clear and the solution felt manageable

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<sup>31</sup> “Common themes” were identified by searching the responses for words that occurred ten or more times in the open-ended question. Each individual response was then re-read to look for exact and near matches for each theme (i.e., the word “easy” occurred more than 10 times, but when considering the broader theme, I included responses that talked about “convenient” options, things that “fit my schedule,” etc.).

<sup>32</sup> This column is calculated as a percentage of the 289 self-identified participants who answered the open-ended survey question asking “Considering the mission activities you selected in Question 1, why did you choose to serve when you did, where you did, how you did?”

to participants. Further down the priorities list, 58 respondents mentioned that they were motivated to serve because of a personal connection or an invitation from a family member, friend, or colleague. These people had relational ties and were perhaps willing to do things they otherwise would not have done because of an invitation. Fifty-three people identified that their service was motivated by their agreement with or support of the particular ministry or cause. For them, the intrinsic value of the project was a compelling reason to provide their support. Forty-five respondents attributed their participation in part or in whole to divine calling or appointment. Their wording varied; some talked about feeling called by God, others mentioned a nudge from the Holy Spirit, or described God putting a need or opportunity before them at a certain time.

Of the 406 respondents, 48 people (12%) indicated that they had not participated in any sort of missions activity. The non-participants who shared their demographic information<sup>33</sup> had a mean age of 45-54, tended to be married (75%), and employed full-time (43%) or retired (47%). About 78% of the participants indicated having a moderate to complete control over their schedules.<sup>34</sup> The average non-participant also reported having a significant degree of financial comfort (a mean of 7.63 on a 1-10 scale, where 10 represented a “Very Comfortable” financial situation). About 20% of non-participants reported long-term physical disabilities, and 39% reported living with invisible illnesses.

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<sup>33</sup> All non-participants provided their age and marital status; one did not answer the question about employment status.

<sup>34</sup> Twenty-two percent of the non-participants who answered the question about their schedule reported that they work specific hours at a specific location. Forty-six percent selected “I have primary control of my schedule and can choose when and where I work,” and 32% selected “I have ‘normal’ working patterns, but am able to be somewhat flexible with my schedule.”

I found it interesting to compare the demographics of the non-participants with the demographics of the participants. [See Table 3] I was not surprised that age and marital status were roughly identical between the participants and non-participants. Those factors were highly representative of the congregation as a whole, and I did not expect them to have a strong correlation to missions participation. I was surprised to find minimal differences between the participants and non-participants when it came to their degree of control over their schedule and their perceived financial comfort. Prior to conducting the survey, I expected to find that many non-participants were choosing not to participate because their schedules did not allow it or the missions opportunities presented a financial burden they could not bear. Neither seems to be the case for my congregation based on this survey. The data does show a higher percentage of non-participants are retired and have long-term physical disabilities. In a framework where physically active projects like trips and work days have been given the most time and attention, it is not surprising to me to see these trends among non-participants. And it is not surprising that they are tied together. As a natural part of the aging process, older people who are in the “65+” age category tend to have more physical disabilities than those who are younger.

<b>Table 3 – Average Demographics of Participants and Non-Participants</b>		
	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Non-Participants</b>
Age (Mean)	45-54	45-54
Married	78%	75%
Employed Full-Time	48%	43%
Retired	22%	47%
Moderate/Complete Schedule Control	80%	78%
Financial Comfort (Mean, scale of 1-10)	8.05	7.63
Physical Disabilities	9%	20%
Invisible Illnesses	44%	39%

Perhaps the greatest surprise for me came in the information about invisible illnesses. As mentioned above, one of my working hypotheses was that invisible illnesses were keeping people out of missions. In creating the survey, I reflected on the fact that I had rarely (if ever) taken invisible illnesses into account when creating, promoting, or leading missions programming. I expected to see significantly more non-participants report invisible illnesses than participants. The opposite was true. Among non-participants, 39% reported living with an invisible illness while 44% of participants reported living with an invisible illness. Although I still believe there are additional ways that we could make our missions programs more sensitive to invisible illnesses and more accessible to those who have a variety of medical concerns, this did not appear to be a significant barrier to participation among my congregation.

In addition to who identifies themselves as non-participants in missions, I also wanted to understand why they had chosen not to get involved. Non-participants were asked why they chose not to participate in any of the types of missions activities listed in the first question. Of the 48 self-identified non-participants, 41 provided an answer to this follow-up question of why they did not participate. [See Table 4.] Fifteen said that they were busy with work and family responsibilities and commitments. Eleven identified their age and/or health as limiting factors. Nine responded that they simply were not interested in missions or were disconnected from the church.

<b>Table 4 – Non-Participants’ Reasons for Not Participating</b>		
<b>Self-described “Why,” by Theme</b>	<b>Number of Non-Participants</b>	<b>Percentage of Non-Participants<sup>35</sup></b>
Busy with work/family	15	37%
Age or health limitations	11	27%
Not interested/disconnected	9	22%

*Congregational Research Part 3 – Interview Parameters and Findings*

The final question on my survey was whether or not the respondents would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview with me. For those completing the survey online, choosing “yes” to the final question redirected them to a separate online form to fill out their contact information. Those who completed the survey in paper form were asked to call or email me with their contact information. In this way, the survey respondents kept their anonymity, as there was no way for me to link together the surveys and the list of people who were interested in participating in the interviews.<sup>36</sup>

Of the 406 survey participants, 156 indicated that they wanted to know more about follow-up interviews. I sent invitations by email to all who expressed interest. I spent six weeks scheduling and conducting interviews. In the end, 65 people signed up for interview times, and 58 completed the interview process. The interviewees ranged from colleagues on the church staff to fairly new attenders, from people who have participated in missions for many years to those who have never engaged in any missions

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<sup>35</sup> This column is calculated as a percentage of the 41 self-identified non-participants who answered the open-ended survey question asking, “Why did you not participate in any of the mission activities listed in Question 1?”

<sup>36</sup> In theory, it is possible that people could have skipped the survey questions entirely and only signed up to participate in an interview. That possibility seems unlikely to me. For the sake of simplicity, I have chosen to treat the interviewees as a subset of the survey respondents.

work, from those who have well-developed ideas and theologies about missions to those who have only the vaguest sense of what missions might be. The results of those interviews were enlightening, if considerably harder to quantify and analyze than the survey results. In many ways, these interviews were where I truly learned what my congregation thinks about missions and what they had experienced with missions.

As an opening question in each interview, I asked interviewees to help me ensure that we were speaking the same language. I asked them to define “missions” for me, or to tell me how they would explain to someone else what “missions” is. After conducting all the interviews, I reviewed my interview notes, looking for key phrases that were repeated by multiple people. A large majority (47 of 58 interviewees) gave definitions that were centered around going and doing. Many of these interviewees actually used the phrase “going and doing,” while others described “getting out of normal life” or “offering help” for others. Some participants thought that any kind of displacement was sufficient; outside the church walls and outside their comfort zone was enough to count as missions. A smaller group within those who talked about displacement (5 of 47) gave definitions that focused on overseas destinations. There was not a great amount of agreement about what the displacement looked like, but there was a good sense of agreement around the fact that missions involves stepping into something different from our day-to-day lives.

The theme of doing something for those who are less fortunate was came up frequently when my interviewees defined missions or described what mission work they had done. Although they often gave different examples of what the “doing” looked like and different motivations for the work, offering physical aid to others was perhaps the most frequent component of the missions definitions I heard during my interviews. My

congregation seems to have a very clear sense that one of the essential elements of missions is doing something practical for those in need that they cannot do for themselves. Nine interviewees out of the 58 specifically mentioned helping people help themselves or making systemic changes to organizations or societies. A few inserted cautions related to helping others; one I heard several times was the tension between having something to offer others and not arriving with a “Savior complex” or a mentality that the American way of doing things was the only right way to do things. On the whole, I felt that there was a reasonable understanding that missions involves offering practical aid to those outside the local church.

What was less clear in many of the definitions was the role that evangelism or presenting the gospel played in missions work. [See Table 5.] Over half of the interviewees (32 of the 58) mentioned that the physical aid or assistance needed to be coupled with sharing the gospel or evangelizing wherever missions is being done. A surprising number (17 of 58) did not mention anything about evangelism or sharing the gospel at any point during their interview. A small group (9 of 58) explicitly mentioned that missions may be motivated by Christian faith, but did not need to include sharing the gospel, trying “win converts” or encourage personal salvation.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Within my context, I believe that some of this confusion may arise from the fact that our church has a Board of Missions and a Board of Evangelism as two separate entities. The reasons for this decision were complex and predated my time on staff, so I have limited ability to discuss them in detail here. From what I can observe, it seems that some of the unintended fallout from that choice is that we have a significant amount of the congregation who see missions as helping to meet people’s physical needs and evangelism as helping to meet people’s spiritual needs. The areas of distinction and overlap between the work of the boards of Evangelism and Missions may need to be more clearly laid out for the congregation.



<b>Table 5 – Connection Between Evangelism and Missions</b>		
	<b>Number of Interviewees</b>	<b>Percentage of Interviewees</b>
Evangelism or an explicit gospel presentation is a necessary part of missions	32	55%
Missions does not need to include talking about the gospel, converting people	9	16%
Interviewee made no comment about whether or not missions involved evangelism or gospel-sharing	17	29%

Many interviewees began their definition of missions with phrases like “that’s a hard question,” or “I don’t really know how to define it.” For those people, I offered a reminder that there was not a right or wrong answer, and some encouragement to just try to put something into words. To those who engaged in the process of defining missions without extra prompting, I asked a follow-up question. I challenged them to reflect more theologically on the “why” behind missions and explain to me why the church should do missions, as they had just defined it.<sup>38</sup> Their answers revealed a spectrum of opinions about the relative importance of missions in the life of the church. At one end, there were those who saw missions as being integral to the identity of the church. Since the language of what is “essential” is already very loaded in my local church context, none of the interviewees described missions as essential.<sup>39</sup> What they described would likely be understood by anyone outside of Corinth as being “essential” to the identity of the church. They said things like, “I don’t know how you can be faithful without doing

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<sup>38</sup> My assumption was that people who could define missions were likely the same people who had thought about why missions matter. I also wanted to keep all interviewees engaged in the interview process, and felt that a theologically reflective questions might be an unnecessarily stressful second question to ask of interviewees who appeared to struggle with my first question to define missions.

<sup>39</sup> As a reminder, at Corinth, the word “essential” is used to refer to that which is at the core of the Christian faith and is required for a person to be a Christian. We reserve the designation of “essential” for faith in Jesus.

missions” or “I can’t imagine a church that isn’t doing missions and is still healthy.” On the other end of the spectrum, some of my people seemed to consider missions something nice to do when we are able, but they had at best a neutral position on the importance of missions. When I asked where they got their ideas about missions, three people appealed to the Great Commission (Matthew 28:16-20) and two referenced Acts 1:8 as key texts. Four other people mentioned the Bible more generically, saying things like “it’s what Jesus says to do.” Only three people offered the suggestion that we participate in missions as an act of obedience to God, which contributes to our own discipleship.

While analyzing my interview data, I realized that it would have been helpful to have asked the question, “Who participates in missions?” Although my interviews had not included that question directly, I tried to glean some information from the answers to several other questions to figure out who my interviewees thought was able and responsible to do missions. Many of the interviewees expressed that at some point in their life – past or present – they considered missions to be the domain of full-time missionaries who committed their lives to living and working overseas. The sources were often missions conferences or visits from missionaries to the churches of their youth. Many had grown up seeing missionaries as those who circled the globe to spend years of their lives in remote villages with unreached people groups. For almost everybody I spoke with, this seemed to be the most prestigious or most important way of doing missions. A small handful clearly articulated this hierarchy, but many others implied it. I heard numerous comments like “I have given money (or helped a local mission agency), but I haven’t done any real missions.” The phrase “real missions” came up in at least a

dozen interviews; in every case it pointed to long-term, overseas work as “real missions” and all other mission activity as something different and less important.

Across the board, everyone who identified themselves as a non-participant in missions thought that missions was work that someone else was better suited to do. Many times, the “others” that they thought were better equipped for missions were younger people, more able-bodied people, people with more free time, people with more money, people with more flexible schedules, or people with fewer family commitments and responsibilities. Even among those who participated in missions and saw value in missions, many seemed to think that the “real” work of missions was best left to full-time missionaries and missions organizations. These people described the church’s role in missions as a support designed to bolster and encourage those in full-time missions.

I asked each self-identified non-participant what they felt they had to offer the world, if given the right set of circumstances in which to do so. The initial answer I heard most frequently was “I don’t know.” When pressed, however, I heard stories of people who have skills they would love to teach, people who enjoy working with children, and medical providers who have specialized skills in diagnosis and treatment. The harder I pushed, the more I realized that the people didn’t lack awareness of what they had to offer; they simply had not yet developed the imagination to see how their skills and backgrounds could intersect with missions. This reinforced my theory that the congregation would benefit from a better definition of what missions is and a clearer understanding of how people can participate in missions.

Perhaps the greatest area where I discovered a need for education about missions came from hearing in the interviews where people drew boundaries around where

missions begins and ends. One person I interviewed who is in her 60s was surprised to learn just this past year that missions can take place domestically. We offered a summer mission trip to Vermont, and she found it shocking that we would apply the word “missions” to something here in the United States. This woman heard this unfamiliar language again when we sent a mission team to Haywood County, NC to help with relief work after severe flooding. In this interviewee’s experience, the word “missions” had never been applied to work so close to home. Though she wholeheartedly supports the idea of doing good things for the benefit of neighbors and engages in such activities regularly, she had never considered that something domestic might also be missions. For this interviewee, missions is synonymous with foreign work. That understanding of missions is more narrow than I want my congregation to have.

At the other end of the spectrum, one person I spoke with told me that he considers his daily work to be a mission field. As a medical provider, he understands his work as the improvement of his patients’ lives, which is primarily based on medical health but can include other types of health too. He perceives his job as using physical health and wellness as a way to love and serve his patients. This “life as missions” outlook is a view that I heard somewhat frequently from healthcare professionals, teachers, and those who work in ministry as their primary occupation. For this group, there was a sense that any time you make a difference in the lives of the underserved, overlooked, or marginalized, you are doing missions. Although I would never want to diminish the work of such an important group of people, I think that considering all of life as mission work can be too broad of an understanding of missions. As a colleague of mine has often said, “If everything is mission, nothing is mission.” All of the work is

important and meaningful and may even all be an expression of Christian values, but it is probably too broad of a definition of missions to include all of one's professional work.<sup>40</sup>

Between those two ends of the spectrum, I found a few people who understand that missions can and does happen both across the street and around the world. For these people, the geography is less important than the sacrifice involved. They told me that their view of missions requires getting out of your comfort zone, your familiar places, your easy path through life. It involves giving something up for some period of time for the sake of someone or some other group. This idea of missions is far closer to what I want my congregation to know and to embrace. But as close as we might have gotten in some interviews, when I considered the results of all the surveys and interviews, it became clear to me that there is a lot more work to do before the congregation has a complete picture of missions.

#### Unresolved Tensions in the Data

In my congregation, in the wider church, and in the academy, missions is a field that is full of unresolved points of tension. I was aware of some of these issues as I designed my congregational research, while others emerged for me as I listened to my congregation. Based on the participation trends that I was able to observe, I expected that some people would consider missions an "essential" activity for all believers while others

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<sup>40</sup> The relationship between work and mission may be similar to the conversation around work and Christian vocation, which is a topic many theologians have reflected on in recent years. Tim Keller insightfully commented that "a job is a vocation only if someone else calls you to do it for them rather than for yourself. And so our work can be a calling only if it is reimagined as a mission of service to something beyond merely our own interests." (Timothy Keller, *Every Good Endeavor* [New York: Penguin, 2012], 2.)

would see it as an optional way of participating in the church. The new angle of that tension that I realized through this research was the way that my church's use of "essential" and "non-essential" language around core theological convictions might be influencing the relative importance that our congregation assigns to particular activities of the church. Prior to this research, I had talked about missions with enough church members to know that there were a variety of perspectives about how to balance our missions efforts between local and global efforts. I had previously misunderstood this as a matter of personal preference; my assumption was that some people care more about helping their neighbors while others care more about those in foreign lands. I did not expect to hear that some of my research participants didn't consider anything in the United States as "missions."

One of the more surprising tensions that emerged from my congregational research was the link between the physical and spiritual components of missions. In particular, I was interested to discover the variety of opinions about how evangelism related to missions. Though my own understanding of missions is centered on the goal of making disciples while providing tangible, material assistance, this was not widely shared by my interviewees. Only a bit more than half expressed a view that was in line with mine; a shocking 16% said that missions either didn't need to or shouldn't include an explicit presentation of the gospel message. This has led me to reflect on the ways that my church's distinctions between evangelism and missions might impact our congregation's understanding of each.

These Corinth-specific points of tension are being lived out against a much larger backdrop of the universal church. Those who engage the topic of missions throughout the

church continue to wrestle with the categories of sending and receiving churches, or those who do missions and those who benefit from missions. There is still a lot of work to be done in understanding how the church is supposed to expand the kingdom of God, while recognizing all of creation as being part of God's domain. And there continue to be ways that the church can better use the empowerment of God without acting in ways that are domineering over others.

### Describing Rather than Defining: A Biblical Path Forward

When I began this thesis and imagined this project, my expectation was that people were not participating because the projects and trips were too similar to one another and were not suitably accessible to different types of people. What I found instead is that there is a general lack of awareness of what missions is, why it matters, where we are serving, and what the various ways are that a person could be a part of missions work. From these interviews, I gained the organizing structure for this thesis. Instead of a transformed approach to doing missions or a different set of missions opportunities, I discovered that the primary need within my congregation was better education about missions. I heard from my people that we need a better definition for missions, a more compelling "why" for missions, and a more comprehensive understanding of how various types of people might do missions.

In my ministry context, what is most appreciated and most readily accepted is Bible-based evidence. Before my people will accept new ideas or adopt new behaviors, they generally want to know that what they are being asked to believe or to do is in line with Scripture. Based on what I know of my congregation, I have concluded that a Bible-

based education tool will probably be the most effective way to shape what my congregation believes about missions and how they engage in missions. Ultimately, I will produce a 4-session Bible study designed to help my congregation see missions as an integral part of their own faithful obedience and discipleship. Through this study, I will examine four different biblical texts, which will each highlight a different truth about missions. First, we will look at Acts 1 to see that missions is sacrificial. Second, we will look at Matthew 28 to see that missions is formational. Third, we will look at John 21 to see that missions is holistic. Finally, we will look at 2 Corinthians 8-9 to see that missions is transformational. Each of these passages will describe one characteristic of missions. These studies will not produce a static definition or a concrete approach to doing missions in all times and places. Instead, they will provide a framework through which my congregation might better engage the many tensions that missions presents, and more faithfully discover how they fit into God's mission.



### Chapter 3 – Missions is Sacrificial

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

We begin our biblical studies in missions with what is arguably the most complicated gospel account from which to discern Jesus' "last words." Luke-Acts presents a notoriously difficult sequence of events when it comes to the end of Jesus' earthly existence. It is outside the scope of this project to try to reconcile the two accounts of Jesus' last words and ascension presented in Luke 24 and Acts 1. For this segment of this project, I will focus on Jesus' final conversation with the disciples in Acts 1, while also considering his final words to them in Luke 24 as authentic. Perhaps the greatest insight we glean from Jesus' words in Luke 24 is the simple command to "stay here in the city [Jerusalem] until you have been clothed with power from on high." (Luke 24:49) Neither the disciples nor the gospel readers have a full understanding of that command until the Holy Spirit arrives in Acts, but we do see that the first step of being Jesus' post-resurrection witnesses is to wait.

#### Waiting To Witness

In the gospel of Luke, the resurrected Jesus appears to his disciples to share a meal and to explain the scriptures to them. In his final teaching he instructs them,

Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high. (Luke 24:46-49)

Luke ends with a final note of the disciples' obedience, indicating that they remained in Jerusalem after Jesus' ascension.

As the narrative resumes in Acts 1, the disciples have gathered and are asking Jesus about the restoration of the kingdom. This element of their final conversation is absent from the narrative in Luke, and it is an interesting shift. Willie James Jennings identifies this question as one that reveals a quest for power and a nationalistic zeal. This question, he says, is not only motivated by the fact that the disciples have been living under Roman rule, but because it is a natural human desire to seek power. "The disciples ask the nationalist question: When will we rule our land, and become self-determining, and if need be impose our will on others? All this would, of course, be for the good of the world, they suppose."<sup>1</sup> Although they are looking for their identity to be spread to the world, Jennings suggests that they are not thinking about which part of their identity they need to share or how it would be properly spread. While Jesus wants his disciples to spread their identity as his followers, at the beginning of this exchange the disciples seem to be thinking about their cultural identity. Kisau calls this a failure of vision on the disciples' part. He says that their "perspective on the type of kingdom God wanted to set up was still far too narrow. They were still limiting the kingdom of God to Israel."<sup>2</sup> Had Jesus acted the way the disciples wanted him to, Kisau argues, there would have been "no place for a universal church," which is in contradiction to Jesus' purpose, which is defined by a "world view [that] encompasses the whole world."<sup>3</sup> Jesus offers a corrective

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<sup>1</sup> Willie James Jennings, *Acts* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 17.

<sup>2</sup> Kisau, 1326.

<sup>3</sup> Kisau, 1326.

to the disciples. Though he certainly had the ability and authority to establish any sort of government or power structure he wanted, he has another mission in mind. Jesus tells the disciples, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:7-8)

Jesus makes it very clear in both Luke and Acts that the ultimate job of the disciples is to go out from Jerusalem to be his witnesses throughout the world. But before they go, he tells them to wait. “The first thing Jesus urged upon his disciples was that they should say and do nothing until they had received the power and anointing of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>4</sup> In his commentary on Acts, Will Willimon offers valuable reflections on the disciples’ waiting phase. He rightfully points out that in our time – and perhaps in every time – the process of waiting may not seem particularly useful. Activity and motion are what is usually most valued and most desired. In the aftermath of the resurrection, the disciples wait and worship and pray. Presumably, waiting was not their natural reaction given the reality-shaking experience they had just lived through. That Jesus told them to begin their work with waiting indicates that “the action demanded of the church is more than busyness and strenuous human effort.”<sup>5</sup> The action demanded of the church first is to wait on God’s timing and God’s empowerment.

It is unfortunate that this initial process of waiting is not more often discussed in treatments of the church’s mission. All too often, missions is understood primarily as the

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<sup>4</sup> Marvin A. McMickle, *Be My Witness* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2016), 15.

<sup>5</sup> William H. Willimon, *Acts* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1988), 21.

activities and locations of evangelistic or humanitarian work. Indeed, those efforts are tremendously valuable and their fruit is remarkable. Yet Jesus himself tells his followers that before they go, they must first wait until they receive the power of the Holy Spirit. “Waiting, an onerous burden for us computerized and technically impatient moderns who live in an age of instant everything, is one of the tough tasks of the church,”<sup>6</sup> Willimon observes. Challenging though this wait may be, it is the essential first step in practicing our obedience and in constructing a proper understanding of missions. Whatever good work we might do or whatever good fruit we might produce, it is not a faithful approach to missions if it is not grounded in prayer, guided by the Holy Spirit, and attentive to God’s timing. Kisau notes that “the task facing the disciples is so vast that they will only be able to perform it through the power of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>7</sup>

Waiting on the arrival of the Holy Spirit at the beginning of Acts is especially significant because the Holy Spirit will be a major character and a major force throughout the rest of the book. Jennings goes so far as to suggest that the Holy Spirit is the “only central character” in Acts, and as such deserves significant attention when considering how we read and understand the entire narrative.<sup>8</sup> In his reading of Acts, the Holy Spirit presents a new vision for the church, which he calls the “common.” “The common is the redistribution of life where the Spirit invites us to a sharing of space and place, resources and dreams.... The common joins, weaving together purpose and hope in the life of

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<sup>6</sup> Willimon, 21.

<sup>7</sup> Kisau, 1326.

<sup>8</sup> Jennings, 1.

discipleship to Jesus.”<sup>9</sup> According to Jennings, this vision of unity is granted to Jesus’ disciples by the Holy Spirit.

Once they are empowered by the Holy Spirit, the job of Jesus’ followers will be to go out and to bear witness to what they have seen and experienced throughout all the earth. In Acts, “initiation into the realm of the Spirit enables the believers to bring an effective witness of the risen Jesus to the world (1:7-8).”<sup>10</sup> Though there is an interesting and profitable study to be done on pneumatology in missions, this study is more about the act of witness than how the Holy Spirit enables and equips the church to bear witness. For the purposes of this study, it is perhaps enough to say that our first task is to wait until God, through the power of the Holy Spirit, moves us to be witnesses to the risen Jesus. As it pertains to the concept of bearing witness to Jesus’ work, we have three primary questions to consider from this text: What does it mean to be a witness? To whom do disciples bear witness? and where do disciples witness? We will address each question in turn, beginning with what it means to be a witness.

### What is a Witness?

In the ancient world as in our modern world, a witness “helps establish facts objectively through verifiable observation.”<sup>11</sup> Witnesses are those who are called upon to establish veracity of events, not to conjure up ideas or make speculations. Throughout the church’s history, the word “witness” has been used in a variety of ways, some of which

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<sup>9</sup> Jennings, 9.

<sup>10</sup> Robert W. Wall, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 41.

<sup>11</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Acts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 64.

have become loaded terms for some Christians. Whatever other connotations the term holds today, in Jesus' time, witnesses were crucial for establishing the truth of a claim. The author of Luke-Acts was deeply committed to the theme of establishing the truthfulness of claims about Jesus. In his prologue to Luke, the author wrote "I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed." (Luke 1:3-4) Witnesses that point to the truth of his message are so important to the author of Luke-Acts that 13 of the 35 occurrences of "witness" in the New Testament occur in the book of Acts.<sup>12</sup>

Though this passage clearly establishes the work of the disciples as being witnesses to the risen Jesus, the concept of being a witness is not fully developed until later in Acts. As Dean Flemming writes,

In Acts, *witnessing* is a comprehensive notion. In the first place, being a witness means giving reliable testimony to what God has done in Jesus, particularly his resurrection from the dead.... Beyond the mere facts of what happened, however, God's witnesses testify to the saving meaning of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection.... God's witnesses... tell the saving story—the good news.<sup>13</sup>

Jennings expands Flemming's definition, adding that the disciples are witnesses both to the "real life history of life with Jesus" and that they "will also be witnesses of divine presence."<sup>14</sup> By this, he means that being a witness involves more than recounting previously established truths, it also means allowing one's life to be a stage upon which God can continue to reveal Godself to the world. "Although there will only be a few who

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<sup>12</sup> Bock, 64.

<sup>13</sup> Flemming, 31.

<sup>14</sup> Jennings, 18.

knew him according to the flesh (*kata sarka*, 2 Cor. 5:16), countless more will follow these disciples in rightly claiming to be an irrefutable presence of an experience with Jesus even as they give space through their lives for Jesus himself to speak to others.”<sup>15</sup>

As Jesus’ disciples bear witness to the truthfulness of the accounts about his life, death, and resurrection, they also bear witness to the transformative power of this truth. Darrell Bock offers an excellent summary of the importance of the church’s mission of witness. “The church exists, in major part, to extend the apostolic witness to Jesus everywhere. In fact, the church does not *have* a mission; it is to be missional and *is* a mission.”<sup>16</sup> The work of being a witness to Jesus began with the disciples and continues with the church today. Modern discipleship continues to require us to be witnesses of Jesus. One of the central purposes of the church is to provide a witness to the world of the truth of the Gospel message and its transformative power. As we consider being witnesses, we must also consider the audience of our witness. That is the next important question to which we now turn.

### To Whom Do We Witness?

The second important matter to understand in Acts 1:8 as it relates to a contemporary understanding of missions is the question of to whom the disciples were called to bear witness. There are two predominant schools of thought on this question: the disciples are either to focus on Israel or to expand their focus to the entire world. Those who think the focus is Israel tend to see Jesus’ last words as instructions to

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<sup>15</sup> Jennings, 18.

<sup>16</sup> Bock, 66.

continue the work of redeeming and restoring Israel. This view grows out of the disciples' question to Jesus about whether the time had come when he would restore the kingdom to Israel. Jesus never says "no," he simply tells them that it is not their business to know the times set by God. This non-answer can be construed to mean that Jesus has the ongoing mission to Israel in mind when he tells the disciples that they will be going out to the ends of the earth. According to this view, he is saying that their work is to take the good news to the Jews wherever they are. This is not out of line with Jesus' earthly ministry which had largely focused on the people of Israel. Though there is some evidence for this case, this tends to be a minority view in Christian scholarship. Far more interpreters see Israel as the first step in a larger process of salvation.

Jacob Jervell notes that in Acts 1:8 the witness in view is "primarily a witness to Israel,"<sup>17</sup> but he is quick to note that there is a different purpose than just telling the Jews about Jesus. Essentially, he believes that the witness to Israel is inseparable from a mission to the Gentiles. As he explains it,

The mission solely to Jews, from the beginning in Jerusalem, does not mean a restriction of salvation to Jews, but to Israel, as the peoples must be reached through Israel and become associated with Israel. The mission to the Gentiles is simply a part of the mission to the Jews. The command to world mission in Acts 1:8 shows the disciples witnessing in Jerusalem, Judaea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. 'To the ends of the earth' does not mean the Gentile mission: throughout Acts the mission goes from synagogue to synagogue, ending with a meeting with the Jews in Rome (28:17ff.). There is no specific mission to the Gentiles separated from the mission to the Jews.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Jacob Jervell, *The Theology of the Acts of the Apostles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 44.

<sup>18</sup> Jervell, 40.



There are some things that I appreciate about Jervell's position on this matter, especially his attentiveness to the historical reality of the ways the gospel spread and the ways the people of Israel might have understood their role in the story of God's salvation. Indeed, many of Jesus' interactions with his disciples are filled with language and imagery from the Hebrew Bible, which further serves to ground Jesus' work in the Jewish identity and mission. As Eckhard Schnabel and others point out, there are some clear allusions to Isaiah throughout this exchange between Jesus and the disciples. One of these allusions is to Isaiah 49:6,<sup>19</sup> where God says that the Servant will be "a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." The argument can easily be made that Israel could identify with the Suffering Servant of Isaiah and see themselves as a light to the nations. Robert Wall extends this argument, suggesting that what is in view in Acts is a global mission which is "the divinely intended means by which God's covenant with a repentant Israel is renewed and Israel is called as 'a light to the nations' so that repentant Gentiles also can share in the blessings of Israel's salvation."<sup>20</sup>

For the purposes of this project, we will mostly set aside the debate about the purposes of God for Israel and the Gentiles, and questions about how those purposes and processes relate to one another. Whatever perception the people of Israel had of themselves, it does seem clear that the disciples began with the territory that was most familiar to them (synagogues) and the people with whom they had the most in common (other Jews). Keeping this in mind, I contend that the answer to the question of to whom we bear witness is fairly clear in Acts. We bear witness to whomever we encounter. By

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<sup>19</sup> Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 79.

<sup>20</sup> Wall, 42.

the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, we are sent into the world, and as we move about the world, we bear witness. It may be that, like Jews witnessing in the synagogues, we are witnesses first to those who are closest to us and most similar to us – the ones in our homes and communities. But as the next section will make clear, the call of Jesus’ followers only begins with familiar territory and people. It then moves outward to places of unfamiliarity and discomfort. As Jennings beautifully summarizes, God “seeks to place in each of us a desire for those outside of us, outside our worlds of culture, clan, nation, tribe, faith, politics, class, and species.”<sup>21</sup> There is much more to be said about what it means to cross all boundaries, and for that conversation, we turn next to the significance of the geographical markers of Acts 1:8.

#### Where Do We Witness?

There has already been a tremendous amount of excellent scholarship done on the implications of the phrase “in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” in Acts 1:8. Many have observed that this phrase creates a roadmap of sorts for the rest of the book of Acts. F.F. Bruce provides a good summary of this position when he writes that: “‘You will be my witnesses’ might be regarded as announcing the theme of the book [of Acts]; ‘in Jerusalem’ covers the first seven chapters, ‘in all Judaea and Samaria’ covers 8:1 to 11:18, and the remainder of the book traces the progress of the gospel outside the frontiers of the Holy Land until at last it reaches Rome.”<sup>22</sup> Historically, this is an accurate description of how the disciples moved and ministered in the first years

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<sup>21</sup> Jennings, 12.

<sup>22</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 36.

after Jesus' resurrection. It is a model of ministry that can be understood as a series of concentric circles as the disciples move outward.

Practically and theologically, these circles begin in Jerusalem. Practically, there is the fact that Jerusalem is where the disciples were last with Jesus and where he told them to wait for the Holy Spirit. The theological significance is perhaps even more striking than the practical significance. Jerusalem had long been considered by the Jews to be the center of the world.<sup>23</sup> There is a strong current running through the Hebrew Bible that suggests that the culmination of God's salvation history would involve all people streaming into Jerusalem. Without a doubt, Jerusalem is the most natural starting point and home base for the church's new mission. David Bosch adds that,

In Acts, the church's missionary ministry... evolves in three phases, indicated in 1:8.... Thus the overall outline [of Luke-Acts] is geographical, from Galilee to Jerusalem and again from Jerusalem to Rome, but this doubtless has more than geographical significance. Geography simply becomes a vehicle for conveying theological (or missiological) meaning. Luke employs it so as to disclose the relationship between the mission of Jesus and the mission of the church. Jerusalem, in particular, is for Luke much more than a geographical center.<sup>24</sup>

Beginning with Jerusalem, where Jesus had told them to wait until they received the Holy Spirit, the disciples spread out toward the "ends of the earth" as they knew it. This marks a new way of thinking about being the people of God. Instead of waiting in Jerusalem for the world to come there, the disciples are being sent out into the world. Schnabel provides more dimension to what it looked like for the disciples to go to the ends of the earth and highlighted several of the easily-overlooked ways in which Acts and

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<sup>23</sup> Darrell Bock notes: "On Jerusalem as the "navel," or center, of the world, see Ezek. 5:5 (Jerusalem at the center of a circle of the nations); 28:12; 1 En. 26.1 (Jerusalem at the center of the world's geography); and esp. Jub. 8-9 (J. M. Scott 1995:99-103; Le Cornu and Shulam 2003:19). Conceptually, see Isa. 2:2-4; Mic. 4:5; Deut. 32:8." (Bock, 63)

<sup>24</sup> Bosch, 89.

other first-century writings reflected the theme of going to the “ends of the earth.”

Schnabel writes,

By the first century, the *western* “end” of the known world was Gaul or Germania on the Atlantic Ocean.... The *northern* “end” of the world was the Arctic... The *southern* “end” of the world was Ethiopia.... [and] the *eastern* “end” of the world was thought to be beyond India and... China. ...Even though we have no explicit information about how the apostles understood Jesus’ directive, it appears that they took it literally. Note that Luke mentions an Ethiopian (Acts 8:26-40), Paul mentions Scythians (Col 3:11) and seeks to go to Spain (Rom 15:24, 28), and India is mentioned in writing in *Acts of Thomas* and in oral traditions as the region where the apostle Thomas engaged in missionary work.<sup>25</sup>

The first disciples took Jesus’ words about going out from Jerusalem seriously and literally. This presented for them a difficult life and a challenging journey. Jennings says that “in the book of Acts... the disciples of Jesus rarely, if ever, go where they want to go or to whom they would want to go. Indeed the Spirit seems to always be pressing the disciples to go to those to whom they would in fact strongly prefer never to share space, or a meal, and definitely not life together.”<sup>26</sup> Though it likely would have been easier and more comfortable to remain where they were, surrounded by familiar settings and people who shared their worldview, the disciples obeyed Jesus and went into unknown territories. Their own discipleship was tested by the instruction to go, and it is abundantly clear that the first disciples passed the test and went.

### Lesson 1: Missions is Sacrificial

When I read Acts 1:8, I see not only an outline of how the early church spread, but also a framework for how to be witnesses in the modern world. The work of being a

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<sup>25</sup> Schnabel, 79.

<sup>26</sup> Jennings, 11.

witness, a component of what I am calling “missions,” is a profoundly sacrificial affair. Our first inclinations may be the same as the first disciples – in light of being one of the followers of an almighty and all-powerful God, how can I make this world look more like what I want it to be? But as Jennings and others have noted, the first thing we sacrifice as disciples of Jesus is the need to shape missions to match our vision of perfection. Being a witness to God means that we are not in control of what the kingdom looks like or when it is restored or how the process unfolds. Our first step is precisely the same as the earliest disciples. We too are called to wait on God’s gift of the Holy Spirit. This is not to be construed as an escape for those who would prefer not to do missions (i.e., “God hasn’t called me to missions” or “I don’t feel led to participate”). It is rather a reminder to give up the urge to go out into the world in our own power and at our own initiative. Once we have discerned God’s power and prompting, we then begin our work of being witnesses.

As witnesses, we declare the truth of who Jesus is and what he has done, and we live in ways that demonstrate to the world around us that we believe these things to be true. Flemming observes astutely that “although Acts gives special attention to verbal testimony, God’s servants bear witness through deeds, as well as words.”<sup>27</sup> In doing so, we sacrifice our ability to say and do whatever we want, and instead allow our words and actions to be shaped by the truth of God revealed through Jesus. Being a witness also entails some personal risk. McMickle says that a witness is “someone who sees something and can offer an accurate eyewitness report...someone who is willing to say something about what he or she has seen... [and] someone who is prepared to suffer for

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<sup>27</sup> Flemming, 32.

something.”<sup>28</sup> There are many types of suffering, and McMickle only suggests that it might happen, not that it is a foregone conclusion. Yet there is truth to what he says; in the terms of this project, I would say that being a witness requires us to sacrifice our security – whether physical or social – in service of our mission. This willingness to make sacrifices is embedded in the very language of being a witness. The Greek verb *martureo*, which is translated as “bear witness,” is the source of the English word “martyr.” Though not all witness are martyred in the traditional sense of the word, the potential for ultimate sacrifice is inextricably linked with the work of being a witness.

The modern task of being a witness begins wherever we are, in our own “Jerusalem.” This could be as local as being a witness within our families or in the neighborhoods where we are situated. For some people, this is a surprising addition to the concept of missions. But as J. Andrew Kirk observes, in today’s world missions is “no longer thought of as the Church’s activity overseas or in another culture.”<sup>29</sup> I would rephrase that sentence to say that missions is no longer thought of as *only* the church’s activity overseas or in another culture. As with so many complex issues, this is perhaps best understood as a both-and. Missions begins where we are and extends indefinitely in every direction. Ultimately, the phrase “ends of the earth” has to do with transcending all geographic boundaries, along with all ethnic and social boundaries that people have erected.<sup>30</sup> This outward movement that sends us to unfamiliar people and places reminds

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<sup>28</sup> McMickle, 17.

<sup>29</sup> J. Andrew Kirk, *What is Mission?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 24.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Bock, 65; Schnabel, 80.

us that being disciples of Jesus requires us to sacrifice our comfort and risk stepping outside of what feels safe and easy.

After the discussion of when, to whom, and where we witness, there is one final lesson to be gleaned from Acts 1:8. There is still the question of why one would bother to make such sacrifices to be a witness. Christopher J.H. Wright has offered the simplest and most valuable explanation that I have come across: “When you know who God is, when you know who Jesus is, witnessing mission is the unavoidable outcome.”<sup>31</sup> There is much yet to be said about what that mission of witness looks like. For now, we can say that missions is a sacrificial work that begins with waiting for the Holy Spirit and being ready to move outward as witnesses. The content of what the witnesses do as they move out from their “Jerusalem” is the topic to which we now turn.

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<sup>31</sup> Christopher J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2006), 66.

## Ch. 4 – Missions is Formational

*And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”*  
(Matthew 28:18-20)

### Reclaiming the Great Commission

The ending of Matthew has been a favorite passage among missionaries and those advocating for the work of missions in recent decades.<sup>1</sup> When I asked interviewees why missions mattered or why the church should care about missions, this was the most frequently cited biblical support they offered. Some quoted the verse in its entirety; others summarized it with a phrase like “Jesus said so.” These interviewees were entirely right. Doing missions is important because Jesus said to do it. Yet there is also quite a lot more depth and dimension to missions that is provided by this passage than a simple “do it.”

This passage provides a culmination of the themes of the Gospel and introduces a recommissioning of Jesus’ followers that includes not only the Eleven, but also the church today. From the opening words of the Gospel, which establish Jesus as a descendent of Abraham, the gospel writer has been drawing on the story of Abraham. The promise that through Abraham all nations would be blessed (Genesis 12:2) reaches

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<sup>1</sup> David Bosch claims that it was “not until the 1940s that biblical scholarship, pioneered by Michel (1941 and 1950/51) and Lohmeyer (1951) began to pay serious attention to Matthew 28:18-20.” (Bosch, 57)



its fulfillment in Jesus as he sends his followers out to “all nations.” In Matthew 28, Jesus is expanding the call and commission of the disciples which we first see in Matthew 10. This time, instead of sending them only to Israel, Jesus is expanding their ministry field. This is roughly parallel to the movement described above in Acts 1:8. In both instances, the disciples’ first mission is the closest to home, though they are never intended or allowed to remain precisely where they began. In a very clear way, “this looks back to and universalizes the commissioning service of ch. 10.”<sup>2</sup> Matthew’s gospel not only universalizes the call to missions by expanding the focus on the object of missions<sup>3</sup> (see below, “All Nations,” for further discussion on that point), but it also universalizes the idea of who does missions.

Throughout the whole gospel, Matthew has been intertwining the themes of discipleship and mission to the extent that “discipleship and mission are inseparable.”<sup>4</sup> From the calling of the first two disciples, Jesus’s message was centered on both discipleship and mission. “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” (Matthew 4:19) As the disciples are commanded to make disciples, the work of discipleship and missions is spread to an ever-growing group. As the group grows, it becomes more and more clear that the discipleship of Jesus’ followers is incomplete without their own participation in the mission of God, which consists in making more disciples. Matthew

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<sup>2</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 1079. Osborne further suggests that “This is a commissioning scene patterned after OT commissionings (Gen 12:1-4; Exod 3:1-10; Josh 1:1-11; Isa 6:1-13, so Hubbard) along with covenant renewal (Carson) and enthronement (Hagner).” (1078) The covenant renewal and enthronement aspects are somewhat less convincing for me, but it seems unnecessary to refute such a view for the purposes of this project.

<sup>3</sup> Osborne rightly notes that “the early church would certainly and correctly read the universal mission into [this passage].” (1078)

<sup>4</sup> Flemming, 10.

28:18-20 will remind the disciples and modern audiences that “mission is not the sole provenance of a specialized cadre of cross-cultural missionaries. It is the identity of the whole people of God.”<sup>5</sup> This passage serves as a bridge to bring together the narrative world of Matthew’s gospel and the lived experiences of Matthew’s readers and hearers, calling both into the complicated world of discipleship and missions.<sup>6</sup>

In this chapter, I will offer analysis and reflection that will provide more clarity to the ideas of going, making disciples, all nations, baptizing, and teaching. There are innumerable other lessons and further discussions that could be drawn from these verses. Indeed, many volumes have been filled unpacking the richness of these verses. But for my purposes, I will focus on the ways that this passage shows us that missions is formational – it is how Jesus taught his first disciples to make more disciples.

### Going

As much as I love the Great Commission, I am equally frustrated by the way that it has been translated in English Bibles and handled by many English-speaking preachers and teachers. Nearly every English translation I have encountered unnecessarily obscures the central point of Jesus’ commission. English translations start this verse with an imperative – “go.” This is a reasonable rendering of the Greek grammar, but the syntax is unsatisfying. According to standard English syntax, this makes it seem as though the main verb of the commission is to go. This has led to many unfortunate workshops, seminars, conferences, and sermons designed to teach would-be missionaries or missions

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<sup>5</sup> Flemming, 21.

<sup>6</sup> Donald Senior, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 177.

supporters the importance of leaving home and country and traveling to distant lands. John Howard Yoder describes the confusion well, when he writes that Matthew 28 “does not say, ‘Go ye.’ It says, ‘Make disciples.’ It is assumed that they will be going. But when, where or why they go is not the text’s focus.”<sup>7</sup> It became abundantly clear to me through this study that the idea of going has been a clearer takeaway from this passage than the disciple-making work.

In my own congregational research, I heard this idea expressed directly and indirectly. Some people said they were not interested in missions because they didn’t want to travel outside the United States. Others told me that they didn’t like missions because they feel that missions ignores the problems in our own backyard. Both ideas are, I believe, expressions of this misguided perception that when Jesus commissions his followers for missions, he is sending them to distant lands to find unreached people. That is certainly one component of missions. But it is nothing close to the whole picture, and I don’t believe that it is the main thrust of what Jesus is calling his disciples to in this passage. As discussed in chapter 3, the idea of movement away from one’s comfort zone is clearly an important part of missions, it simply is not the central idea of Jesus’ words in Matthew 28. The central idea, “making disciples” will be discussed in the next section. But before we get there, there is one final note to make on the idea of “going.”

The concept of going out to spread the gospel to all nations – which the disciples did in the years following Jesus’ resurrection – would have been a radical departure from the disciples’ experience and expectations. Osborne and others have referred to this as a

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<sup>7</sup> Yoder, 76.

centripetal mission versus a centrifugal one. Throughout the Hebrew Bible there was an expectation that the people of Israel were on a centripetal mission; that is, they were to “stay in the Holy Land and witness to the grace of God, so that the nations could come to them and be blessed.”<sup>8</sup> As Flemming rightly notes, even Jesus had not been “going out” in Matthew’s narrative world:

The mission of *attraction* seems to be the primary mode of operation on the few occasions that Jesus encounters Gentiles in Matthew’s Gospel. The Magi, for example, make a pilgrimage to Judea in order to worship the infant king (Matt 2:1-12). During Jesus’s earthly ministry, Gentiles like a Roman centurion and a Canaanite come *to him*, drawn by his miracle-working power (Matt 8:5-13; 15:21-28). Only after Jesus’s resurrection does his mission turn intentionally *toward* the nations, and only then through the community of his disciples (Matt 28:16-20).<sup>9</sup>

The instruction to “go and make disciples” is a paradigm shift that moves the disciples from a world where they are waiting for the Gentiles to come in, to a world where they are taking the message out to meet the nations where they were. “This centrifugal mission, taking the message to the nations, would be a messianic act.”<sup>10</sup> No longer could God’s people remain in Jerusalem; they were now people on the move with an active commission to spread the gospel. In other words, they were to be witnesses to God’s work “in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8) The movement is important, but as discussed in the previous chapter, I contend that there is not a minimum distance placed on the movement. As Flemming notes, “Christians today sometimes place far too much weight on the word *go*, with the result that mission becomes primarily the task of missionaries who cross geographical

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<sup>8</sup> Osborne, 1079.

<sup>9</sup> Flemming, 6.

<sup>10</sup> Osborne, 1079.

boundaries. Matthew, however, puts weight on the command to ‘make disciples,’ which is the main verb in the passage.”<sup>11</sup> It is to that disciple-making that we now turn.

### Making Disciples

The main verb which gives meaning and structure to Jesus’ recommissioning of the disciples is “make disciples.” Although Jesus’ disciples feature prominently in Matthew’s gospel and there is a lot of information we might glean about what it looks like to be a disciple, the language around making disciples is far less common. For Matthew, making disciples is related to the other verbs in the Great Commission – baptizing them and teaching them obedience. Each component will be addressed in turn below. Discipleship, for Matthew, is a matter of proper instruction leading to correct knowledge, and a moral commitment leading to correct behavior.

The process of discipleship as a component of missions is longer and deeper than many people have understood. In my own congregational research, I heard repeated concerns from people who are deeply committed to missions but have doubts about the efficacy of short-term projects. In those cases, the interviewees were mostly concerned that mission trips were little more than “Christian tourism,” an exciting week in far-away places with little value for the people we intend to serve. This is not what Jesus has in mind when he calls his followers to missions. In fact, the primary instruction to “make disciples” is not the same as the evangelism that the modern church sometimes associates

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<sup>11</sup> Flemming, 15.

with missions. For Matthew, that is just the first step in a life-long process. As Osborne writes,

It is critical to note that the command is not to evangelize but to perform the broader and deeper task of “discipling” the nations. Many denominations and mission groups misunderstand this and spend all their effort winning new converts rather than anchoring them in the Christian faith (in spite of the many studies that show that too few are truly converted in that initial decision). Jesus mandates that all mission activity emulate his pattern of discipling followers as exemplified in this gospel. They must be brought to understanding and to that deep ethical commitment patterned in the Sermon on the Mount and the Community Discourse; then they will become “trained as disciples in the kingdom” (13:52).<sup>12</sup>

The task of disciple-making certainly assumes an initial evangelistic component, but that is merely the entry to a longer process of forming disciples that look and act like Jesus in their day-to-day lives.<sup>13</sup> This discipleship is designed to permeate all areas of the life of the Christian, breaking the boundaries between the secular and the sacred, and encompassing all arenas of the believer’s life and existence.<sup>14</sup> This process is built on the dual pillars of baptism and teaching, which will be explained in more detail in the next two sections. As Osborne explains, the modern church has often fumbled the work of missions, leaning too heavily on evangelism without creating a structure for ongoing discipleship for those who hear and receive the gospel in our day:

A huge error has occurred over the last two hundred years in the missionary movement. Our task is, of course, to reach the world with the gospel message of salvation, but too many denominations and mission organizations have been content to give little more than salvation messages. The Great Commission makes it clear that this is not enough. Every single person who is won to Christ must be anchored in Christ and taught how to live for Christ in day-to-day decisions.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Osborne, 1080.

<sup>13</sup> Flemming, 21.

<sup>14</sup> Osborne, 1084.

<sup>15</sup> Osborne, 1084.

In addition to the surprising reversal of “going” and the deep work of “making disciples,” Jesus names an unanticipated audience for this mission work: all nations. It is to that audience that we now turn.

### All Nations

The language behind the English translation “all nations” is the Greek word *ethne*. In some contexts, this relates to Gentiles specifically and in others it is used to designate groups of people more generically. Some writers read this command to go to “all nations” to be a specific call to take the gospel to the Gentiles, in contrast with the Jews with whom Jesus has been interacting throughout Matthew’s gospel.<sup>16</sup> This is an argument that I find unpersuasive. It makes better theological sense to me to consider that the Jews are one among the ranks of the nations to which Jesus is sending his disciples.<sup>17</sup> As Bosch has rightly noted, “if Matthew had intended his readers (many of whom were Jews, still part of the wider Jewish community) to understand him as saying that Jews could no longer be recipients of the gospel, he would have had to say it much more unambiguously.”<sup>18</sup> The significance of this shift in language and mission cannot be overstated. To Jesus’ disciples, “the notion of discipling *nations* would have sounded quite revolutionary. ‘Nations’ (*ethne*) does not refer to modern constructs like ‘nation states’ or ethno-linguistic ‘people groups,’ but more broadly, to all peoples.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Ulrich Luz, *The Theology of the Gospel of Matthew* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 139.

<sup>17</sup> As Senior explains, “With the final and decisive age of salvation now here, the disciples’ mission is no longer restricted to the “lost sheep of the house of Israel” (10:5-6; 15:24) but now extends to “all nations” (28:19).” (Senior, 175)

<sup>18</sup> Bosch, 65.

<sup>19</sup> Flemming, 16.

In this command, Jesus is continuing the theme of fulfillment from the Hebrew Bible which has run throughout Matthew's gospel. Moving the focus of his work from Israel to all nations extends and fulfills the promise of God to Abraham that "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" by him (Genesis 12:3) and that "all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him" (Genesis 18:18). Flemming rightly argues that this emphasis on "all nations" removes any real or perceived barriers that existed before the resurrection. "The mission of the risen Lord projects outward. 'All nations' (Matt 28:19) means that there is no place, no people, no culture, no religious community, no political persuasion, that is 'beyond the pale' of the mission of God's people."<sup>20</sup>

In a dramatic change from Matthew 10, the disciples' mission has expanded beyond the Jews, but this does not happen at the exclusion of Israel. "For Matthew's audience, this is not a *replacement* of the Jewish mission in chapter 10, but an *extension* of it. 'All nations' doesn't mean *other* nations; it includes Jews, as well."<sup>21</sup> Boring has suggested that it may be best to think of these two missions – the mission of chapter 10 and the expanded mission of chapter 28 – as concentric circles. In the first instance, the focus was only on ministry to Israel. In the second, broader circle, the mission is to all the world, which still includes Israel.<sup>22</sup> This is similar and related to the concentric circles of an expanding mission that we saw from Acts 1:8 in the previous chapter.

This expansion of the mission, some argue, is linked to Jesus's own expanded authority that he is given at or after the resurrection. "Previously Jesus had limited power

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<sup>20</sup> Flemming, 22.

<sup>21</sup> Flemming, 17.

<sup>22</sup> M. Eugene Boring, *Matthew* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015), 376.



and authority, his mission was limited to the lost sheep of Israel, and his disciples were likewise constricted. But now since Jesus has all power and authority over all peoples, his disciples must likewise broaden their field of operation to include the nations, all the nations that Jesus now rules.”<sup>23</sup> It has been argued that if Jesus had actually said to go to all nations, there would not be the dispute that is recorded in the early chapters of Acts over Paul’s ministry to the Gentiles. I agree with Witherington, who argues that this is not necessarily true.<sup>24</sup> “It could be that this commission was originally understood to mean go to the Diaspora, and in particular to the Jews in all the nations in the known world. Luke includes an equally clear command in Luke 24 and Acts 1, yet we see clear hesitations about a Gentile mission even as late as Acts 15.”<sup>25</sup> Obviously, the disciples had some initial struggles with the meaning of Jesus’ words. This makes sense, since his words reflected a future reality that differed dramatically from the lives that his disciples had lived up to this point, and from everything their traditions taught as God’s plan. As Witherington so accurately summarizes, there is “no doubt it took years to work out all the implications of Jesus’ teaching.”<sup>26</sup> Indeed, the church is still wrestling with Jesus’ teaching nearly 2000 years after his post-resurrection appearance.

What does seem clear, however, is that the mission of the church is directed toward all nations without boundaries. It is also important to note that this does not just mean there are no distant boundaries; there are also no near boundaries to this mission. As with the language around “going” discussed above, the call to disciple “all nations”

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<sup>23</sup> Ben Witherington III, *Matthew* (Macon, Ga.: Smyth & Helwys, 2006), 533.

<sup>24</sup> See also, Boring, 375.

<sup>25</sup> Witherington, 533.

<sup>26</sup> Witherington, 533.

has often led to the misperception that most important missions happen in some far-flung corners of the world. Several of my interviewees had views like this, though they were not always articulated in such direct language. More often, I heard things like “I work with some local ministries, but I’ve never done a *real* mission trip.” The unspoken assumption was that what we do in our own communities may be nice, it may be benevolent, but it isn’t missions. One person went so far as to say that missions requires leaving one’s home country and culture. This was one of the most dramatic divides that I heard during my interviews. A certain segment of my congregation holds the view that there are plenty of problems in our own community and we ought to focus our missions efforts and dollars close to home. Others believe that our society has plenty of back-stops and assistance programs for our neighbors, and that the church doesn’t necessarily need to help them. Those in foreign lands, however, do not have access to the advantages of American society, and will get more benefit from our assistance. As I read the gospels, Jesus doesn’t seem to give us the option to choose one or the other. I understand his call to disciple all nations to begin at home and spread without end. As Flemming summarizes, “going to all nations... may involve crossing geographical and cultural barriers, but it also includes mission in one’s own setting,<sup>27</sup> ...beginning with our near neighbors who are not like us.”<sup>28</sup>

The call of Jesus is to do missions that point us outward as active agents of discipleship for all our neighbors and all the nations. The nature and content of that

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<sup>27</sup> Flemming, 17.

<sup>28</sup> Flemming, 22.

discipleship is rooted in the two remaining verbs of the Great Commission – baptizing and teaching.

### Baptizing

The first explanation of what it means to “make disciples of all nations” that Jesus provides is to baptize. At this point, I must acknowledge that there has been a centuries-long debate about baptism in the church. Even within my own congregation, we do not all agree on whether the Bible prescribes the baptism of infants or those who can confess their faith, nor whether baptism is rightly performed by sprinkling or immersion. In the language of my local church, the time of baptism and the amount of water are “non-essentials.” For this discussion, I am treating these details as “non-essentials,” because I intend to use Jesus’ words to reflect on the “why” of baptism, rather than to comment on the matter of “how” the church baptizes.

Baptism has long been understood as an important part of the Christian experience, although Jesus himself was not recorded as having baptized anybody during his ministry. Baptism is a “part of the salvation experience,” even though baptism itself is not the means of salvation.<sup>29</sup> In a sense, this baptism is an entry point into relationship and community. For Matthew, it seems as though baptism is a public marker of the beginning of two relationships. First, Osborne argues, it is best to understand the “*eis*” in the phrase as “baptism ‘into the fellowship with’ (Allen, Albright and Mann) or ‘into the Lordship of’ (Carson) the Godhead, expressing a new relationship (Davies and

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<sup>29</sup> Osborne, 1084.

Allison).”<sup>30</sup> As stated above, I do not see a theologically sound basis to suggest that the act of baptism causes salvation, but I do believe it is reasonable to view the act of baptism as a marker indicating a new or transformed relationship with God.

The act of baptism also seems to signal a participation in community. As Flemming suggests, “‘Baptizing’ converts in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit implies personal faith in and allegiance to Jesus. But it also suggests incorporation into a community of believers.”<sup>31</sup> Here, Jesus sets up baptism as “the primary [means] of initiation into the Christian faith.”<sup>32</sup> Discipleship is not a solitary activity; there is no discipleship apart from community in Jesus’ time or ours. Baptism then is not merely a representation of the renewed relationship with God, but also a purposeful entrance into a community of believers, the community in which discipleship will take place. In my own context, this is a concept that has become well-ingrained in our congregation. The sacrament of infant baptism ends with a reminder to all in attendance that the job of raising the child to know God and to profess their own faith is not the work of the parents alone. The officiating pastor asks the congregation, “Do you who have witnessed and celebrated this sacrament promise your love, support, and care to this child as s/he lives and grows in Christ?” The congregation answers, “We promise our love, support, and care.” There is not a salvation experience in that moment, but there is a demonstration that by baptism, the community is growing. The same holds true for baptisms of those who are able to make a profession of faith. The community grows, and it is a clear

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<sup>30</sup> Osborne, 1081.

<sup>31</sup> Flemming, 18.

<sup>32</sup> Osborne, 1080.

marker – like a threshold in a doorway – that another person has entered into the community, and that they are a ready and willing would-be disciple. Once the person enters the community through baptism, the focus turns to the last element of “making disciples” – teaching.

### Teaching

Teaching is the final verb that explains what it means to make disciples of all nations. This marks a change in Jesus’ disciples’ role from what we have seen throughout the gospel. Previously, they had been given the ability to heal and cast out demons (Matthew 10:1); here Jesus broadens the scope of their ministry. “Although they have previously shared in Jesus’ authority... prior to Easter the disciples had not been authorized to teach.”<sup>33</sup> This teaching is critical to the ongoing existence of the community of discipleship. Indeed, “teaching is essential to creating mature communities of disciples among the nations”<sup>34</sup> It is through the act of teaching that disciples are formed and strengthened. The content of that teaching is spelled out by Jesus – new disciples are to be taught “to obey everything I have commanded you” (28:20).

In the context of Matthew’s gospel, there is much attention placed on Jesus’ role as the “teacher of Israel.”<sup>35</sup> The disciples themselves are now supposed to take up the mantle of teacher and “are to ‘make disciples,’ that is, form followers of Jesus in the manner affirmed throughout the gospel of Matthew, particularly in the section where

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<sup>33</sup> Boring, 376.

<sup>34</sup> Flemming, 18.

<sup>35</sup> Flemming, 7.

Matthew had focused on Jesus' instruction of his disciples (see, esp., 16:13-20:4)."<sup>36</sup>

Matthew provides an account of five extended teaching discourses, the content of which is in view as Jesus refers to "all I have commanded." As Boring suggests, "'all' here reflects the 'all' of 26:1, and it refers not only to the Sermon on the Mount but to all of Jesus' teaching contained in the Gospel as well, especially the five great discourses."<sup>37</sup>

There has been healthy scholarly debate around the topic of Jesus' teachings and how they related to the Torah. Flemming suggest that Jesus' five discourses in Matthew would have naturally reminded his Jewish readers of the five books of Moses<sup>38</sup>, which seems like a reasonable point to me. What seems less clear is whether Jesus is fulfilling or transcending the Torah when he teaches or tells the disciples to teach. Boring, for instance, argues that "Jesus' teaching that fulfills the Torah (cf. 5:17-20) is the sole content of the disciples' teaching."<sup>39</sup> This reading may be too narrow. Osborne offers an alternate view, suggesting that fulfillment and transcendence of the law might both be possible readings that can coexist with one another:

The emphasis on obeying "everything I have commanded you" shows that the discourse sections are not really didactic material to be learned but more importantly practical injunctions to be lived. In this sense Davies and Allison is right to call this a *nova lex* ("new law"), the "Torah of the Messiah" that constitutes the fulfillment of the Torah in Jesus' teaching (contra Carson), with "I have commanded" (Greek text) a global aorist that encapsulates all of Jesus' teaching as commands to be followed in life, namely, the coming kingdom and our relation to it. At the same time, Jesus does not replace the Torah but transcends and "fulfills" it, taking it to a higher plane via radical demand for discipleship.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Senior, 176.

<sup>37</sup> Boring, 376.

<sup>38</sup> Flemming, 7.

<sup>39</sup> Boring, 376.

<sup>40</sup> Osborne, 1082.

I find Osborne's reading convincing, but whatever understanding of Jesus' relationship to the Torah is understood, Osborne helpfully observes that the command is "'everything I have commanded you' (not whatever we feel like saying)."<sup>41</sup>

The nuance of Jesus' teaching and the best way to convey those teachings to others may be debated. What is non-negotiable is the fact that Jesus sets the guidelines for what proper teaching and discipleship look like. The teaching that Jesus enables his disciples to do is directed toward both the mind and the heart; "it is a call for a concrete decision to follow him and to submit to God's will."<sup>42</sup> As Osborne rightly notes, the discipleship in view in this passage is marked by ethical obedience.<sup>43</sup> Flemming simplifies the matter and reminds readers that "obeying Jesus' commands is summed up in his call to love God unreservedly and to love our neighbor as ourselves (Matt 22:34-40)... Consequently, it is at the heart of what Jesus wants his followers to communicate and model as they form new disciples in the nations."<sup>44</sup> This is the good news that the disciples "owe to the world,"<sup>45</sup> in the words of Ulrich Luz. It is the same good news that we still owe to the world today. It is good news marked by a ministry of teaching with the goal of life-long discipleship.

As Witherington points out, "It is also worth stressing that the emphasis is on teaching rather than preaching. So this is not quite the Great Commission to go out and preach to or evangelize the nations, though we should not rigidly exclude such ideas

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<sup>41</sup> Osborne, 1085.

<sup>42</sup> Bosch, 67.

<sup>43</sup> Osborne, 1081.

<sup>44</sup> Flemming, 19.

<sup>45</sup> Luz, 141.

here.... The chief means of making disciples is teaching.”<sup>46</sup> This may be a radical reframing of what some people understand missions to be. In a certain segment of the church, missions is synonymous with long-distance travel to evangelize people who look different than us and live in a reality different from ours. There is a lot of value in preaching and some mission work can be accomplished through thoughtful and faithful preaching. However, preaching is not what Jesus tells his disciples to do and it is not the lesson we should take from his words in Matthew 28. In my tradition and in my understanding, preaching is the work of the pastoral leaders of the church; missions and disciple-making is the domain of all those who consider themselves disciples of Jesus.

## Lesson 2: Missions is Formational

In this moment, Jesus is “recommissioning the Eleven and reaudiencing their ministry. Now they are no longer to confine themselves to Israel, but rather are to go to the nations, and this surely includes the majority population of those nations, not just the Jews.”<sup>47</sup> As they go, they are to make disciples by baptizing and teaching. The spread of that itinerant ministry or the distance one must go to fulfill it will vary. What does not vary is the instruction to disciple, to baptize, and to teach. This is the clearest command Jesus gives about the missionary work of the church. The church is to be proclaiming who Jesus is and making new followers. “The followers of the earthly Jesus have to make

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<sup>46</sup> Witherington, 534.

<sup>47</sup> Witherington, 534.



others into what they themselves are: disciples.”<sup>48</sup> This discipleship is oriented toward God and others. As Bosch appropriately notes,

Mission is not narrowed down to an activity of making individuals new creatures, of providing them with “blessed assurance” so that, come what may, they will be “eternally saved.” Mission involves, from the beginning and as a matter of course, making new believers sensitive to the needs of others, opening their eyes and hearts to recognize injustice, suffering, oppression, and the plight of those who have fallen by the wayside.<sup>49</sup>

In obeying Jesus’ commands to make disciples who obey everything he commanded, we ourselves become more obedient disciples. As Joe Kapolyo has aptly noted, this Great Commission from Jesus is “binding on all disciples for all time,” and is “the most exciting, most urgent and most necessary task in the world.”<sup>50</sup>

Kapolyo also offers a critique of the approach to missions that has treated some people or groups as missionaries and others as the object of missions. He writes of the Great Commission that,

This is a message that the African church needs to hear loudly and clearly. For too long we have been recipients of the benefits of the gospel, and with few exceptions most of our church communities do not anticipate, let alone participate in, mission. We do not see it as our duty to go and spread the good news to people within our own countries, or to people beyond the borders of our own countries. This is disobedience to the words of the Lord of heaven and earth.<sup>51</sup>

Kapolyo is far more qualified to offer a critique of the African churches than I will ever be. However, the same type of critical reflection can be offered by someone like me to the Western churches. Too often, we in the West have heard the Great Commission as a command to go to the far corners of the world and turn all the “others” we find into

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<sup>48</sup> Bosch, 75.

<sup>49</sup> Bosch, 83.

<sup>50</sup> Joe Kapolyo, “Matthew” in *Africa Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 1196.

<sup>51</sup> Kapolyo, 1196.

foreign versions of ourselves. In doing so, “we” fix “them” and “they” have “us” to thank for their new-found faith and life. That view of missions misses the point of the Great Commission entirely. If we read Matthew 28 more closely and apply it more faithfully, we become the sort of people who share the good news of Jesus wherever we go, equipping others to become disciples who look like Jesus and who have the desire and ability to make even more disciples. In obeying Jesus’ command to make disciples, we become more like Jesus as we help others to become more like Jesus. In the end, it is a call that leads to a never-ending process of disciples forming more disciples.

## Ch. 5 – Missions is Holistic

*He said to him the third time, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” And he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep.”*  
*(John 21:17)*

In the final chapter of the gospel of John, the resurrected Jesus meets the disciples on a beach one morning. After a miraculous catch of fish and a breakfast together, the rest of the people seem to vanish, leaving Jesus and Peter<sup>1</sup> alone. What follows is a three-fold question from Jesus as to whether Peter loves him. After each affirmative answer from Peter, Jesus tells him to “Feed my lambs” (15), “Take care of my sheep” (16), and “Feed my sheep” (17). I will address a few of the key interpretive issues related to this passage before offering my interpretation and application of this passage. Unlike the many scholars who view Jesus’ reinstatement of Peter as a message about Peter’s specific apostolic authority or the pastoral role of church leaders, I will suggest that his message applies more broadly to the discipleship of all believers. The key application that I take from Jesus’ exchange with Peter is that missions is holistic, and that the work of Jesus’ disciples is to care for the body and the soul of God’s people.

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<sup>1</sup> For the sake of familiarity and the ease of readers, I have chosen to use the name “Peter” throughout this chapter to refer to the man who is sometimes known as Simon, Simon Peter, Peter, and Cephas. I have not altered direct quotations to match my own style preference.

## Three Questions and Three Answers

The structure of Jesus and Peter's question-and-answer session is a three-fold exchange. There are variations to each of the questions and answers which will be discussed below, but the general content of each question is consistent, and each answer is basically the same as the others. Many scholars have drawn a connection between this exchange and Peter's three-fold denial of knowing Jesus in John 18:15-27,<sup>2</sup> which I find to be a reasonable link. Another noteworthy matter when it comes to these verses is the author's choice of words. In the span of three short verses, there are two different words used for "love" and two words rendered as "sheep" or "lambs" in English translations. Although word studies can be profitable and variances in language can at times indicate important theological truths, I find myself aligned with the majority of modern scholars who argue that in this passage "no nuance appears to be indicated, merely diversity in word use."<sup>3</sup> Charles Talbert states it even more emphatically, saying that the alternation of terms is "merely stylistic and has no theological import."<sup>4</sup> In terms of both the three-fold structure and the vocabulary choices, it is best to remember that the writer of the fourth gospel possesses a flair for poetic language and creative turns of phrase.

There is another fascinating debate around the referent in verse 15 for Jesus' question "Do you love me *more than these*?" (emphasis added). In only the first of his three questions, Jesus adds the phrase "more than these" to his question about Peter's love. Jesus himself leaves this phrase unexplained in the text, and Peter neither questions

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<sup>2</sup> For a concise summary of alternate understandings of the significance of the three-fold question, see George R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 405.

<sup>3</sup> Gerard Sloyan, *John* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1988), 230.

<sup>4</sup> Charles H. Talbert, *Reading John* (Macon, Ga.: Smyth & Helwys, 2005), 271.

nor qualifies it. Whatever it meant to Jesus and Peter, modern readers do not get the benefit of their explanation or comment. All we know is that Jesus is asking Peter a question about the object of his love.<sup>5</sup> There are several ways to read and understand what Jesus has in mind when he refers to “these,” and well-respected scholars make passionate cases for each. In its simplest form, there appear to be three different options. Jesus could be asking if Peter’s love for him surpasses the love others have for Jesus (i.e., “Do you love me more than they love me?”), if Peter’s love for Jesus surpasses Peter’s love for other people (i.e., “Do you love me more than you love them?”), or if Peter’s love for him surpasses Peter’s love of other things (i.e., “Do you love me more than you love this fishing equipment, or this life you have as a fisherman?”). Beasley-Murray, Michaels, Sloyan and others prefer the first reading, where Jesus is asking Peter if he (Peter) loves Jesus more than the other disciples do. Sloyan refers to this as the “obvious” reading<sup>6</sup> while Michaels calls it “the only possible meaning”<sup>7</sup> and Beasley-Murray says that “in the context [the question] must surely mean, ‘...more than your fellow disciples do?’”<sup>8</sup> In contrast and with equal conviction, Moloney argues that “Jesus’ thrice-repeated question asks Simon Peter to commit himself to love Jesus more than he loves the other disciples at the meal.”<sup>9</sup> Klink acknowledges that the referent could be the fishing way of life, but ultimately concludes that “these” referring to the disciples “makes the most sense, but it is still not exactly clear.”<sup>10</sup> Charles Talbert disagrees with both camps, and

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<sup>5</sup> Edward W. Klink III, *John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 912.

<sup>6</sup> Sloyan, 230.

<sup>7</sup> J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 1043.

<sup>8</sup> Beasley-Murray, 405.

<sup>9</sup> Francis J. Moloney S.D.B., *John* (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 554.

<sup>10</sup> Klink, 913.

suggests that “After breakfast Jesus asks Peter, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love [agapas] me more than these?’ (i.e., more than this fishing gear.)”<sup>11</sup> My own opinion in this debate is conflicted, though if pressed, I would tend to align most closely with Talbert. There are elements of each interpretation that make sense to me, and elements of each that I find unsatisfactory. It makes good sense to me that Jesus would ask Peter whether he (Peter) loves him (Jesus) more than he loves any other person or object. The idea of love of God and love of Christ as the goal of discipleship and the Christian life is well-established throughout the Scriptures. In the Synoptics, Jesus makes various attempts to show the disciples that they must love him more than they love anyone or anything else. What is less clear to me is why Jesus would seem to pit the disciples against each other to figure out who loves him (Jesus) the most. It seems equally implausible that Jesus would suggest that Peter should judge the affections or allegiances of the other disciples and then rank himself against them. I can, however, understand why Jesus would ask Peter to recognize Jesus as his greatest love above other people, lifestyles, or objects. Whether people or objects are in view, I think Peter is being asked to reflect on what his highest allegiance and his greatest love truly is. His answer to that question will give meaning to Jesus’ call to feed or tend his sheep.

### Peter’s New Role

At this point, we must consider what Jesus was saying to Peter and how this passage can be applied to the church today. When it comes to understanding Jesus’

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<sup>11</sup> Talbert, *Reading John*, 271.

meaning, Beasley-Murray observed that “the endeavor to answer that question appears to be the one issue in the entire Gospel where members of different Christian confessions not only divide, but find difficulty in understanding the answers of the others.”<sup>12</sup> The traditional Catholic understanding of this passage is that this is the moment where Jesus establishes the papacy and bestows Peter as “the sole repository of his pastoral authority.”<sup>13</sup> In this case, Jesus’ words and actions only apply to Peter and his direct spiritual descendants. Most Protestants treat this text more broadly and apply Jesus’ words to pastoral leadership within the church. The argument here is that Jesus is giving instructions to church leaders to take care of the “flock,” which is the church. Moloney suggests that the interpretive key to this passage is to understand the church leader as a shepherd.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the language of shepherd has close ties with language about leadership in the gospel of John and throughout the Bible. There is a significant amount of common language between this passage and other shepherding texts about leadership, and there is historical evidence that Peter did become a leader among the disciples in the early church. Although this reading makes sense, I think there is a wider application for this text that just the leadership model that is most frequently discussed.

When it comes to the interpretation of this passage and its application for the modern church, I find the most value in Klink’s treatment of the verses. Klink goes further than most scholars in applying Jesus’ words to more than local church or denominational leaders. Klink begins by suggesting that Jesus was not intending to

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<sup>12</sup> Beasley-Murray, 406.

<sup>13</sup> Beasley-Murray, 406.

<sup>14</sup> Moloney, 555.

bestow Peter with an unquestioned authority over the flock. Rather, Jesus intended to keep his role as the “Good Shepherd,” but was teaching Peter how to care for the sheep in his absence. Klink says, “The qualification “*my sheep*”... makes clear that this is the command of the Good Shepherd to an undershepherd, for just as there is ‘one flock,’ there is also only ‘one Shepherd’ (10:16).”<sup>15</sup> On this point, it is possible to align his position with that of many other scholars who see the pastor, bishop, or pope as standing in the place of Jesus in his physical absence from believers. Klink helpfully pushes the imagery a step further when he says that “This command of Jesus is ultimately the fulfillment not only of the expectation that Peter love him (vv. 15-17) but also of the new commandment given to the church for mutual love (13:34-35), which fittingly occurred earlier in the Gospel just before Jesus announced the betrayal of Peter (13:38).”<sup>16</sup> When we understand Jesus’ words to Peter as a message about mutual love rather than a message about leadership, it makes it easy to apply his instructions more broadly than has traditionally been understood. Certainly good Christian leadership should be marked by love of those one is leading, but the work of feeding and tending to others need not be restricted to leaders.

Jesus’ words in this scene can be applied universally to all Christians, as they are descriptive of a way to love and serve one another. I agree with O’Day on this point, who says that “[t]hese verses do not point to Peter as Jesus’ distinctive successor, but as embodying what is true of all of Jesus’ disciples. These verses position Peter as a model

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<sup>15</sup> Klink, 915.

<sup>16</sup> Klink, 915.



of what it means to live out one's love of Jesus."<sup>17</sup> Ngewa comes at this exchange from a different angle and highlights the ordinariness of Peter's role in this dialogue which is revealed by Jesus' use of his "ordinary name" Simon, rather than calling him Peter or Cephas. This, Ngewa argues, is because "Peter's denial had shown that he was not yet 'a rock'. He was still the ordinary Simon."<sup>18</sup> By considering Peter's ordinariness and the broad truth that Jesus is illustrating, we can reclaim this passage as one that has useful instructions for all disciples of Jesus, not only for those in positions of authority. This is where I believe there is an often-overlooked application of Jesus' words. The work of leading the flock is certainly the calling of pastors and other church or denominational leaders. But the shepherding tasks of feeding and tending to the sheep are not restricted to those in leadership. Jesus is setting up a community that is marked by care and concern of one another, and that requires meeting the needs of others.

In John's gospel, the disciples have been called to represent community to the world, and Jesus himself suggests that love is the mark that distinguishes his followers from the rest of the world. "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another," he tells them in John 13:35. Jesus extends that command here and gives it more dimension by making "love for others, even for brothers and sisters in Christ, a subset of a love for Christ."<sup>19</sup> Klink further explains:

In this Gospel the logical expression of Christian love is action, just as God's expression of his love for us is displayed in the person and work of Jesus Christ. That is why Jesus, after grounding Peter's discipleship in a love for him, immediately commands for its expression to be in the form of an obedient and

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<sup>17</sup> Gail R. O'Day, *The Gospel of John* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 861.

<sup>18</sup> Samuel Ngewa, "John" in *Africa Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 1322.

<sup>19</sup> Klink, 913.

sacrificial following of him. To follow Christ is to make one's own life a subset of the life of Christ.<sup>20</sup>

Following Klink's lead, I would suggest that Jesus' last words to Peter in the gospel of John are as much about the heart of the community as they are about its organization. In this conversation, Jesus is showing Peter that the work of being his disciple entails love for others that is expressed through meeting their immediate physical needs, in the way a shepherd would meet the needs of his sheep.

### Lesson 3: Missions is Holistic

Perkins wrote, "the gospel, rightly understood, is holistic—it responds to man as a whole person; it doesn't single out just spiritual or just physical needs and speak only to those."<sup>21</sup> This delicate balance is one the church continues to work to find. In my interviews, I found some people who thought missions was only the work of evangelizing people for the purpose of conversion and others who thought missions was about meeting physical needs regardless of the gospel. The truth is a more complicated mix. The call Jesus issues his followers is to love in a holistic way that meets both the physical and spiritual needs of others. We feed Jesus' sheep when we share the gospel with a hungry soul and when we share a meal with a hungry stomach. Discipleship without regard to the person's physical needs can seem cold and uncaring. Physical aid without discipleship is a worthy social project, but is in no way unique to the church. Only when they are combined do these elements create missions.

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<sup>20</sup> Klink, 924.

<sup>21</sup> Perkins, 21.

Jesus knew from the beginning of his public ministry that spiritual healing must often be coupled with a change in a person's physical condition. Numerous miracles throughout all the gospels show that Jesus not only sought to share the good news with people but that he cared about their bodies as well. He often used his ability to improve their physical lot in life as a catalyst to be allowed a platform on which to reach their souls. As his followers, we may not have access to the same miracle-working abilities, but there is a great deal that we are able to do that will substantially improve the lives of those with whom we wish to share the gospel. When we feed Jesus' sheep, we love others in a holistic way, giving them things that are both physically and spiritually life-sustaining and life-enhancing.

## Ch. 6 – Missions is Transformational

*“You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God.*

*(2 Corinthians 9:11-12)*

Following his Christophany in Acts 9, Paul sets out on a series of journeys designed to spread the gospel, establish churches, and then strengthen, encourage and correct those churches. The evangelism and church-planting part of Paul’s work is well-known by Christians and has been explored at great length in many books. What is more intriguing about Paul for this project is his writing in 2 Corinthians 8-9 regarding the collection for the Jerusalem church. Paul employs a series of motivational tactics<sup>1</sup> to encourage the church in Corinth to give generously. We have already seen that Jesus illustrates for his disciples a way of doing missions that is sacrificial (ch. 3), formational (ch. 4), and holistic (ch. 5). In this chapter, we will see the early church engaging in missions and realizing an unexpected outcome – missions is also transformational. The work that Paul is calling the Corinthians to do is not solely (or even primarily) about the benefit to the Jerusalem church; Paul desires for the Corinthians to realize that their generosity is for their own good. Their own transformation will be both the motivation

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<sup>1</sup> Jacob Cherian offers a crucial warning about the line between motivation and manipulation. He writes, “Those of us who are pastors and leaders have to be careful and sensitive in dealing with our flocks - especially when it comes to using emotionally powerful motivators like praise, shame, fear or blame to move them in desired directions. Good results will be built on the foundation of proven and caring relationships.” (Jacob Cherian, “2 Corinthians” in *South Asia Bible Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015], 1603.)

and the result of participating in this collection for Jerusalem. For Paul, giving is not an obligation that is incumbent upon the believers; it is an opportunity for them to deepen their discipleship and to experience God's blessings.

### About the Collection for Jerusalem

In 2 Corinthians 8-9, Paul is attempting to rally one of his churches – the believers at Corinth – to offer an acceptable gift in support of this mission. This, we will eventually learn, is because Paul sees this giving as an integral part of living out their calling as disciples of Jesus. Because these chapters are just one part of a longer discussion about the collection that spans across several of Paul's letters, it requires a bit of investigating to piece together the whole puzzle that Paul points to in 2 Corinthians 8-9. Throughout Paul's letters, his language about the collection for Jerusalem changes. At times, he writes about the recipients of the offering as “the poor,” “the poor who are among the saints in Jerusalem,” and “the saints.”<sup>2</sup> In the same way, he talks about the offering as “remembering,” a “collection of money,” a “ministry,” and a “gift.”<sup>3</sup> Regardless of the language used to describe it, the project appears to be a monetary collection for believers in Jerusalem who have fallen on hard times. The roots of this project trace back to the disagreement described in the opening verses of Galatians 2. Paul, after he had been preaching to the Gentiles for years, went to Jerusalem to share with the leaders what he had been doing. Though there was some conflict and debate about how Gentiles would become Christians, the meeting seems to have ended peaceably. Paul recorded, “They

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<sup>2</sup> J. Paul Sampley, *The Second Letter to the Corinthians* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 114.

<sup>3</sup> Sampley, 114.

asked only one thing, that we remember the poor, which was actually what I was eager to do.” (Galatians 2:10)

Part of the need behind this collection for the poor was a famine in Jerusalem. This famine presented “an urgent crisis, not a regular levy on Corinthian Christians’ resources.”<sup>4</sup> Like many modern appeals to missions, this collection was sparked by the unusual need of others<sup>5</sup> and was predicated upon the ability of a group of believers to materially change the life circumstances of those in need. But then and now the awareness of a need and the ability to meet a need does not necessarily mean that the need will be met. As Paul attempted to rally the various churches to come to Jerusalem’s aid, he was met with mixed results. “The Macedonian churches at Thessalonica and Philippi... vigorously embraced the offering and generated an astonishing collection.... [while] the Galatian churches [did not participate in the collection].”<sup>6</sup> Somewhere between the robust success of Macedonia and the non-participation of Galatia sat Corinth. As we see in 2 Corinthians 8-9, the Corinthians had begun to support this collection with great zeal, but in the year since they began their enthusiasm waned and

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<sup>4</sup> Craig S. Keener, *1-2 Corinthians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 206.

<sup>5</sup> Guy Nave offers an alternate perspective on the meaning of Paul’s message about this collection, which bears observation and comment. He suggests that Paul “depicts giving as a ministry, not simply an act of charity” which he says is significant because “ministry is an ongoing way of living, not a one-time event.” Though I agree that we should live generous lives and that Paul would have wanted the Corinthians to continue this practice in their normal lives, I’m not sure this passage makes that point. Where Nave is actually trying to go, however, is a tremendously helpful critique of the American church. He goes on to write, “The ministry of giving is about justice, not charity. American Christians tend to understand giving as charity rather than justice, because America is much better at charity than at justice. The response of Americans to national and international tragedy demonstrates the willingness of Americans to sacrifice for the sake of charity, but the huge and insurmountable chasm between the haves and the have-nots demonstrates the reluctance of Americans to sacrifice for the sake of justice.” (Guy Nave, “2 Corinthians” in *True to Our Native Land* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007], 319)

<sup>6</sup> Sampley, 114.

their collection was left incomplete. Paul takes issue with this and approaches the Corinthians with an unexpected message: your generosity will be good for your soul.

### Giving is Motivated by Grace

To build the case that generosity is good for the soul, Paul first reminds the Corinthians that giving is motivated by grace. The grace language is somewhat obscured in English translations, but would have been obvious to Paul's original audience.<sup>7</sup> He uses versions of *charis* (which can mean "grace" or "gift") seven times in these chapters, in addition to several instances of the related word *eucharis* ("thanksgiving") and the similar-sounding *chara* ("joy"). *Charis* is used throughout Paul's writings to refer to the grace of God and generosity between people. In this passage, he uses forms of *charis* to express the "grace of God" (8:1), the "generous undertaking" of the collection (8:6, 7), the "generous act" of Jesus' incarnation (8:9), "every blessing" that God provides (9:8), and the "surpassing grace of God" (9:14). From beginning to end, 2 Corinthians 8-9 is filled with grace-gift language.

In Paul's theology, grace and giving are inextricably linked to one another. The grace of God was demonstrated in the gift of Jesus. When we receive that gift of grace, our proper response is generous giving that is in proportion to the grace we have been given. "God gave us the supreme gift of Christ Jesus who impoverished himself to serve others (8:9) and to save us. Those of us who have experienced this grace from God are now called to imitate his self-giving love in concrete ways."<sup>8</sup> This theme of imitation is

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<sup>7</sup> Sampley, 131.

<sup>8</sup> Cherian, 1604.

extended by Paul in his writings to Corinth. Not only are they to imitate God's generous giving, but also the generosity of the Macedonian church. The Macedonians, Paul says, have already understood something the Corinthians have not yet grasped: grace received and properly understood results in abundant giving. In particular, Paul praises the Macedonians for giving "according to their means, and even beyond their means." (2 Corinthians 8:3) Though the church in Macedonia did not have the same level of wealth as the Corinthians, they had understood grace more fully, and had given a more generous gift.

Paul treats that tangible, practical gift from the Macedonians as evidence of their deeper spiritual gifts. By evoking this friendly competition between Corinth and Macedonia, he is trying to spur the Corinthians to greater generosity by showing them that in doing so, they might also prove or increase their spiritual giftedness. Knowing that the Corinthians would not easily accept being considered less than any other group, Paul is setting up a comparison in which "the Macedonians are manifesting a spiritual gift that puts them ahead of the Corinthians."<sup>9</sup> Sampley notes that in Paul's world, it was very common for people to learn right behaviors by comparison to another group and modeling after others.<sup>10</sup> The right behavior that Paul wanted the Corinthians to manifest was generosity in giving. The comparison he used to evoke that gift was to point to the

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<sup>9</sup> Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Corinthians* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2002), 218.

<sup>10</sup> Sampley goes even further than noting the historical practice of comparison and modeling; he suggests it is a tool that is underutilized by the modern church. "Why not," he writes, "...realize that we underuse exemplification as a way to enhance moral reflection, sieze (sic) the opportunity to become better models ourselves, and make public recognition of those whose actions and comportment set a good pattern for us all?" (Sampley, 122)



Macedonians who had demonstrated their generosity in spite of their hardships, which seem to have far exceeded any hardships the Corinthians may have faced.

Some commentators suggest that the Macedonians are bearing witness to the fact that “we always have something to give because we are always rich in some area.”<sup>11</sup> Though there is certainly truth to that statement and there is an excellent argument to be made that the modern church could learn to think more creatively about the breadth of opportunities for giving, I think the key point is the sacrificial nature of their giving, not the variety of gifts they might have at their disposal. “Despite their affliction (8:2), the Macedonians had responded to God’s grace in kind — namely, in abundance and beyond their power. Their eagerness to be participants in the collection (8:4) sets up a distinct contrast with the yet to be noted reticence of the Corinthians (8:10-12; 9:3-5).”<sup>12</sup> This eagerness to help is crucial to Paul, who desires the Corinthians to have the abundance of spiritual gifts that the Macedonians already enjoy. He desperately wants the collection to be completed successfully for the benefit of the poor in Jerusalem and the benefit of the Corinthians alike.

### Giving is Freely Chosen

Although Paul makes it clear that his desire is for the Corinthians to recognize and respond to God’s grace in their lives by giving generously to the Jerusalem collection, the Corinthians’ motivations matter to him. Grace is supposed to prompt a joyful, willing response of giving; giving is not something Paul wants to command or require. Paul’s

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<sup>11</sup> Issiaka Coulibaly, “2 Corinthians” in *Africa Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 1432.

<sup>12</sup> Sampley, 121.

goal is that the Corinthians would give of their own volition, though perhaps in response to his prompting. He “wants them to give based on their eagerness, to follow others’ examples, and not to feel like he is abusing his authority or exploiting them.”<sup>13</sup> Paul’s interaction with the Corinthians may seem heavy-handed to modern readers, but in his own context, he was behaving in a way that would have seemed appropriate to the Corinthians. In Paul’s world, “writers often invited their addressees to prove their love for them by some particular favor the writer needed, often on behalf of a third party.”<sup>14</sup> To achieve this goal, Paul sets up the collection as a test for the Corinthians (8:8). This test is primarily an exercise in self-reflection, where the Corinthians look inward to evaluate their motives and their behaviors. Sampley says that the self-reflection Paul is calling them to is an “important and regular Pauline spiritual exercise.”<sup>15</sup> Later in his argument, Paul will more fully develop the case for the spiritual benefit of generosity in giving.

Charles Talbert points to chapter 9 to show that the benefits for this generosity is threefold: “The benefits will be for the Corinthians (vv. 6-11a, 14), for the poor in Jerusalem (v. 12a), and for God (vv. 11b, 12b, 13).”<sup>16</sup> The benefit for the poor in Jerusalem is obvious, and the benefit for God will be discussed later. As it relates to the benefit to the Corinthians themselves, Paul draws on the popular metaphor that sowing bountifully leads to reaping bountifully. Talbert says that 2 Corinthians 9:7 shows that sowing bountifully means “one’s giving must not be done reluctantly or under

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<sup>13</sup> Keener, 205.

<sup>14</sup> Keener, 204.

<sup>15</sup> Sampley, 123.

<sup>16</sup> Talbert, *Reading Corinthians*, 223.

compulsion but cheerfully” and that reaping bountifully means that “liberality is beneficial to those who practice it.”<sup>17</sup> This imagery was very common in the ancient world and would have been familiar to the Corinthians.<sup>18</sup> Paul is using this metaphor to highlight the connection between their financial generosity toward others and their own spiritual benefits.

In order to realize these benefits, however, it is important that the Corinthians choose when to give and what to give of their own volition. Sampley offers an extended reflection on gifts that are freely given, which is a helpful theological framework for understanding Paul’s writing and our modern context. He notes that “grace – and how it is responded to – like love, is best not commanded but left to the discretion of the person(s) involved.”<sup>19</sup> He goes on to suggest that giving ought to begin not from obligation but from celebration. He says that “if we begin... with the celebration of what and how much God has done for us and given to us, then the zeal for giving and for responding to others flows freely from it.”<sup>20</sup> First John 4:19 says, “We love because [God] first loved us.” Sampley believes that motivation applies to the actions and the gifts that believers share; “believers do and give because they have been done unto and been given to.”<sup>21</sup> Paul wants the Corinthians to offer a gift, but the gift will not truly be a gift if it is required or is given under compulsion. This encouragement to giving is

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<sup>17</sup> Talbert, *Reading Corinthians*, 223.

<sup>18</sup> Talbert, *Reading Corinthians*, 223.

<sup>19</sup> Sampley, 123.

<sup>20</sup> Sampley, 128.

<sup>21</sup> Sampley, 122.

integral to Paul's theology. Though the actions and the gifts may look different at times, Paul's assumption is that the believers will be doing good works such as giving.

### Giving is Designed for Equality<sup>22</sup>

In the midst of these chapters, Paul briefly shifts his focus to a description of what generosity in giving looks like that is particularly relevant for modern churches. Paul's call to the church at Corinth is for giving that is "reasonable, and within [their] present means (8:12). What is being talked about is sharing. [They] are not being asked to give away all that [they] possess so that [they themselves] are left in dire straits (8:13)."<sup>23</sup> Paul tells the Corinthians to complete their gift from the resources they have. "The latter note, twice sounded and once restated as "not out of what you do not have," shows Paul's careful insistence that he does not now expect them to be put under unreasonable pressure to come up with more funds than is proportionally fitting."<sup>24</sup>

This idea of what is proportional for them to give is an important theme through Paul's urging, and ties into the theme of justice. Though "the language of 'equality' was Greek, Paul illustrates the principle from Scripture. The manna narrative to which Exodus 16:18 belongs emphasizes depending on God rather than hoarding."<sup>25</sup> Paul is turning the

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<sup>22</sup> Several scholars have identified and reflected on the connection between equality and justice, suggesting that Paul's work is more radical and culture-defining than has sometimes been considered. Among them, Michael Gorman suggests that Paul's work in these chapters is an invitation to participate in economic justice, which is at the heart of gospel. See Michael Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), especially ch. 7 – "Becoming the Justice of God: 1 & 2 Corinthians." Guy Nave provides perhaps the most poetic one-liner on this point that I have read when he writes that "equity and justice are partners – inseparable soul mates – and they represent the will and purpose of God." (Nave, 319)

<sup>23</sup> Coulibaly, 1433.

<sup>24</sup> Sampley, 124.

<sup>25</sup> Keener, 206.

Corinthians' attention back to the time when God directly met the needs of God's people, doing so in a way that did not result in either lack or abundance. Keener suggests that "this economy depicted God's ideal for his people."<sup>26</sup> This theme would have been familiar to the Corinthians. Not only was it presented in the Exodus narrative in the Hebrew Bible, but other ancient writers also "condemn greed for (among other things) being against the public interest."<sup>27</sup> Paul is encouraging the Corinthians to give from what they have so that there would be a rebalancing of resources; they would not have too much and the people in Jerusalem would not have too little. Cherian extends this argument and suggests that this call to equality is rooted in the concept of friendship. "In Paul's day it was generally accepted that friends were equal and shared in all things. Equality was often connected to community solidarity. Thus Paul saw this collection as an important element of the fellowship between churches (8:4; Rom 15:26)."<sup>28</sup>

There is an additional dimension to Paul's argument about proportionality beyond the believers in Jerusalem and the believers in Corinth being equal. He also calls on the Corinthians to give in proportion to what they have received.

How much one puts aside is supposed to be commensurate with how well one has prospered during that week (1 Cor 16:2). Those with abundance must share with those with little so that there are reciprocity and equality.... No one is to be "put upon" by this collection (8:13). At the same time, however, everyone "owes" love to others (Rom 13:8), and in this instance love calls for sharing the burden with those who have already shared what was theirs.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Keener, 206.

<sup>27</sup> Keener, 212.

<sup>28</sup> Cherian, 1602.

<sup>29</sup> Sampley, 115.

Paul is urging the Corinthians to put actions behind their goodwill. “The motive given for such action in vv. 12-15 is equality: ‘as a matter of equality your abundance at the present time should supply their want, so that their abundance may supply your want, that there may be equality.’ (v. 14).”<sup>30</sup>

To modern American readers, it is probably not immediately clear what abundance the Jerusalem Christians have that they might share with the Corinthians, since the church in Jerusalem is the one in need of money. That is because our culture does not tend to place equal value on material and spiritual goods. What Paul seems to have in mind is that the Corinthians would share their material blessings, and the Jerusalem church would share their spiritual blessings.<sup>31</sup> In Paul’s worldview, this type of reciprocity seems to be a perfectly reasonable and natural exchange of blessings and an exchange of sufficient intrinsic value to motivate the Corinthians to make a generous gift.

### Giving Benefits the Giver

As the Corinthians give generous gifts, Paul suggests that they will manifest more spiritual blessings in their own lives. This is a point not to be taken lightly or skimmed over. One of Paul’s central points, and one of the ones that I hold central to my argument for contemporary missions, is that participating in missions contributes to the participants’ own discipleship and transformation. Cherian points out that “fundraising efforts today generally highlight the needs of the receivers and often appeal to our

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<sup>30</sup> Talbert, *Reading Corinthians*, 219.

<sup>31</sup> Talbert, *Reading Corinthians*, 219. Talbert goes on to say, “The same type of argument was given by Hermas, who said that the rich have money to share with poor Christians, whereas poor Christians have power in prayer to benefit the rich Christians.”

emotions. But Paul does not provide any emotional description of the dire needs of the believers in Jerusalem. He positions his call to generosity in the framework of God's people's experience of God's grace."<sup>32</sup> They respond to the call to action because they have experienced God's grace; they experience more of God's grace through their active response to that grace. As Coulibaly writes, "God gives to us so that we can share what he gives with others, and our harvest of righteousness (9:10) is an increasing closeness to God... which reminds us that he alone is the source of the blessings we enjoy."<sup>33</sup> This matter of getting something as a benefit of giving is a point that must be handled carefully. It is by no means my intention to adopt something like a prosperity gospel and suggest that we ought to give to others so that we might get something for ourselves in return. That sort of transactional mentality is not at all representative of what Paul was doing nor what I think the modern church needs to hear.

In my context, where wealth is generally assumed and the accumulation of assets is perfectly normal, the message needs to be that what we do with our wealth matters, and that wealth it is a tool we can use for tremendous good. "Paul presents a positive attitude toward possessions. When God provides one with wealth, God does so in order that the wealth may be shared."<sup>34</sup> Charles Talbert goes a step further in combating the view that wealth is evil when he suggests that today, as in Paul's day, "wealth is good if it leads to generosity."<sup>35</sup> The ancient world understood better than most moderns do that sharing generously with others is a virtue. Paul frames the "liberality in giving" which the

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<sup>32</sup> Cherian, 1602.

<sup>33</sup> Coulibaly, 1433.

<sup>34</sup> Nave, 321.

<sup>35</sup> Talbert, *Reading Corinthians*, 223.

Macedonians have exhibited and the Corinthians are being called to match as a spiritual gift.<sup>36</sup> This liberality is supposed to be in proportion to what one has been given, and is an indication that one has rightly understood their resources as blessings. Perhaps more importantly, there was an attitude about wealth in the ancient world that suggested that generosity would be enabled by the deities. In this particular case, Paul is “echoing [Isaiah] 55:10-11... If people are willing to give, God will make it possible for them to do so.”<sup>37</sup>

This is a sharp departure from the prevailing modern American views. The suggestion that wealth exists to be shared and that it is in the best interest of all in society if resources are distributed equally would certainly be met with resistance in most churches. Even many of those who agree with the principle would struggle with the application. Our modern American culture values individual success and prosperity, and tends to equate wealth with blessings and favor. This means that even the church is far removed from the mentality that God’s approach is “not only providing enough for everyone, but offering some the privilege of sharing in his generosity (Deut 15:4-11).”<sup>38</sup> Though this might be accepted in theory, my experience is that those with wealth and material goods prefer to give out of their surplus, stopping well before those receiving the gift are equal to the givers.

Sampley warns against giving only when we perceive that we have abundance. “If we wait to share until we find ourselves with surplus, we may never share because we

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<sup>36</sup> Talbert, *Reading Corinthians*, 217.

<sup>37</sup> Talbert, *Reading Corinthians*, 223.

<sup>38</sup> Keener, 215.



have been subtly acculturated to think we never have enough.”<sup>39</sup> This brings us back around to Paul’s earlier point about generosity in giving being linked to proper understanding of God’s grace. This is also perhaps the point at which the modern church needs the most instruction and transformation. Sampley goes on to summarize the tension often felt in the modern church when there is an opportunity for generosity.

If we think about how hard we worked to arrive where we are, we are likely to become stingy, because there is something innately programmed into us to have us think either that by our hard work we deserve what we have or that we have been shortchanged and do not have enough. If, on the other hand, we think about how many doors have been opened to us, about how we have gotten where we are by the way things have surprisingly opened to or “broken for” us (by God’s grace and by the working of the Spirit), then we are more likely to think more generously. No doubt some truth resides on both sides of those arguments. The issue is how we keep perspective.<sup>40</sup>

#### Lesson 4: Missions is Transformational

The challenge before the modern church remains much like the challenge before the Corinthian church in Paul’s day. The danger faced by the modern, wealthy church is to assume that their material wealth is the product of their own effort or is something they deserve by their inherent worth. We risk losing proper perspective and seeing our material wealth as a product of our efforts, and thus ours to dole out as we wish. The modern church continues to be in danger of forgetting the biblical truth that all wealth is God-given and is a result of grace. Grace properly understood should still prompt us to give generously and to share in God’s work in the world.

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<sup>39</sup> Sampley, 124.

<sup>40</sup> Sampley, 132.

Further, the modern church has a new risk that seems to have been less dangerous in Paul's world. The modern church needs to navigate the territory between modern values and biblical values. Whereas Paul's cultural values emphasized equality and sharing economies, the modern Western world values personal accumulation and gain.<sup>41</sup> In our world, material wealth is an indicator of status and power. Even among Christians, it would be a challenge to find a group who placed equal value on material and spiritual blessings. Certainly many American Christians would assert there is value in both, but there is an often-unspoken cultural assumption that the one that you can put in a bank account is far more valuable. What this means for modern American Christians is that there is an inherent risk to thinking that what we have to offer is more valuable than what we stand to gain. This can lead to a certain kind of arrogance in missions that is not what Jesus or Paul ever intended.

This mentality is what I heard referred to in several of my interviews as a "Savior complex." Those with money can descend upon the poor and assume that material goods can fix their problems. They then leave, assuming they did something good, without realizing the power imbalance that they assumed and perpetuated. In reality, the modern church has a lot to learn from those who are so often considered the objects of missionary efforts. There still is something profoundly powerful about the spiritual blessings that the poor can offer to the wealthy, and something beautiful about the perspectives of the "have-nots" that they can share with the "haves," if they are given the opportunity to do

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<sup>41</sup> Betz pushes the contrast even further, pointing out that ancients valued simplicity in ways that many moderns do not. (Hans Dieter Betz, *2 Corinthians 8 and 9* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985], 44.)

so. Wealth can transform the world of the person who does not have wealth; sharing wealth transforms the life of the one who gives.

Some of the greatest and most compelling work that I have read about missions in recent years is working to move missions from a giving-to or doing-for model to one in which those groups with different sets of abundance are able to work, share, and grow together. The wealthy church can find too much comfort in its wealth, can hoard it too much, and can fail to see its own poverty in non-wealth areas. What a counter-cultural witness we might be to the world if only we would take Paul's advice, and consider our blessings as God-given gifts, share them liberally, and anticipate a rich and surprising harvest from the seeds we have sown. In doing this, the modern church might still experience that biblical transformation and deepened discipleship to which Jesus called his first followers and Paul called the Corinthians.

## **Ch. 7 – Studies in Missions**

In order to translate my biblical exegesis into congregational changes in views and actions, I have decided to present the key passages discussed in chapters 3-6 as a series of four Bible studies intended for use in small groups or classes. These studies follow the model to which my congregation is most widely accustomed. Although we have small groups that currently use a variety of teaching tools, including video series with discussion questions, lectures and break-out groups, and fill-in-the-blank style workbooks, the single most used resource is our “Sermon Series Study Guide.” Each week, one of our preaching pastors prepares an inductive study guide for the upcoming Sunday’s sermon text. Numerous mid-week groups and Sunday school classes use that guide to prepare for worship on Sunday morning. There are multiple ways to effectively and faithfully present the information I have researched for this thesis. I am choosing to present it in this way because it is a format that is so familiar to my intended audience. In my opinion, there are enough challenging tasks ahead with the content of the study; I see no need to create more barriers by presenting the material in an unfamiliar format.

I envision using these study guides in the same way that we use our current Sermon Series Study Guides. Participants would receive the question sheet several days in advance of the group meeting so they have ample time to read and reflect on the key passage prior to the discussion. For those who wish to dig more deeply into the texts, this also allows time to consult other resources or pursue independent studies on topics that are of particular interest to them. For ease of use and clarity of the purpose of questions, I am also providing a Leader Guide for each week, which contains notes about key concepts.

## **Week 1 – Missions is Sacrificial (Acts 1:1-8)**

### **Gather (5-15 minutes)**

1. Share about a time when you had to wait for something that you really wanted. Was it hard to wait? What did you learn in the process?
2. Who needs prayer or encouragement from you today? Pray for them now and make a plan to reach out to them later.

### **Observe (10-20 minutes)**

3. Read Acts 1:1-8. What are your first impressions and questions?
4. What does Jesus tell the disciples not to do in this passage?
5. What promises or predictions does Jesus make?
6. What do the disciples mean by “restore the kingdom to Israel”?
7. What does it mean to be “baptized with the Holy Spirit” (v. 5) or for “the Holy Spirit [to] come upon you” (v. 8)?
8. What does it look like to be a witness (v. 8)?
9. Where are Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria on the map? Where are they in relation to one another?

### **Interpret (10-15 minutes)**

10. Why does Jesus tell the disciples to wait before he tells them to be his witnesses?
11. Read Acts 2:1-12. How will the arrival of the Holy Spirit equip the disciples to be Jesus’ “witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria”?
12. Skim Acts 1-8. What key events or activities occupy the disciples’ time after Jesus’ ascension?

### **Apply (5-10 minutes)**

13. Missions starts with waiting for the Holy Spirit. In what areas do you need to slow down and wait for God to equip or direct you?
14. Missions is about being a witness. What is one thing God has done that you can provide an eyewitness testimony to? Who needs to hear that testimony?
15. Missions involves stepping out of your comfort zone. What person, place or activity could be your next step toward being a witness “to the ends of the earth”?

## Week 1 – Missions is Sacrificial (Acts 1:1-8) - Leader Guide

**Objective:** Participants will discover that missions is sacrificial. Some may hear this theme and assume we mean an all-encompassing sacrifice of their career or family for the sake of participating in full-time missions in a remote location. For some people, that is the sacrifice missions requires. But even for those of us who are not engaged in full-time missions, being part of missions does require sacrifice. It requires us to sacrifice our control (wait on God’s timing and leading) and to sacrifice our comfort (go to people and places we may not choose). Where God sends us may be near or far, but wherever we go, we are witnesses to the truth of what God has done in our lives and in our world.

### Gather (5-15 minutes)

1. Share about a time when you had to wait for something that you really wanted. Was it hard to wait? What did you learn in the process?
2. Who needs prayer or encouragement from you today? Pray for them now and make a plan to reach out to them later.

### Observe (10-20 minutes)

3. Read Acts 1:1-8. What are your first impressions and questions?
4. What does Jesus tell the disciples not to do in this passage?
  - Leave Jerusalem (4)
  - Worry about God’s timing (7)
5. What promises or predictions does Jesus make?
  - You will be baptized with the Holy Spirit (5)
  - You will receive power (8)
  - You will be my witnesses (8)
6. What do the disciples mean by “restore the kingdom to Israel”?
  - A literal restoration of a literal kingdom.
  - Many Jews in Jesus’ day expected that the Messiah would be a political figure who would restore Israel’s former power and position, based on several Old Testament prophecies.
  - See Ezekiel 36:22-32, Amos 9:11-15, and Zephaniah 3:16-20.
7. What does it mean to be “baptized with the Holy Spirit” (v. 5) or for “the Holy Spirit [to] come upon you” (v. 8)?
  - Answers may be influenced by participants’ previous church experience and denominational backgrounds.
  - Don’t get lost in debates about when or how to baptize.
  - At the simplest level, this means being covered by or wrapped up in the Holy Spirit.
  - The imagery is immersive and complete – you can’t be a little bit baptized or have the Spirit sort of come upon you.
  - It’s an all-in moment that changes everything. We are no longer our own.
8. What does it look like to be a witness (v. 8)?
  - Testify to something you have seen.
  - Provide an accurate account of events that have happened.

- Provide true information, not opinions or perspectives.
9. Where are Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria on the map? Where are they in relation to one another?
- Use the map in your Bible or do a web search.
  - Jerusalem is just northwest of the Dead Sea.
  - Judea is the region in which Jerusalem is located.
  - Samaria is just north of Judea along the western side of the Jordan River (south of Galilee).

### **Interpret (10-15 minutes)**

10. Why does Jesus tell the disciples to wait before he tells them to be his witnesses?
- They need the power of the Holy Spirit to do this work
  - On their own, they still have the wrong idea of what God is up to (“restoring the kingdom to Israel”).
  - They need help to give up their idea of what their mission is and to understand God’s plans for them.
11. Read Acts 2:1-12. How will the arrival of the Holy Spirit equip the disciples to be Jesus’ “witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria”?
- There is a literal miracle of speech and hearing, which breaks down the walls between people groups.
  - All of these disciples have seen first-hand the power of God, so they now have something amazing to testify about.
  - They have experienced God’s ability to give them what they need through the Holy Spirit.
12. Skim Acts 1-8. What key events or activities occupy the disciples’ time after Jesus’ ascension?
- Prayer (1:14, 4:23-31)
  - Administrative & Organizational Issues (1:26, 6:1-7)
  - Interpreting Scripture (2:17ff, 2:25ff, 2:34-35, 4:11, 4:25-26, 8:32-33)
  - Preaching (2:22ff, 3:11ff, 8:4ff)
  - Baptizing (2:41, 8:38)
  - Communal life and fellowship (2:43-47, 4:32-37)
  - Healing (3:1-10, 5:12-16)
  - Conflict with Jewish Leaders (4:1ff, 5:17ff, 6:8-15, 7:1ff, 8:1-3)

### **Apply (5-10 minutes)**

13. Missions starts with waiting for the Holy Spirit. In what areas do you need to slow down and wait for God to equip or direct you?
14. Missions is about being a witness. What is one thing God has done that you can provide an eyewitness testimony to? Who needs to hear that testimony?
15. Missions involves stepping out of your comfort zone. What person, place or activity could be your next step toward being a witness “to the ends of the earth”?

## **Week 2 – Missions is Formational (Matthew 28:16-20)**

### **Gather (5-15 minutes)**

1. What is the most important job you have ever had? What made it so important?
2. Who needs prayer or encouragement from you today? Pray for them now and make a plan to reach out to them later.

### **Observe (10-20 minutes)**

3. Read Matthew 28:16-20. What are your first impressions and questions?
4. When and where have you heard this passage taught or preached?
5. Why did the disciples go to Galilee?
6. How does doubt relate to their obedience?
7. What does Jesus tell the disciples to do? List the important verbs he uses.
8. What promise does Jesus make to the disciples? Why would this promise matter?
9. How does Jesus have the authority to make these commands and promises?

### **Interpret (10-15 minutes)**

10. What is the significance of Galilee? Why would Jesus tell the disciples to go there first?
11. What does it mean to “make disciples” (v. 19)? How has Jesus modeled this behavior for his followers in Matthew’s gospel? Be as specific as you can.
12. What is the “everything” Jesus has in view when he says new disciples are “to obey everything I have commanded you”?

### **Apply (5-10 minutes)**

13. The main verb in the Great Commission (and the key work of missions) is to make disciples. What parts of disciple-making are comfortable for you? What parts make you uneasy or challenge your comfort zone?
14. Where can you make disciples? Who are the people already in your life who would benefit from your guidance?
15. How does (or how should) knowing that Jesus is “with you always” impact the way you go throughout the world and make disciples?



## Week 2 – Missions is Formational (Matthew 28:16-20) - Leader Guide

**Objective:** Participants will discover that missions is formational. The work Jesus calls his disciples to is life-long discipleship. Jesus' idea of missions involves bringing people into the community of faith (baptism) and teaching them what it means to be a disciple. Though the sacrament of baptism is not something that most participants will be able to perform, nearly everybody can and should be able to teach about Jesus. Don't let participants get too caught up in formal teaching structures or a rigid idea of teacher-student relationships. We teach our children; we can teach our neighbors. This is about a gracious, invitational way of presenting Jesus' teachings that will help to deepen the faith of those who are newer to the Christian faith.

### Gather (5-15 minutes)

1. What is the most important job you have ever had? What made it so important?
2. Who needs prayer or encouragement from you today? Pray for them now and make a plan to reach out to them later.

### Observe (10-20 minutes)

3. Read Matthew 28:16-20. What are your first impressions and questions?
4. When and where have you heard this passage taught or preached?
5. Why did the disciples go to Galilee?
  - Jesus told them to (16) via the angel's words (7).
  - Jesus had also told them before his death that Galilee would be their rally point (26:31-32).
6. How does doubt relate to their obedience?
  - The experienced doubt in the midst of obedience; it did not prevent obedience (17).
7. What does Jesus tell the disciples to do? List the important verbs he uses.
  - Go (19)
  - Make disciples (19)
  - Baptize (19)
  - Teach (20)
  - Remember (20)
8. What promise does Jesus make to the disciples? Why would this promise matter?
  - "I am with you always" (20).
  - Connect to lesson 1, where our work needs to be guided and timed by the Spirit. This is a related promise that God is not leaving us to work in our own power or on our own agenda.
  - Everything we do is still directed by God.
9. How does Jesus have the authority to make these commands and promises?
  - God gave it to him - "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (18).

### **Interpret (10-15 minutes)**

10. What is the significance of Galilee? Why would Jesus tell the disciples to go there first?
  - Going to Galilee means going home. In the aftermath of crisis, it's normal to want to go home.
  - Galilee is the region where Jesus' hometown of Nazareth is located. Jesus is identified as being a prophet from Nazareth in Galilee (21:11).
  - It was their "home base" for ministry. Jesus began his ministry in Galilee and called his first disciples in Galilee (Matthew 4:12ff).
  - That is where Jesus had predicted his death (Matthew 17:22-23).
11. What does it mean to "make disciples" (v. 19)? How has Jesus modeled this behavior for his followers in Matthew's gospel? Be as specific as you can.
  - Disciples are made by baptizing (bringing them into the community) and teaching (forming them into the likeness of Jesus)
  - Jesus explicitly tells people to "follow me" throughout Matthew – two sets of brothers (4:18-22), those who want to delay (8:22), Matthew (9:9), anybody who wants to be a follower (16:24), the rich young ruler (19:21).
    - Note: Following is not the same as baptizing, but it is a related invitation into community.
  - Jesus gives five extended teaching discourses in Matthew. In these, he shows the disciples the content of what they should teach, and gives them an example of what it looks like to teach. See next question for details.
12. What is the "everything" Jesus has in view when he says new disciples are "to obey everything I have commanded you"?
  - Jesus seems to be referring to the sections of Matthew's gospel that have been called the "Five Discourses."
  - Matthew 5 – 7 (Sermon on the Mount) – how the followers of Jesus ought to live and relate to others.
  - Matthew 10 (Mission Discourse) – what it looks like to be a disciple of Jesus and the risks of discipleship.
  - Matthew 13 (Parabolic Discourse) – what the kingdom of heaven is like.
  - Matthew 18 (Discourse on the Church) – what the church will look like in the future.
  - Matthew 23-25 (Olivet Discourse) - how believers should live in light of the coming judgement.

### **Apply (5-10 minutes)**

13. The main verb in the Great Commission (and the key work of missions) is to make disciples. What parts of disciple-making are comfortable for you? What parts make you uneasy or challenge your comfort zone?
14. Where can you make disciples? Who are the people already in your life who would benefit from your guidance?
15. How does (or how should) knowing that Jesus is "with you always" impact the way you go throughout the world and make disciples?

### Week 3 – Missions is Holistic (John 21:15-17)

#### Gather (5-15 minutes)

1. What is the most memorable meal you've ever had? What makes it stand out in your memory – the setting? The food? The company? The occasion?
2. Who needs prayer or encouragement from you today? Pray for them now and make a plan to reach out to them later.

#### Observe (10-20 minutes)

3. Read John 21:15-17. What are your first impressions and questions?
4. What does Jesus ask Peter three times? Is his question the same each time?
5. How does Peter respond to Jesus? Is his answer the same each time?
6. What does Jesus tell Peter to do? Is it the same instruction each time?
7. Who are the sheep/lambs? What does it mean to feed or tend them?
8. Why do Jesus and Peter repeat their exchange three times?
9. What attitudes or emotions do you imagine Jesus and Peter have during this exchange? Are they relaxed? Tense? Frustrated? Happy? (If you have time, try re-reading the passage aloud with different moods.)

#### Interpret (10-15 minutes)

10. What does Jesus mean when he asks Peter “do you love me *more than these?*” Is he talking about other people? Other things? What evidence supports your view?
11. Skim through the gospel of John. What are some the ways Jesus has fed or tended to his followers? Focus on literal, physical things, not spiritual nourishment.
12. What are the implications of Jesus calling his followers sheep/lambs? See John 10 for some ideas.

#### Apply (5-10 minutes)

13. Missions is about following Jesus' call to care holistically for his sheep. What are some of the tangible ways you can feed/tend to God's people this week?
14. Nobody is just a “giver” or just a “receiver.” How do you need to be fed or tended to? What resources are available to you?

### Week 3 – Missions is Holistic (John 21:15-17) - Leader Guide

**Objective:** Participants will discover that missions is holistic. Many times, missions is misunderstood to be about only evangelism or only altruism. Jesus does not give us the option to divide the body and the spirit in this way. When Jesus engages with people – and when he tells his followers how to engage with others – he pays attention to both the physical and the spiritual concerns that people have. When we engage in missions, we do more than just make disciples (see Week 2), we also feed and nurture the whole person.

#### Gather (5-15 minutes)

1. What is the most memorable meal you've ever had? What makes it stand out in your memory – the setting? The food? The company? The occasion?
2. Who needs prayer or encouragement from you today? Pray for them now and make a plan to reach out to them later.

#### Observe (10-20 minutes)

3. Read John 21:15-17. What are your first impressions and questions?
4. What does Jesus ask Peter three times? Is his question the same each time?
  - Simon son of John, do you love me?
  - The questions are generally the same; the second and third are identical, but the first also includes the phrase “more than these.”
5. How does Peter respond to Jesus? Is his answer the same each time?
  - Yes, Lord; you know that I love you
  - The answers are generally the same; the first and second are identical, but the third includes the phrase, “Lord, you know everything”
6. What does Jesus tell Peter to do? Is it the same instruction each time?
  - Feed my lambs (15)
  - Tend my sheep (16)
  - Feed my sheep (17)
7. Who are the sheep/lambs? What does it mean to feed or tend them?
  - Sheep and lambs are generally understood to be the followers of Jesus. See John 10, where Jesus identifies himself as the Good Shepherd.
  - On the most literal level, feeding means feeding – meeting the physical needs. To take a broader view, this has to do with holistic care for God's people, which includes (but is not limited to) protection and food.
8. Why do Jesus and Peter repeat their exchange three times?
  - Most scholars think Peter affirms his love for Jesus three times to mirror the three times that Peter had denied Jesus (18:15-18, 18:25-27)
9. What attitudes or emotions do you imagine Jesus and Peter have during this exchange? Are they relaxed? Tense? Frustrated? Happy? (If you have time, try re-reading the passage aloud with different moods.)

### **Interpret (10-15 minutes)**

10. What does Jesus mean when he asks Peter “do you love me *more than these?*” Is he talking about other people? Other things? What evidence supports your view?
  - The three main views are that Jesus is asking (1) if Peter loves Jesus more than he (Peter) loves anyone else, (2) if Peter loves Jesus more than anyone else loves him (Jesus), or (3) if Peter loves Jesus more than he (Peter) loves any other things (like his fishing equipment or the morning’s large catch of fish).
  - Scholars disagree on which reading is correct, and any could make sense; just make sure that participants are thinking about what they hear in this question.
11. Skim through the gospel of John. What are some the ways Jesus has fed or tended to his followers? Focus on literal, physical things, not spiritual nourishment.
  - 2:1 – Turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana
  - 4:46 – Healing an official’s son
  - 5:1 – Healing the man who was ill for 38 years
  - 6:1 – Feeding the five thousand
  - 9:1 – Giving sight to a blind man
  - 11:38 – Resurrecting Lazarus
  - 13:1 – Washing the disciples’ feet
  - 21:1 – Helping the disciples’ catch fish; cooking them breakfast
  - *This is an incomplete list – participants may come up with others. Focus on the fact that Jesus cares for bodies as well as souls.*
12. What are the implications of Jesus calling his followers sheep/lambs? See John 10 for some ideas.
  - Jesus guards and protects his followers (10:1-2, 7-8)
  - Jesus knows them intimately and cares for each (10:3)
  - Jesus is recognizable and trustworthy to his followers (10:4)
  - Jesus is willing to sacrifice his life for his followers (10:11)

### **Apply (5-10 minutes)**

13. Missions is about following Jesus’ call to care holistically for his sheep. What are some of the tangible ways you can feed/tend to God’s people this week?
14. Nobody is just a “giver” or just a “receiver.” How do you need to be fed or tended to? What resources are available to you?

## **Week 4 – Missions is Transformational (2 Corinthians 9:6-15)**

### **Gather (5-15 minutes)**

1. What is the best gift you have given someone? What made it so special?
2. Who needs prayer or encouragement from you today? Pray for them now and make a plan to reach out to them later.

### **Observe (10-20 minutes)**

3. Read 2 Corinthians 9:6-15. (Also skim all of chapters 8 and 9, if you have time.) What are your first impressions and questions?
4. How are we supposed to give?
5. What is the result of generosity?
6. How are the concepts of giving and thanksgiving related?
7. How are the concepts of giving and obedience related?
8. What is God's role in our generosity and giving?

### **Interpret (10-15 minutes)**

9. What does the image of sowing and reaping teach about giving?
10. Does giving mean that we will receive even more than we gave? Why or why not?
11. Look at verse 8 again. What do you make of the repetition of words like every, always, and everything?
12. How does giving reflect God's grace?

### **Apply (5-10 minutes)**

13. Missions involves giving of our resources. How can you give more generously this week?
14. Missions (giving) is transformational for both the receiver and the giver. When have you seen giving result in an unexpected benefit or blessing for the receiver? For the giver?
15. When has giving been a challenge for you? What encouragement or help do you see in these verses?

## **Week 4 – Missions is Transformational (2 Corinthians 9:6-15) - Leader Guide**

**Objective:** Participants will discover that missions is transformational. In 2 Corinthians 8-9, Paul suggests a more radical type of giving than most of us practice. Paul suggests that we should give so that resources are distributed equally (8:13-15), and no one experiences lack or over-abundance. This is a difficult counter-cultural message that is likely to be met with some resistance – whether spoken or internalized! Don't get hung up on convincing people to give. Paul's key point here is that generous giving flows naturally out of our understanding of God's grace to us, and results in ever-more grace in our lives. When we give, we not only help others, but our lives are transformed too.

### **Gather (5-15 minutes)**

1. What is the best gift you have given someone? What made it so special?
2. Who needs prayer or encouragement from you today? Pray for them now and make a plan to reach out to them later.

### **Observe (10-20 minutes)**

3. Read 2 Corinthians 9:6-15. (Also skim all of chapters 8 and 9, if you have time.)  
What are your first impressions and questions?
4. How are we supposed to give?
  - As we have decided freely on our own (7)
  - Cheerfully (7)
  - Abundantly (8)
5. What is the result of generosity?
  - God will provide every blessing (8)
  - God will “increase the harvest of [our] righteousness” (10)
  - We will be “enriched in every way” (11)
  - God will be glorified (13)
6. How are the concepts of giving and thanksgiving related?
  - As we give, God receives thanksgiving from those who receive gifts (12)
7. How are the concepts of giving and obedience related?
  - They are intertwined ways that we glorify God (13)
8. What is God's role in our generosity and giving?
  - God provides what we need, so that we can give out of abundance (8)

### **Interpret (10-15 minutes)**

9. What does the image of sowing and reaping teach about giving?
  - There is a correlation between what we give (sow) and what we get (reap); generosity begets generosity (6)
  - Whatever we sow or reap is ultimately God's; God provides the seed and the harvest (10)
10. Does giving mean that we will receive even more than we gave? Why or why not?
  - It depends how we understand giving and receiving.

- 2 Corinthians 8-9 does seem to indicate that we will receive in abundance as we give, but it is oversimplifying the point to think that giving \$100 means we will get \$1,000. What we receive will be in greater abundance, but potentially not of the same kind. In other words, we may give material gifts and receive spiritual or intangible blessings.
11. Look at verse 8 again. What do you make of the repetition of words like every, always, and everything?
    - *This question is subjective, and may have a variety of responses.*
    - One possible answer: God is sovereign over all our giving, and over all aspects of all the lives of all of God's people.
  12. How does giving reflect God's grace?
    - *It takes looking at all of 2 Corinthians 8-9 to get this whole picture.*
    - When we understand that all we have is a result of God's grace and properly consider the surpassing generosity of Jesus' sacrifice for us, we are enabled to give ever more generously. In this way, those who receive our gifts experience God's grace.

**Apply (5-10 minutes)**

13. Missions involves giving of our resources. How can you give more generously this week?
14. Missions (giving) is transformational for both the receiver and the giver. When have you seen giving result in an unexpected benefit or blessing for the receiver? For the giver?
15. When has giving been a challenge for you? What encouragement or help do you see in these verses?

**Summary:** Through these four sessions, participants should have learned that missions is sacrificial, missions is formational, missions is holistic, and missions is transformational. Our calling is to wait for God to give us the Holy Spirit, then to move out from the places that feel most comfortable to us. As we go, we make disciples by teaching them what Jesus did and said, and we tend to their physical needs in addition to their spiritual need. Through this process, we will see that we are not only improving the lives of others, but transforming our lives as well.



## Final Wrap-Up

Leaders should invite participants to one final event – a meal, coffee hour, or other equally low-pressure environment. As participants gather, ask them to reflect in small groups on one or more of the following questions:

1. How did your understanding of missions change throughout this study?
2. Which aspect of missions – sacrificial, formational, holistic, transformational – was most interesting to you? Why?
3. Which aspect of missions was most challenging? Why?
4. What questions do you still have about missions?

The goal of this event is to wrap up any loose ends and to provide an opportunity for more active engagement in missions. The questions above and the leader's response to the answers will address the first part of that goal.

To accomplish the second goal, leaders may invite some guests to help provide inspiration and opportunity to engage in missions. These guests may give presentations or sit on a panel for a more conversational approach. Ideas of guests include:

1. Representatives of local mission agencies (soup kitchen, community garden, rescue mission, prison ministry).
2. Participants of past mission projects/trips.
3. Leaders of upcoming mission projects/trips.
4. Someone who has a testimony of being changed by missions.

Keep in mind that the goal of this event is to foster enthusiasm about missions, increase awareness of current missions opportunities, and present easy opportunities to engage in missions. Leaders may want to suggest an opportunity for the Bible study group to serve together or adopt a project. Remember that the goal is invitation and opportunity, not coercion. Some participants may not be ready, able, or willing to engage in missions; this is okay. Remind them of where and how to find information about missions opportunities should their situation change in the future.

## Ch. 8 – Conclusion

### Putting the Pieces Together

In my church office hangs a 3' by 4' photo collage that we commissioned in 2019 as part of Corinth's 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations. From a distance, you see a photo that I took of Corinth years ago. The sanctuary's Gothic steeple rises up above lush green trees with white flowers in full spring bloom, and the green lawn stretches out in front of the building. Up close, the image of the church campus fades and the component photos come into view. The big picture of Corinth is made up of hundreds of images of Corinth's missions work over the years. There are faces of Kenyan children who are fed and educated by our contributions, construction photos of the Corinth Hope Center in Nicaragua, modern and historical photos of Corinth-supported missionaries serving in all parts of the globe, logos of missions organizations we support, and short-term mission teams serving together. Each separate picture means something to me and evokes a powerful memory, but it's the whole collage that I truly love. This artwork is my daily reminder that missions is an interrelated web of efforts and that the church is incomplete without each.

In this project, I have attempted to show just a few of the component truths of missions that make up the whole. I have not painted the entire picture, but my hope and prayer is that some portion of it is being brought into focus. In this work, I have shown that missions is sacrificial, formational, holistic, and transformational. Although these are tremendously important truths about missions and do represent some of the things I want my congregation to learn, these are not the last things I hope they or I will learn about how to do missions faithfully.

## The Work Ahead

### *Communications*

In its earliest versions, I thought this project was about communications strategies for missions volunteer recruitment and retention. Although I discovered that education was the greater need, there is a lot of work left to be done about how we communicate about missions. My interviews revealed that we have not sufficiently communicated to the congregation who our mission partners are or what their opportunities to participate in missions are. This became clear to me when over 10% of my interviewees talked about our ongoing work in Guatemala. Though we did have a 10-year commitment with a village called Villa Hortencia, that partnership ended in 2016, and we sent our last mission team to Guatemala in the spring of 2017. I was startled to hear how many people thought we were still involved in that community half a decade later.

One of the most profitable set of questions that I asked interviewees was a two-sided analysis of our local congregation. “What are we doing well when it comes to missions, and what could we do better?” The theme of improved communication and greater information sharing was one of the most common answers to what we could improve. Even those who have been actively engaged in missions at Corinth for many years noted that they wish they knew more about our mission partners and what kind of work those partners are doing. Some practical ideas included creating a bulletin board somewhere at the church, having more frequent opportunities for mission partners to share updates during worship, writing a regular blurb in our bulletins or newsletters highlighting one mission partner at a time, or adding mission partners to our church-wide prayer list on a regular rotation. This particular set of recommendations was encouraging

for me, as it indicates that at least some segment of the congregation is interested in knowing more, understanding better, and engaging more deeply with our missions partners. In addition, these suggestions would all be relatively easy to implement and could be done in a way that would not create any significant disruption to our current way of doing ministry.

Several of the people I interviewed had a different perspective on communication. Within our congregation, we have career missionaries, parents and adult children of career missionaries, and some people who work for missions agencies. I was surprised to hear from quite a few of the people in that group that they would like to see more communication from the church to the missionaries and missions agencies. I have been operating under the impression that our missions partners were busy and may want to be left to do their work, receiving their support checks quarterly and requests for ministry updates about as frequently. What I had not anticipated was the observation that we could support our missionaries better by being more proactive in our communication, asking for more updates and reminding them of our support for them.

Other suggestions related to communications had to do with how much information we share about missions opportunities and when we share those details. Several people noted that our announcements tend to assume too much knowledge on the part of those whom we hope will sign up to participate in the activities. For example, a number of people said that simply announcing “we are taking a trip to X-location, contact such-and-such if you want to learn more” can put too much burden on prospective participants. The specific recommendations were to announce opportunities earlier to allow people to plan, and to include more specific details. Where are we going? How

long will we be there? How many people does this team require? What particular skills or interests would be helpful to be on this team? What is the cost? Who will pay the cost? There are some logistical problems with that recommendation, as we have very limited space in our print materials and limited time in our verbal announcements, and not all details are available in the earliest phases of planning and recruitment. Still the underlying point is valid – some people want to know more without having to ask for more information.

The requests for more information extended even beyond those who thought they might participate in a trip or a work day, which are the types of activities we have most frequently promoted in the past. When I spoke with older folks (including some with physical limitations) and people who say that their schedules give them very little time or flexibility, there was still a willingness and desire to learn more about missions. Those who are unable or unwilling to go on a trip or commit to a particular work day or project still seemed very eager to hear about ways they can provide supplies or prayer. Many of those who have schedule limitations right now expressed a hope to participate more in the future. All of this was encouraging for me; whether or not people are participating now, there seems to be a general impression that missions is important and an interest in engagement even among non-participants.

There is also the issue of what communication happens after people participate in a missions opportunity. Early in the congregational research process, I realized that many of the opportunities we presented (work days, supply drives, needs of partner organizations, etc.) did not come with an effective feedback loop for participants to report back about their service or for us to track involvement. I heard from a couple

interviewees that they had previously had negative experiences in missions, but never knew who to share that information with or how to share it. I don't yet have a plan for how to complete that loop, but I am convinced of the need for it in the planning of future projects.

### *Accessibility and Inclusion*

My second early idea was that my thesis would be a project about accessibility and inclusion in missions. My working hypothesis was that the missions program we offered did not provide a sufficient variety of types of involvement for those who have physical disabilities or who live with invisible illnesses. As discussed in chapter 2, I was shocked to see that the presence of invisible illnesses did not correlate with missions participation. While physical disabilities did correlate with non-participation, it was also closely linked to age.

Perhaps the most surprising thing I heard in my interviews was the number of people who said that something Corinth is doing well in missions is offering a wide variety of opportunities for people to get involved in different ways. I assumed that one of the ways we could improve our missions program would be to create different avenues of service that would create additional entry points that would be more accessible to more types of people. The interviews seemed to reveal the exact opposite. I heard things like “there's something for everybody” or “if people aren't participating in missions, it's because they don't want to, not because they don't have the opportunity.” I would have been skeptical of this information if had only been coming from those who were already participating in missions. If that had been the case, there would have been a clear bias;

obviously the people who are doing something believe that it is possible to do what they're doing. What I found far more surprising and encouraging was the number of self-identified non-participants who told me that Corinth offered a good variety of ways to participate in missions. What that told me was that the design and variety of opportunities were not the central issues when it came to participation. Instead, even those who were not taking advantage of the opportunities thought the opportunities themselves were good.

As encouraging as that was, and as grateful as I am that these responses helped me narrow down the focus of this project, I am not yet convinced that we are doing all we can to make missions appropriately accessible and inclusive. For too long, much of the church has considered those who are able-bodied and neuro-typical to be the ones who are capable of and responsible for giving aid. There have been some good efforts to move the conversation of missions from a missions-to mentality to a missions-with approach,<sup>1</sup> which seeks to remove the false dichotomy between those who do missions and those who receive missions. Despite this work, there remains much to do in the practical application of breaking down the dividing walls in missions.

### *Transforming Minds, Hearts, and the Church*

Although there is plenty of work to be done around how we talk about missions and how we do missions, my research showed that these are secondary concerns in my

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<sup>1</sup> See, among others, the work of Lamar Hardwick's *Disability and the Church*, Rebecca F. Spurrier's *The Disabled Church*, Bethany McKinney Fox's *Disability and the Way of Jesus*, and Benjamin T. Conner's *Disabling Mission, Enabling Witness*.

context. What my congregational research revealed is that our particular problem with missions participation begins at the thought level. Before we can hope to change behavior, we need to provide education that will help to establish proper thinking about missions. Studies in psychology have repeatedly established the link between thought and behavior, but the roots of this reality are found even in the Bible. Paul writes in Romans 12:2 that believers should be “transformed by the renewing of [their] minds,” and implies that their transformed minds would produce actions that are in keeping with “the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.” The studies produced in chapter 7 are designed to help transform the minds of participants, particularly their thoughts about missions. Participants will see directly from the Bible how missions is sacrificial, formational, holistic, and transformational. My goal is that this work of education and transforming minds will provide an entry point for participants to begin to change their behaviors in the area of missions.

As the church continues to engage critically and reflectively in the work of missions, our picture of the church will develop and emerge – much like the picture of Corinth that hangs on the wall in my office. My prayer for the church is that we will arrive in a place where the unique gifts of each person are utilized, where we celebrate the diversity of backgrounds and talents that are brought to the table, and where we feel the freedom to sacrifice our need to paint the picture into what we want it to be. The church looks the most like the thing Jesus imagines when it waits patiently, steps out in faith, makes more disciples, and eagerly anticipates its own transformation. This is the heart of missions. This is what the church was designed to be.



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## **Biography**

Amy Lynn Rinehults is one of the Associate Pastors at Corinth Reformed Church in Hickory, NC. She lives in Statesville, NC with her wonderful husband, Josh, where they share the great pleasure of raising the most creative and compassionate set of twins, Izy and Seth. In their limited free time, Amy and Josh enjoy traveling and exploring the world together. They particularly love serving in missions together, and have six additional “Nicaraguan kids” that they sponsor (and visit as often as possible).

Amy grew up in central Pennsylvania, where she developed a love for languages and the arts, a fiercely competitive spirit, and an appreciation for the simplicity of life in the heart of Amish farmlands. Amy attended Lenoir-Rhyne University (Hickory, NC) as a Presidential Scholar, and earned her B.A. (Magna Cum Laude) in Philosophy and Religion and a certificate in Family Development in 2008. She went on to complete the Master of Divinity degree with an emphasis in Biblical Studies at the M. Christopher White School of Divinity at Gardner-Webb University (Boiling Springs, NC).

Prior to becoming a pastor, Amy worked in non-profit ministries and education. Her roles included serving as the director of the social enterprise of a women’s rescue mission and teaching high school religion classes. Amy was ordained in the Western North Carolina Association of the Southern Conference of the United Church of Christ in March 2016, and accepted a call to Corinth Reformed Church several weeks later. Her primary areas of ministry responsibility include missions, communications, technology, and administration.

Amy’s life verse is Colossians 3:15 – “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.”