

VACANCY

FINDING WHO'S MISSING & BRINGING THEM HOME
A PRACTICED THEOLOGY OF MULTIPLICATION

MANUSCRIPT EDITION

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What people are saying about the book . . .

As a church planter and church planting leader, I've been thinking a great deal about the missional movement. Dr. Ken Priddy's book, *VACANCY*, comes at a critical time and brings great clarity and a strong theological framework. This book describes the biblical meaning of "missional" in both the old and new testaments, and takes the reader back to the mission of Jesus, to seek and to save lost people. There is still *VACANCY* in heaven for people, and God wants to use us, the church, to reach them. I'm also struck by a profound thought in this book: It is God's will for His Church to grow, but it's not about *numbers*... it's about *names*.

Rev. David Reynolds
Greenhouse Churches
Southwest Church Planting Director
Western Church Planting Alliance

Dr. Ken Priddy's *VACANCY* provides a solid biblical foundation for the church growth movement, missional church movement, and general redemptive mission work of the church. It will help refresh and encourage the hearts of pastors, lay leaders, church planters, denominational and parachurch leaders as they grope and search for a common ground to build the Lord's church in the 21st century. It is very timely because the current context requires us to look into basic biblical faith in a pluralistic world, and to clarify for all parties involved what is God's plan and his strategy to accomplish his mandate given in the book of Genesis through Revelation. Dr. Priddy, who has been church planter, church revitalizer, and church consultant to many denominations and traditions, knows how to communicate the biblical truth to us in a very relevant way. I read the book and was greatly encouraged by his biblical kingdom perspective and emphasis on the redemptive purpose of God. I highly recommend this book to be used as part of daily devotion, a tool for sharpening vision and strategy, or just for inspiration and encouragement.

Rev. Tong K. Park
Executive Director
NOVO Korea Global

I read *VACANCY* and I loved it. I especially appreciate the biblical and scholarly, common sense emphasis upon the importance of numerical growth woven throughout. A great service has been done for the Church in this faithful work.

Dr. James Banks
Pastor, Peace Church (Durham, NC)
Author: *Prayers for Prodigals*, *Praying the Prayers of the Bible*,
Praying Together and more

Think you have a proper handle on what the Scriptures hold regarding numerical church growth and the principles of multiplication? Not so fast! With a keen ability to divide the word and speak to the present day, Ken Priddy has provided Christ's mission-minded servants with a compelling, in depth survey of what these numerical passages mean and how it matters to the church's missional mandate. In the reading of VACANCY, prepare to have your mind opened into new dimensions and your heart stirred up by a threading theme derived from the very soul of God.

Dr. Gary Comer
Founder of Soul Whisperer Ministry
Author: *Soul Whisperer* and *ReMission*

What people are saying about the author . . .

There is a great need in our day for church revitalization that is deeply rooted in the Scriptures and strongly focused on vibrant ministries of outreach and evangelism. Dr. Ken Priddy is not only a passionate advocate and seasoned practitioner in this type of church revitalization, but one of the best hands-on, practical church revitalization trainers and consultants in the country.

Dr. Steven L. Childers
President, Pathway Learning

From my perspective, Dr. Kenneth Priddy is one of the top two or three authorities on church revitalization in the United States. His approach to renewing churches is biblically sound, practically useful, and strategically solid. If you wish to see your church be fruitful in its evangelism and outreach, I advise you to listen, learn, and leverage Dr. Priddy's insights for kingdom growth.

Gary L. McIntosh, Ph.D.
Professor of Christian Ministry & Leadership
Talbot School of Theology, Biola University
Author: *One Size Doesn't Fit All*, *Beyond the First Visit*, *Biblical Church Growth* and more

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I am grateful for the dozens of pastors and church leaders that have worked with me over the years, sharing their perspectives and offering their experience and knowledge as the body of understanding numerical growth expanded. I also want to thank my advanced reader team, especially those who offered their critique and insight as the final draft was being developed. That small group includes Rev. Dave Reynolds, Rev. Tong Park, Dr. James Banks and Dr. Gary Comer.

My heartfelt thanks go out to you all.

A Brief Foreword from the Author Concerning the Manuscript Edition . . .

Getting a book to full publication is a lengthy and arduous journey and **VACANCY: Finding Who's Missing and Bringing Them Home** still has a few legs to go. A formal Foreword is yet to be written, so, consider this brief comment a foreword to a presumptive Foreword, if you will. The main body of the book is complete and is ready for what I'll call private consumption. I invite the reader to consider this Manuscript Edition a pre-release. Rather than waiting for weeks and maybe months for formal publication, I've made it a practice with my latest books to put the main body into the hands of interested people sooner rather than later, getting the manuscript to early adopters who are ready to engage. So, now you have it.

VACANCY has been years in the making, starting simply with a two-fold question, "What does God say in His Word about numerical growth in the church and what does He mean by what He says in His Word?" Some of what I've found mercifully confirms what I suspected, but there were a few surprises along the way. If nothing else, I've grown from the experience of writing and I pray that your reading what I've written will prove beneficial. You have my thanks.

Two particular word pictures that are painted by Jesus have gripped my heart, my mind and my soul as this journey has unfolded. The first is found in John 14 where Jesus informs that there are many rooms in His Father's house (John 14:2). The second comes from the Parable of the Wedding Feast found in Matthew 22:1-14 where a king's invited guests, kingdom insiders, fail to accept the king's invitation, so the king sends his servants out to the main roads to invite outsiders to come and fill the wedding hall. As I blend these two together in my imagination, I envision a magnificent hotel with hundreds, even thousands of rooms, but many sit empty, unoccupied. When will the evangelical church rise to meet the overwhelming need, challenge, responsibility and opportunity of VACANCY?

INTRODUCTION

Since the creation of Adam and Eve, God has been growing His church, His family; a family that will live with Him forever. Year by year, month by month, week by week, day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute, second by second to the end of the age, He is gathering His people, His eternal family, as He redeems and regenerates. Despite this redemptive action of God and the vast resources of the American evangelical church, most of our churches are in long-term plateau or decline. In Scripture, Jesus informs that, in His Father's house, there are many rooms (John 14:2), yet many of those rooms sit empty. Why? Because many of our eternal family members remain lost, missing from the family of God, absent from the house of God. Why? Because there is a labor shortage. Again, in Scripture, Jesus informs that the harvest is plentiful but that the laborers are few (Matthew 9:37). VACANCY is a call to action. It's time for you, for me, for all of us, to find who's missing and bring them home. It's time to grow the kingdom, not for the sake of numbers but for the sake of lost souls, brothers and sisters in Christ who are estranged from the family.

God established His people through covenant, a covenant that moved with time through Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Joshua and beyond. As history unfolded and the vision of God poured out upon humanity, God's family continued to increase. Through the Incarnation, the Son of God became a man and declared that He would build His church (Mt. 16:18), and on the Day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit was poured out and the message of the Gospel began to spread (Acts 2:1ff), drawing men, women and children into the church, into the family of God. The New Testament reveals a continuous numerical growth in the church until the fruition of the Gospel's impact on the world is seen in a multitude of believers so large that it cannot be numbered (Rev. 7:9). The lost will be found, the missing will be brought home, but will my church, will your church, have in hand in God's unfolding plan of redemption? We have a choice to make.

In short, church growth has been taking place since Genesis and will continue until Revelation, interestingly, the first and last books of the Bible. New Testament church growth has ridden the storms of early persecution and state institutionalization. It has survived a thunderous split between east and west and has expanded across the globe through centuries of missionary activity. Church growth has flourished with the coming of the Reformation that put God's Word into the hands of the commoner in his own language.

Numerical growth is the natural state of the church, increasing and increasing until the coming Day of the Lord. Why, then, has church growth become controversial in our day? Why is numerical growth in the church often viewed as a negative? What is wrong with growing the church numerically? How has church growth in the past thirty years or so become synonymous with compromise and syncretism in the minds of some church leaders? Why is it that many pastors and leaders in the American evangelical church are content to serve in churches that see little to no conversion growth?

God is the source whom we must consult to get to the truth of all matters including the truth about church growth. What does God say about numerical growth in His Word? What does He mean by what He says in His word about this maligned subject? What follows is a theology of multiplication, a study in biblically understanding God's desires and expectations concerning the numerical growth of the church, the numerical growth of His family. McGavran states, "The numerical approach is essential to understanding church growth. The church is made up of countable people and there is nothing particularly spiritual in not counting them."¹

Viewing this presentation as a theology is not without peril as some might wonder whether the scholarship is appropriately weighty while others might wish for something more pragmatic, favoring practical theology over theology per se. Horton highlights this tension stating, "[S]ome Christians assume that knowing doctrine and practical living are competing interests. The modern dichotomy between doctrine and life, theology and discipleship, knowing and doing, theory and

practice has had disastrous consequences in the life of the church and its witness in the world.”² It is necessary to embrace both sides of this dichotomy as we must begin with theology, the study of God, as we consider God’s word and its meaning. At the same time, we must commit to *practical* theology, acting on the theology that emerges. The objective of this search is a theology that is put into action, a *practiced* theology, and my foremost discovery is that church growth is not centered on numbers, it is centered on names; many, many names; names that are recorded in the Lamb’s Book of Life.

Champions & Critics

To begin this study, it is necessary to make a distinction between “church growth” and “Church Growth.” The focus here is on church growth, not on Church Growth. The former, church growth, refers generally to the ongoing numerical development of the church, while the latter, Church Growth, refers specifically to the Church Growth Movement with its accompanying Church Growth Theory that was spawned by Donald A. McGavran and others during the second half of the twentieth century. There are findings from the theory and practice of the Church Growth Movement that will have relevance to this study, but my intent is not to analyze the pros and cons of this movement. For such a study, I recommend *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement*, Paul E. Engle, series editor, and Gary L. McIntosh, general editor. In briefly considering the Church Growth Movement, though, it seems that most informed pastors and church leaders in our day fall into one of two categories, champions or critics. If we place these two positions at opposite ends of a continuum, we find that Church Growth champions can be overzealous about large numbers, endeavoring to grow their congregations numerically with a “whatever it takes” commitment. Unfortunately, this line of thinking opens these champions to presenting an easy Gospel, which, of course, is not the true Gospel, and a low-commitment membership or perhaps no membership or body life commitment at all. In an effort to be relevant to culture, these champions walk the razor’s edge between the church and the world.

Compromise often results and the covert penetration of syncretism into the church is a very real risk. In speaking of essential Church Growth principles, as developed by Donald McGavran, McIntosh remarks, “The first essential principle is to realize that God wants his lost children found and enfolded.”³ Surely no thinking church leader would argue against that point. However, how these lost children are found and how they are enfolded is much debated.

Herein lay the challenge from the critic of the Church Growth Movement, who sees developments such as the Seeker Model and the rise of the mega-church as blight on the credible ministry landscape. At his end of the champion-critic continuum, concern for numerical growth is anathema, akin to selling one’s soul to the devil. Purity of theology and depth of preaching and teaching accompany care of the congregation as the emphases, leaving numerical growth completely in the hands of God, who will bless or not in this regard according to His plan and pleasure. We, then, take no credit for numerical growth, nor blame for its absence.

Throughout my years in ministry, I have heard many a champion take pride in the numerical growth of his church, reasoning that the church must be dead center in the will of God to be experiencing such growth. I have also witnessed many a critic take pride in the lack of numerical growth in his church, reasoning that this lack of growth is a sure sign of true holiness, faithfulness and purity, a spiritual red badge of courage. Keller writes, “Why is getting your heart’s deepest desire so often a disaster? In the book of Romans, Saint Paul wrote that one of the worst things God can do to someone is to ‘give them over to the desires of their hearts’ (Romans 1:24). Why would the greatest punishment imaginable be to allow someone to achieve his fondest dream? It is because our hearts fashion these desires into idols.”⁴

Could it be that the opposite poles of the Church Growth Champion-Critic Continuum are idolatry? Could it be that some champions take numerical growth to such a level of devotion that this growth becomes an idol? Could it be that some critics take an ambivalence or disdain of numerical

growth to such a level of devotion that this, too, becomes an idol? Surely this is not what God intends or desires. Jesus is building His church (Mt. 16:18) and I suggest that in so doing, Jesus is concerned about both the quality and the quantity of the church's growth.

My purpose is to develop a *practiced* theology of multiplication by examining what God says and what God means, and by engaging the writings of key authors whose voices are prominent in the ongoing discussion concerning church growth. Chapter One lays a foundation of God's views concerning quality and quantity. Chapter Two pulls the lens back to a God's-eye view of history, particularly noting the significance of the Book of Life. Chapters Three through Five focus on God's covenant with His people, first in the Pentateuch, next in the Psalms, and finally as the New Covenant.

Chapters Six and Seven target mission, first, the mission of Jesus Christ and second, the commissioning of His disciples by Jesus Christ. Chapters Eight through Ten investigate the Bible's teaching concerning multiplication with a general overview, a look at the development of the church in the Book of Acts, and finally, through the lens of the calling of Christ to become fishers of men.

With Chapter Eleven, the investigation shifts to leading voices in the ongoing dialogue concerning church growth. In this chapter, the early movement toward the current missional focus of ministry is considered, citing late twentieth century missiology and early twenty-first century philosophy. Chapter Twelve follows with a spectrum of researchers, analysts and practitioners lending their insights to the conversation.

Chapter Thirteen offers a change of pace, sharing findings and implications gleaned from a survey involving ninety-two evangelical pastors. This survey was developed to determine the relationship between a given pastor's perspective toward numerical church growth and the actual numerical growth of that pastor's church.

Chapter Fourteen connects the biblical, theological, philosophical and strategic dots to form a theology of multiplication with a bent toward action. There is also a surprise to be found by the

reader. Yes, God is seeking the lost, but there's more to the story. Read on and get to work. A plentiful harvest is waiting!

A 21st Century Parable

Imagine a hotel, a very large hotel, in fact, a gigantic hotel with thousands and thousands of rooms. Many of these rooms, most of these rooms, are empty. Out front there is a magnificent lighted sign that flashes, "Vacancy, Vacancy, Vacancy." However, though myriad passers-by stream past this gigantic hotel with its flashing, lighted sign, few enter the lobby and check in. The hotel staff is ample, stocked with valets, porters, bellmen, managers, desk clerks, housekeepers, chefs, waitstaff and more, all skilled in accommodating hotel guests, ready to meet every need, want and expectation. Strangely, the limited number of guests leave the staff idle, largely tending to each other since so few guests are arriving. In recent years, it has become more and more challenging for hotel managers to keep this large staff on the payroll. More and more staff have been laid off or have left disillusioned or in the hope of better opportunities elsewhere. Those who remain long for the good old days when the hotel was bustling with guests and activities, often completely sold out. "What's wrong with people, anyway," they wonder. "Why aren't they checking in?"

Hotel owners have become increasingly concerned and have resorted to a most unexpected strategy. Calling all staff into a meeting in the largest of the conference rooms, these owners announced a radical new plan in an effort to gather guests and fill the empty rooms. Every staff member was directed to leave the hotel and to wade into the surrounding neighborhoods, communities and countryside. Their mandate is to mix shoulder to shoulder with these passers-by, sharing the benefits of being a hotel guest and bringing them back into the hotel to join in with all that this spectacular hotel has to offer. One owner, in a fiery speech designed to encourage and inspire, shouted, "People are not coming to us so it's up to us to go to them! Let's share what we have with everyone else!"

Unfortunately, the hotel staff is not mobilizing. “We don’t know how to do that,” they say. “That’s not our job,” they cry. “This is not why I signed on,” explains one manager. “How undignified,” scoffs another. One angry staffer, rallying a crowd of supporters, shouts at the owners, “This is your fault and it’s your problem,” as the crowd cheers in agreement. Meanwhile, outside, the magnificent but lonely lighted sign continues to flash, “Vacancy, Vacancy, Vacancy.”

CHAPTER ONE: BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS OF QUALITY AND QUANTITY

God's Concern for Quality

Moving from Church Growth to church growth, consider the question as to whether God is mostly concerned about quality or mostly concerned about quantity. Scripture reveals that He is concerned about both. How do we know that God is concerned about quality? God's Word begins to make qualitative statements beginning with the fourth verse of the first chapter of Genesis. "And God saw that the light was good" (Genesis 1:4). Following each element of Creation, God notes that it was good. A negative qualitative evaluation is seen in the next chapter. "Then the LORD God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him'" (Genesis 2:18).

God makes a sweeping qualitative judgment in Genesis 6. "The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Genesis 6:5). Scripture reveals that this "grieved God to his heart" (Genesis 6:6), and that God's judgment fell on mankind in the form of a flood that left only Noah and those with him in the ark alive.

In the Parable of the Talents recorded in Matthew 25, God is represented by a master in the parable who expresses, "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Matthew 25:21), a clear pronouncement of qualitative judgment. Concerning this verse Hendriksen comments, "Note also that the servant is called 'good' and 'faithful.' In the eyes of the master this man had proven himself to be thoroughly reliable. Accordingly, he was going to have a share in the master's feast."⁵ Here is a qualitative analysis attached to a quantitative expression of fruit as the servant had doubled his master's stake.

Luke 21 opens with an account that clearly expresses that sometimes less is more in God's economy. "Jesus looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the offering box, and he saw a

poor widow put in two small copper coins. And he said, “Truly, I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on” (Luke 21:1-4). In this instance quality was valued above quantity in the eyes of Jesus. Morris remarks, “A widow had few ways of earning money in first-century Judea and normally found life very difficult. A poor widow is thus almost proverbial for the poorest of people . . . If the measure be what is left over after giving, she certainly outdistanced them all, for they gave *out of their abundance*, and had much left over. She gave all she had. This is real sacrifice.”⁶ Though the quantity of the widow’s gift was painfully small, the quality of her gift was extraordinarily high and worthy of note.

As a final glance at God’s view of quality, consider the letters to the churches in Revelation. Regarding the Book of Revelation, Ladd comments, “[T]he imminent historical judgment is seen as a type of, or a prelude to, the eschatological judgment. The two are often blended together in apparent disregard for chronology, for the same God who acts in the imminent historical judgment will also act in the final eschatological judgment to further his one redemptive purpose.”⁷ The seven letters are in part God’s qualitative evaluation of the seven churches that are identified in Revelation 2 and 3 as the addressees, but this evaluation stretches beyond these seven churches. The structure of these letters adheres to a general pattern of seven elements (see Table 1). Hendriksen identifies these elements as:

1. The Salutation or Address
2. Christ’s Self-Designation
3. Christ’s Commendation
4. Christ’s Condemnation
5. Christ’s Warning and Threat
6. Christ’s Exhortation
7. Christ’s Promise⁸

TABLE 1
THE SEVEN LETTERS DIAGNOSTIC TABLE – SCRIPTURE INDEX

| Revelation 2-3 | Salutation | Self- Designation | Commendation | Condemnation | Warning & Threat | Exhortation | Promise |
|-------------------|------------|----------------------|--------------|--------------|------------------------|-------------|---------|
| Ephesus | 2:1a | 2:1b | 2:2-3, 6 | 2:4 | 2:5 | 2:7a | 2:7b |
| Smyrna | 2:8a | 2:8b | 2:9 | X | 2:10 | 2:11a | 2:11b |
| Pergamum | 2:12a | 2:12b | 2:13 | 2:14-15 | 2:16 | 2:17a | 2:17b-c |
| Thyatira | 2:18a | 2:18b | 2:19 | 2:20-23 | 2:24 | 2:25 | 2:26 |
| Sardis | 3:1a | 3:1b | 3:4 | 3:1c-2 | 3:3 | 3:6 | 3:5 |
| Philadelphia | 3:7a | 3:7b-c | 3:8-10 | X | X | 3:13 | 3:11-12 |
| Laodicea | 3:14a | 3:14b | X | 3:15, 17 | 3:16, 19 | 3:18, 22 | 3:20-21 |

Hendriksen further comments, “In each church – with the single exception of Laodicea – Christ finds something to commend. In five of the seven He finds something to condemn. The laudable exceptions are Smyrna and Philadelphia.”⁹

What is it in these churches that Christ finds worthy of commendation?

To the Church in Ephesus: “I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name’s sake, and you have not grown weary . . . you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate” (Revelation 2:2-3, 6).

To the Church in Smyrna: “I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan” (Revelation 2:9).

To the Church in Pergamum: “I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is. Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells” (Revelation 2:13).

To the Church in Thyatira: “I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first” (Revelation 2:19).

To the Church in Sardis: “Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy” (Revelation 3:4).

To the Church in Philadelphia: “I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. Behold, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie – behold, I will make them come out and bow down before your feet and they will learn that I have loved you. Because you have kept my word about patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth” (Revelation 3:8-10).

To the Church in Laodicea: No commendation is recorded.

What is it in these churches that Christ finds worthy of condemnation?

To the Church in Ephesus: “But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first” (Revelation 2:4).

To the Church in Smyrna: No condemnation is recorded.

To the Church in Pergamum: “But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality. So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans” (Revelation 2:14-15).

To the Church in Thyatira: “But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols. I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality. Behold, I will throw her onto a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of her works, and I will strike her children dead. And all the churches will know that I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you according to your works” (Revelation 2:20-23).

To the Church in Sardis: “I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God” (Revelation 3:1c-2).

To the Church in Philadelphia: No condemnation is recorded.

To the Church in Laodicea: “So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth . . . Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent” (Revelation 3:16, 19).

When reading through these commendations and condemnations, it becomes very clear that God is deeply concerned about quality. He commends hard work, patience and endurance. He commends faithfulness in spiritual testing, the shunning of false teaching and the embracing of true teaching. He commends those who stand for His name’s sake despite opposition and even persecution. He condemns the waning of initial spiritual passion and those who have followed after false teaching. He condemns the tolerance of sexual immorality and those who have left the works of God incomplete due to a dead faith. He condemns the self-indulgent comfort, ambivalence and complacency that thrive in the culture of a lukewarm commitment. God, indeed, is intensely and passionately concerned with quality.

God's Concern for Quantity

How do we know that God is concerned about quantity? There is significant biblical evidence indicating that God is very concerned about quantity well beyond the fact that one of the books of the Bible is titled, *Numbers*. Consider Psalm 90, “The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty; yet their span is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away. Who considers the power of your anger, and your wrath according to the fear of you? So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom” (Psalm 90:10-12). In short, this text informs that our days are numbered and so we should number our days, making them count through commitment to what is eternal.

Have you ever counted stars? God has. To impress upon Abraham the magnitude of His covenant, God points Abraham to the stars. “After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: ‘Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.’ But Abram said, ‘O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?’ And Abram said, ‘Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir.’ And behold the word of the LORD came to him: ‘This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir.’ And he brought him outside and said, ‘Look toward heaven, and number the stars. If you are able to number them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your offspring be.’ And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness” (Genesis 15:1-6).

We find in Psalm 147 that God not only numbers the stars, but He names them. “Praise the LORD! For it is good to sing praises to our God; for it is pleasant, and a song of praise is fitting. The LORD builds up Jerusalem; he gathers the outcasts of Israel. He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds. He determines the number of the stars; he gives to all of them their names” (Psalm 147:1-4). One might argue that this Psalm is taking poetic license in using hyperbolic language, but

then there is the prophecy of Isaiah 40, “To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him? says the Holy One. Lift up your eyes on high and see: who created these (referring to the stars)? He who brings out their host by number, calling them all by name, by the greatness of his might, and because he is strong in power, not one is missing” (Isaiah 40:25-26).

Do these texts concerning the names and numbers of stars find relevance when it comes to considering the people who will populate God’s eternal family? When God speaks to Abraham about stars too numerous for him to count, He is speaking of people, those who will become children of Abraham, and just as no single star is missing from where God has placed and named it, no person in the family of God will be found missing. The *Westminster Confession of Faith* articulates, “By the decree of God, for the manifestation of His glory, some men and angels are predestined unto everlasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death. These angels and men, thus predestined, and foreordained, are particularly and unchangeably designed, and their number so certain and definite, that it cannot be either increased or diminished.”¹⁰ Clearly the Westminster Divines understood Scripture to declare that the numerical growth of the church would be precisely measured according to the decree of God, and that this theological point was of such importance that it was included in the *Confession* under the heading of *God’s Eternal Decrees*.

John 6 states, “Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst. But I said to you that you have seen me and yet you do not believe. All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me; that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day’” (John 6:35-40).

All, a quantitative designation, whom God has given to Jesus Christ will come to Him, and *nothing of all*, a quantitative designation as well, will be lost. Concerning this passage, Bruce comments, “Men’s blindness cannot frustrate the saving work of God. God is at work by his grace in the world, and those who come to Christ come to him by the ‘sweet constraint’ of that grace. And when they come, they find that Christ undertakes the entire responsibility for their full and final salvation. He does not turn them away when they come, nor does he subsequently disown them.”¹¹ God is quantitatively engaged from the numbering of the masses to the counting of the one.

Quality and Quantity

With God, quality and quantity are not mutually exclusive, and to treat them as such is to create a false dilemma. A biblical perspective reveals that quality and quantity are intertwined and virtually inseparable. The Apostle Peter instructs, “For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 1:5-8). Quality and quantity are clearly intertwined in an upward spiral of being and doing in this passage. Bauckham informs, “*αργους* (‘idle’) and *ακαρπους* (‘unfruitful’) are one of 2 Peter’s pairs of nearly synonymous words . . . Both words were used in early Christianity in the context of the need for Christian faith to have ethical effects in the Christian life.”¹² These ethical effects are developed as godly qualities that increase in the life that Peter prescribes, a life of quality growing in quantity.

John 15 provides an interesting study of the relationship between quality and quantity. Jesus explains, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit” (John 15:1-2). These verses reveal much about quality and quantity. The line in the sand is the bearing of

fruit, some degree of productivity that meets the vinedresser's approval. All branches will be cut, some cut off due to the lack of productivity, some productive but cut, or pruned, to become more productive. If fruit in the first instance is viewed as qualitative productivity, then more fruit surely adds quantitative productivity. Tasker remarks, "Before Jesus engages in the last and fiercest strife against the prince of the world, He teaches His disciples by means of a simple allegory the demands their discipleship imposes upon them and the conditions under which it can become effective."¹³

The text of John 15 goes on to speak of much fruit with, "By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples" (John 15:8). Much fruit, a qualitative noun with a quantitative modifier, serves as the very proof of discipleship. Finally, fruit, more fruit and much fruit reach an ultimate expression as sustainable fruit. Jesus culminates this teaching with, "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you" (John 15:16). It seems that the marriage of quality and quantity lies at the very root of effective prayer.

Acts 2 provides a final stop in establishing a biblical foundation for quality and quantity. This description of the first century church, and perhaps prescription for the twenty-first century church, begins with devotion. "And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42). This devotion qualifies the life of that first century Christian community. Who are these people? To answer that question, we need to back up to the previous verse, an informative verse that tells us what happened in response to Peter's first sermon, preached on the Day of Pentecost. It informs, "So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls" (Acts 2:41). This early Christian community was qualified by the nature and content of their devotion, and they were quantified by the number who had come to believe. Subsequent verses go on to describe this community in terms of their spiritual development and their pragmatic way of living. We're informed that they enjoyed the favor

of those who lived around them who were not part of their community. God was clearly moving in their life together and was being praised by His people. As a final descriptor, we are told, “And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47b).

The biblical record is clear. God is deeply concerned with quality that steadily increases as faith and practice mature, and He is deeply concerned with quantity that steadily increases with integrity, faithfulness and uncompromising truth. Quality and quantity in the Christian faith, in the life of the growing church, cannot be separated but must work in tandem toward the fulfillment of God’s redemptive plan.

CHAPTER TWO: TIME TRAVEL – THE HISTORY OF REDEMPTION

God's Glory in Time

God has suspended a timeline inside of eternity that stretches from the beginning of time to the end of time, from Genesis to Revelation. Why has He done so? What is God's purpose for time? How is He using time to accomplish His ultimate goal? What is God's ultimate goal? In short, everything that God has done, is doing, or will do centers on His glory. Hodge comments, "The final cause of all of God's purposes is His own glory. This is frequently declared to be the end of all things."¹⁴ History, *His-story*, reveals His glory and His worthiness to be glorified. Question 1 of the Westminster Larger Catechism asks, "What is the chief and highest end of man?" and answers, "Man's chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully to enjoy Him forever."¹⁵ Consider these Scripture texts:

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.

(Romans 11:36)

So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

(1 Corinthians 11:31)

The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.

(Psalm 19:1)

Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, who alone does wondrous things. Blessed be his glorious name forever; may the whole earth be filled with his glory! Amen and Amen!

(Psalm 72:18-19)

Be exalted, O God, above the heavens! Let your glory be over all the earth!

(Psalm 108:5)

The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers. Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. Show hospitality to one another without grumbling, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies – in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. (1 Peter 4:7-11)

Indeed, the glory of God is at the center of all creation, the center of its very purpose, God's purpose. Time is God's tool to facilitate His glory, and the most remarkable element of that glory is His people, made in His image and gathered together over time to become His eternal family that will glorify and enjoy Him forever. Time, from beginning to end, from Genesis to Revelation, is the history of redemption. It is the history of God's redeeming His people from their sin in order that they become His eternal sons and daughters, praising Him and glorifying Him forever. God accomplishes His goal, fulfills His purpose, through conversion, the act of regenerating the spiritually dead so that they might become spiritually alive in Christ. The Apostle Paul writes, "But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved" (Ephesians 2:4-5). As men, women and children are made alive together with Christ, the family of God grows, the church grows by conversion; the church grows numerically.

The Book of Life

To understand church growth by conversion one must consider the foundational significance of the Book of Life. This book is mentioned throughout Scripture but is easily overlooked because of the scarcity of teaching on the Book of Life and because it seems inconsequential or even contradictory

to the theological perspective of many. I would argue, however, that it is seminal to a proper understanding of numerical church growth by conversion and to the ultimate consummation of the kingdom of God.

In the Book of Revelation, the Apostle John sees a vision of the First Beast in chapter thirteen. Of this Beast he remarks, “It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven. Also, it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them. And authority was given it over every tribe and people and language and nation, and all who dwell on earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slain” (Revelation 13:6-8). We learn from this passage of Scripture that a book was written before the world began, before Genesis, and listed in that book are those who will face the First Beast and will not succumb to worshipping that beast along with everyone else on the earth at that time. Whether or not this document is a literal or metaphorical book is of no consequence. It exists in the mind and plan of God and is therefore authoritative. Concerning this book of life Ladd remarks, “It is the register of those who have been saved by faith in the crucified Lamb of God. That their names were written before the foundation of the world carries the assurance that even though they seem to be powerless before the attacks of the beast, they are really in the keeping providence of God and have been since the foundation of the world.”¹⁶ Are their names recorded in the Book of Life because they will resist, or will they resist because their names are recorded in the Book of Life? Are there other names besides these listed in the book?

Biblical evidence for such a book appears as early as Exodus 32, “The next day Moses said to the people, ‘You have sinned a great sin. And now I will go up to the LORD; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.’ So Moses returned to the LORD and said, ‘Alas, this people has sinned a great sin. They have made for themselves gods of gold. But now, if you will forgive their sin – but if

not, please blot me out of your book that you have written” (Exodus 32:30-32). Concerning this passage Calvin exposit, “By ‘the book,’ in which God is said to have written His elect, must be understood, metaphorically, His decree,”¹⁷ alluding to the eternal decree of God decided before the creation of the world. It seems that the existence and content of this book was well understood for hundreds of years by the Hebrew community. In the Psalms, David writes, “Add to them punishment upon punishment; may they have no acquittal from you. Let them be blotted out of the book of the living; let them not be enrolled among the righteous” (Psalm 69:27-28). Jesus speaks of this book as revealed in Luke 10, “The seventy-two returned with joy, saying, ‘Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!’ And he said to them, ‘I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven” (Luke 10:17-20). Hendriksen informs, “What the Master must have meant was that authority over demons was, after all, insignificant in comparison with having one’s name recorded in heaven’s book of life.”¹⁸

The Book of Life is seen in other Old Testament texts as well in the prophecies of Isaiah and Daniel. Isaiah 4 records, “In that day the branch of the LORD shall be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land shall be the pride and honor of the survivors of Israel. And he who is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy, everyone who has been recorded for life in Jerusalem” (Isaiah 4:2-3). Daniel 12 states, “At that time shall arise Michael, the great prince who has charge of your people. And there shall be a time of trouble, such as has never been seen since there was a nation till that time. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone whose name shall be found written in the book” (Daniel 12:1). As is characteristic of apocalyptic Scripture, there is an ebb and flow in this text between events of the moment and events to come at the eschatological end. Longman explains, “When chapter 12 begins ‘at that time,’ we find ourselves again in that flux between earthly

and heavenly reality. We deal with the definitive end of Antiochus's persecution of God's people as well as their final struggle."¹⁹ Michael's battle is both a battle in the present and a battle in the future. Ferguson adds clarity, "The heavenly visitor had described the rise of Antiochus Epiphenes (as the fulfillment of his prophecy indicated). The description of the blasphemous activities seemed to serve as a springboard for describing a more sinister figure yet to come, to be known in the New Testament as the final antichrist or the man of sin."²⁰ Ferguson further notes, "The final reference to Michael is found in Revelation 12:7, in which he is seen as the leader of the heavenly host making war on the dragon and his angels (who sought to destroy the male child). Here again, Michael is seen as the one who battles on behalf of God's cause. Daniel learns that through him 'his people shall be delivered' (v. 1). All those whose names God has written in the book of life will be preserved."²¹

Clearly, the Book of Life is much more expansive than an eschatological roster. The scope of this book stretches from before the beginning of time to beyond the end of time, including the names of all who will come to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. As noted, Calvin connects the Book of Life to God's decree. Grudem adds, "The decrees of God are *the eternal plans of God whereby, before the creation of the world, he determined to bring about everything that happens*. This doctrine is similar to the doctrine of providence, but here we are thinking about God's decisions *before the world was created*, rather than his providential actions in time."²² Concerning the degrees of God, Hodge observes, "As God is infinite in wisdom and power, there can be with Him no unforeseen emergency and no inadequacy of means, and nothing can resist the execution of His original intention."²³ In Ephesians 1, Paul provides a concrete teaching about God's original intention, particularly noting His pre-creation plan and purpose to adopt an eternal family. He writes, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according

to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight, making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things to him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Ephesians 1:3-10). Paul, the master of the run-on sentence, covers a timeline from before the foundation of the world to the fullness of time, making clear that God’s ultimate will, plan and purpose call for the redemption and adoption of an eternal family, and Scripture informs that the names of all family members are recorded in the Book of Life.

Paul’s letter to the Romans contains a corroborative passage as he writes, “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified” (Romans 8:28-30). The scope of this passage ranges from foreknowledge to glorification, from before the beginning to beyond the end. Some see this mention of foreknowledge as simply God’s foresight into all that will come to pass. However, there is more to this teaching than divine foresight; there is God’s divine selectivity. God has complete foreknowledge of all that will come to pass. In other words, he foreknew every person who has ever lived, is alive now, or will ever be alive, but not everyone that God foreknew or foreknows in this general sense will see glorification. Therefore, the foreknowledge of God that is seen in Romans 8:29 is not a general foreknowledge, but a selective foreknowledge, for *all* whom God foreknows in Romans 8:29 are also predestined, called, justified and glorified. Of this passage Murray comments, “There is no question but the apostle here introduces us to the eternal counsel of God as it pertains to the people of God and delineates for us its various aspects.”²⁴ Murray

explains further, “It is to be observed that calling, justification, and glorification are set forth as acts of God – ‘he called’, ‘he justified’, ‘he glorified’. The same divine monergism appears as in ‘he foreknew’ and ‘he foreordained’ [he predestined]. It is contrary to this emphasis to define any of these elements of the application of redemption in any other terms than those of *divine action*.”²⁵

Paul anticipates questions and even objections to the line of thought laid out in Romans 8 as he gives further instruction in Romans 9. He reminds his readers of the birth of Isaac’s twins through his wife, Rebekah, and God’s disposition toward those twins, by citing Malachi 1 in Romans 9:13, “As it is written, ‘Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.’” He presses his argument further with, “What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God’s part? By no means! For he says to Moses, ‘I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.’ So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, ‘For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.’ So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he will. You will say to me then, ‘Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?’ But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, ‘Why have you made me like this?’” (Romans 9:14-20).

Admittedly this is difficult teaching to swallow, and yet we must because it is the word of God, and though this word is challenging, we can rest in the knowledge that God is the sum of all of His attributes all the time, including his love, grace and mercy. God is also sovereign, and though we know from Scripture that man is free and that man is responsible for his decisions and choices, we also must realize that man’s freedom is bounded or limited by God’s sovereignty. In other words, man is as free as God’s sovereignty allows, while God’s sovereignty reigns unrestricted. The Book of Life and the names recorded there are the prerogative of the Sovereign God.

Paul specifically mentions the Book of Life in his letter to the Philippians, leveraging the joy of being included in this book to help quell a dispute between two women. He writes, “I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord. Yes, I ask you also, true companion, help these women, who have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are recorded in the book of life” (Philippians 4:23). The remaining references to the Book of Life, and the greatest concentration of such references, are found in the Book of Revelation.

The Book of Life in the Revelation of John

Though the Book of Life was written before the foundation of the earth, before time, it is at the end of time that the Book of Life is given its greatest visibility in Scripture, in the apocalyptic Book of the Revelation of John. It first appears in the letter to the church in Sardis. The letter reads in part, “Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (Revelation 3:4-6). Note that there are three mentions of “name” in this short passage, highlighting the importance of names and their usage. Concerning this passage Ladd remarks, “As a civic register contained the names of living citizens, so God’s book of life contains the names of the saints. The form of the promise in the present passage is an assurance of salvation in the consummated Kingdom of God.”²⁶

Revelation 13:5-8 is cited previously regarding the worship of the First Beast, stating in part, “. . . and all who dwell on the earth will worship it [the beast], everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain” (Revelation

13:8). We learn from this passage that the book exists, that it was written before time, that those listed prevail against the beast, and that the book is connected to the sacrificial work of Jesus Christ.

Later in Revelation we encounter the Great Prostitute who is said to have made the dwellers of the earth drunk with the wine of sexual immorality (Revelation 17:2). The text reads, “And I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of the martyrs of Jesus. When I saw her I marveled greatly. But the angel told me, ‘Why do you marvel? I will tell you the mystery of the woman, and of the beast with seven heads and ten horns that carries her. The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to rise from the bottomless pit and go to destruction. And the dwellers of the earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world will marvel to see the beast, because it was not and is to come’” (Revelation 17:6-8). Here the Book of Life is revealed again in the negative, in terms of those whose names are not written in the book. These people are not saved, are not to be believers in Jesus Christ, and are destined to fall in the end. This determination was made before the foundation of the world as God chose not to write their names in the Book of Life. They are destined to succumb to the influence of the Great Prostitute. Further reading in Chapter 17 informs that these dwellers of the earth will eventually rebel against the Great Prostitute, but Hendriksen informs, “[T]here will come a time when these same worldly people who together with their antichristian governments constitute ‘the beast’ and who were infatuated with the ‘harlot’, that is, with the seduction of this world, its pleasures and allurements, its culture and luxury, come to see what great fools they have been. But then it is forever too late.”²⁷ Only those whose names are written in the Book of Life will prevail.

Intrigue concerning the Book of Life intensifies in Revelation 20 as other books are introduced in regard to a final judgment. Alcorn, in his discussion of books that will be found in heaven, states, “The other book is the Book of Life, in which the names of God’s people are written. John mentions it throughout the book of Revelation (Revelation 3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:12; 21:27). It’s mentioned in the

Hebrew Scriptures as well (Exodus 32:32-33; Daniel 12:1). It's also referred to in later literature, such as the Book of Jubilees and the Dead Sea Scrolls."²⁸ In Revelation 20 the Apostle John writes, "And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire" (Revelation 20:12-15).

Note that there are two genres of books, one that includes what people have done during their lives, the other the Book of Life that includes the names of those who were set apart for salvation since before time. Much could be said regarding these books and this passage, but I must maintain focus here on the Book of Life. The question to be considered in this discussion is who is spared from the lake of fire, or who is spared from the second or final death? The answer is that those whose names are written in the Book of Life are the only ones who are spared this outcome. In other words, regardless of what is written in the other books that include what people have done, no one is spared from the lake of fire unless his or her name is recorded in the Book of Life, written before any of these deeds have been done. True, there is a judgment rendered concerning the deeds done and recorded in those other books, but salvation comes only to those listed in the Book of Life regardless. Ladd posits, "It is significant to note that the text does not intimate that anyone was saved on the basis of his good works."²⁹

In considering only these few verses in Revelation 20, one might be tempted to argue that these other books suggest a means of salvation based on works or deeds since all are judged *according to what they had done*. But a preponderance of Scripture will not allow such an interpretation. In

Ephesians, Paul writes, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:8-10). Clearly, salvation is not the product of our works.

Another description of the final judgment is revealed in Matthew 25 which reads, “When the Son of Man comes in glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world’” (Matthew 25:31-34). Note the connection between a kingdom prepared from the foundation of the world and the Book of Life written before the foundation of the world.

The Book of Life alone is an indicator for salvation. The other books reveal that all actions of all people will be held accountable. Good works will be attributed to God (Ephesians 2). Bad works, or sin, will require payment, and we know that the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23). Where there is sin, someone must die. In the case of the non-believer, the goat, his or her death will be required. In the case of the believer, the sheep, his or her sin is covered by the blood of Christ, covered by His atoning death on the cross. How will believers be identified? Their names are written in the Book of Life.

Finally, we come to Revelation 21 and the coming of a new heaven and a new earth. John describes his apocalyptic vision with, “And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the

earth will bring their glory into it, and its gates will never be shut by day – and there will be no night there. They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb’s book of life” (Revelation 21:22-27). For whom is heaven reserved? Heaven is reserved for those whose names were written in the Book of Life by Almighty God before the foundation of the world.

From Multiply to Multitude

What is the connection between the Book of Life and numerical church growth by conversion? Simply put, the only people who will come to Christ through conversion are those whose names are written in the Book of Life. Not only do they have the potential to come to Christ, but they inevitably, providentially, must come to Christ by God’s decree. This is the plentiful harvest that Jesus identifies in Matthew 9 and Luke 10. This is the white harvest of John 4. This perspective should greatly encourage and increase our efforts in outreach and evangelism. The harvest is there for the gathering; men, women and children whose names are written in the Lamb’s Book of Life who have yet to come to Christ. Church growth is not about numbers, it is about names, the many names that are written in the Book of Life.

The history of redemption is the timeline from beginning to end when God builds His eternal family. The gathering begins in Genesis with the introduction of the covenant that charges Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply (Genesis 1:28), and continues all the way to Revelation as the Apostle John proclaims, “After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’” (Revelation 7:9-10). Who are the people of this multitude? They are the people whose names are written in the Lamb’s Book of Life.

CHAPTER THREE: THE COVENANT IN THE PENTATEUCH

Genesis: From Adam to the Twelve Tribes

God's relationship with His people is a covenantal relationship, one rooted in God's covenant with His people, a covenant that is threaded throughout redemptive history. While man is party to the covenant, God is the initiator of the covenant, tying His people to the covenant as is His pleasure. God's people surely benefit from this covenantal relationship and are by necessity bound to the covenant by the will and decree of God. Grudem writes, "As in all covenants that God makes with man, there is here no negotiating over the provisions. God sovereignly imposes this covenant on Adam and Eve, and they have no opportunity to change the details – their only choice is to keep it or to break it."³⁰

God's covenant, as seen in the Old Testament, is a covenant of works and is directly tied to multiplication and fruitfulness, quantity and quality, appearing in the first chapter of the Bible at the very point of God's creating male and female. The text reads, "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.' So, God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth'" (Genesis 1:26-28). This mandate would echo throughout redemptive history as a divine refrain calling God's people to grow numerically and spiritually until all of God's people are gathered to Him as His eternal family. Berkhof remarks, "The discussion of the original state of man, the *status integritatis*, would not be complete without considering

the mutual relationship between God and man, and especially the origin and nature of the religious life of man. That life was rooted in a covenant, just as the Christian life is today.”³¹

God first established this covenant of works with Adam and Eve and called for them to abide by the conditions of the covenant that He determined. Soon the covenant was breached, ushering sin and mortality into the world that God had created. Sin gathered steam through the early generations until God pronounced a devastating judgment. Because of this sin, humanity would be destroyed. Genesis 6 reveals, “The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart” (Genesis 6:5-6). The text goes on to report that God determined to annihilate man and animals, but mankind would get a reprieve because Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD (Genesis 6:8). God shared His plan of destruction with Noah, but promised to establish His covenant with Noah as the covenant of works passed from Adam to Noah. In speaking with Noah God said, “For behold, I will bring a flood of waters upon the earth to destroy all flesh in which is the breath of life under heaven. Everything that is on the earth shall die. But I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons’ wives with you.”

Noah, his family, and the animals that were carried with them by God’s instruction survived the flood in an ark. Months later, when the waters had receded, the ark gave up its cargo and Noah built an altar to the Lord. Genesis 9 states, “And God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth . . . And you, be fruitful and multiply, teem on the earth and multiply in it’” (Genesis 9:1, 7). This multiplication is seen in Scripture as Noah’s sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth, bore many sons after the flood as described in Genesis 10. The chapter closes with,

“These are the clans of the sons of Noah, according to their genealogies, in their nations, and from these the nations spread abroad on the earth after the flood” (Genesis 10:32).

In Genesis 15 the covenant passed to Abraham with God’s promise that prolific multiplication would occur through his descendants. God speaks to Abraham and proclaims, “Look toward heaven and number the stars, if you are able to number them . . . So shall your offspring be” (Genesis 15:5). Scripture informs, “And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness” (Genesis 15:6). This is the righteousness of Abraham referenced by the Apostle Paul in Romans 4:3 and Galatians 3:6 in explaining that righteousness is credited to a believer through faith and not earned by a believer through works. The balance of Genesis 15 portrays the covenantal ceremony administered by God with Abraham binding them both to the covenantal agreement, concluding with, “On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, ‘To your offspring I give this land’” (Genesis 15:18).

The terms of the Abrahamic covenant are further articulated in Genesis 17 with, “When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, ‘I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, that I may make a covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly.’ Then Abram fell on his face. And God said to him, ‘Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall you be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God.’ And God said to Abraham, ‘As for you, you shall keep my

covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations” (Genesis 17:1-9). God established an irresistible and irrevocable covenant with Abraham that included exponential multiplication and productivity.

The covenant with Abraham seemed to be in jeopardy when Abraham was called to sacrifice his son, Isaac, as seen in Genesis 22. In obedience Abraham set out to offer this sacrifice but at the very moment that he was about to plunge a knife into Isaac the angel of the LORD intervened, “He said, ‘Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing that you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.’ And the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven and said, ‘By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice” (Genesis 22:12, 15-18). From Abraham, the biological and spiritual seed of the people of God would descend, growing in number and fruitfulness throughout the generations.

The covenant passed from Abraham to Isaac and then to Jacob, grandson of Abraham. Scripture records, “God appeared to Jacob again, when he came from Paddan-aram, and blessed him. And God said to him, ‘Your name is Jacob; no longer shall your name be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name.’ So he called his name Israel. And God said to him, ‘I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply. A nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall come from your own body. The land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you, and I will give the land to your offspring after you” (Genesis 35:9-12). Through Jacob, now Israel, God would greatly expand His family as Israel would bear twelve sons who would become patriarchs of the twelve tribes of the

nation of Israel. Chapters 37-50 of Genesis reveal the life and times of Israel and his twelve sons, most notably Joseph who comes to power in Egypt after being sold into slavery by his brothers. Ultimately Israel, his sons and their families, the twelve tribes of Israel, migrated to Egypt, driven by famine in their homeland and finding great acceptance and opportunity in Egypt due to the vast authority given to Joseph by Pharaoh. In Egypt, the people of God flourished. Scripture records, “Thus Israel settled in the land of Egypt, in the land of Goshen. And they gained possessions in it, and were fruitful and multiplied greatly” (Genesis 47:27). After blessing his sons, Jacob died in Egypt and his sons essentially became guardians of the covenant. Years later, concerning the death of Joseph, we read, “And Joseph said to his brothers, ‘I am about to die, but God will visit you and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob’” (Genesis 50:24).

Exodus through Deuteronomy: From Moses to Joshua

The Book of Exodus opens with reference to God’s covenant with His people and the prolific growth they experienced. Scripture informs, “All the descendants of Jacob were seventy persons; Joseph was already in Egypt. Then Joseph died, and all his brothers and all that generation. But the people of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them” (Exodus 1:5-7). So strong, in fact, that they were perceived as a threat by a new king. Scripture explains, “Now there arose a king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. And he said to his people, ‘Behold, the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they multiply, and, if war breaks out, they join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land’” (Exodus 1:8-10). This shrewd dealing led to the enslavement of the people of Israel, setting the stage for God’s deliverance of His people through Moses. God renews His covenant with Moses as seen in Exodus 34 with, “And he said, ‘Behold, I am making a covenant. Before all your people I will do marvels, such as have not been created in all the

earth or in any nation. And all the people among whom you are shall see the work of the LORD, for it is an awesome thing that I will do with you. Observe what I command you this day. Behold, I will drive out before you the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites” (Exodus 34:10-11). These were the nations inhabiting the land that God had promised by covenant to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The Israelites would return to this land, and the land would be given over to them in fulfillment of God’s covenantal promise.

Mention should be made of the ark of the covenant, a sacred and physical representation of the covenant. This ark, unlike the large ark built by Noah, would be a holy chest that contained the Ten Commandments, a receptacle of manna and Aaron’s staff. The Ten Commandments served as the forensic basis of God’s covenant with His people and was referred to as the testimony. The manna was the sustenance God provided for the nourishment of His people during their forty years of wandering in the desert following their deliverance from Egypt, memorialized as per the instruction of Moses. Scripture records, “And Moses said to Aaron, “Take a jar and put an omer of manna in it, and place it before the LORD to be kept throughout your generations”” (Exodus 16:33). Likewise, Aaron’s staff, which gave evidence of God’s choice of Aaron and his descendants as priests, was memorialized and given unique prominence as per the instruction of the Lord. Scripture notes, “And the LORD said to Moses, ‘Put back the staff of Aaron before the testimony, to be kept as a sign for the rebels, that you may make an end of their grumbling against me, lest they die”” (Numbers 17:10).

The Pentateuch closes in Deuteronomy with the death of Moses, but the covenant did not die with Moses. It passed on to Joshua, successor to the leadership of Moses. The Book of Joshua opens by recording this transfer of authority with, “After the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, the LORD said to Joshua the son of Nun, ‘Moses my servant is dead. Now therefore arise, go over this Jordan, you and all this people, into the land I am giving to them, to the people of Israel. Every place

that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you, just as I promised to Moses . . . Be strong and courageous, for you shall cause this people to inherit the land that I swore to their fathers to give them” (Joshua 1:1-3, 6). The covenant has moved from Adam to Noah to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to the twelve tribes of Israel to Moses and to Joshua. God is determined to build His family and is determined that His family will be fruitful and will multiply, living in the land He has promised to them in His eternal covenant.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE COVENANT IN SONG

The span of time between Moses and David is approximately a thousand years and we find in David a strong connection to the covenant. In the words of God as He instructs the prophet Nathan we see language that is reminiscent of the covenantal language found in the Pentateuch. 2 Samuel records, “Now, therefore, thus shall you say to my servant David, ‘Thus says the LORD of hosts, I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, that you should be prince over my people Israel. And I have been with you wherever you went and have cut off all your enemies from before you. And I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may dwell in their own place and be disturbed no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel. And I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover, the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever’” (2 Samuel 7:8-13). The covenant takes on a new dimension at this point concerning the unending kingdom built through the house of David. This, of course, refers to Jesus Christ who would be born through the lineage of David and who would reign forever as King of kings and Lord of lords. Keil and Delitzsch comment, “David calls the promise in [1 Chronicles 7], that God would establish his kingdom to his seed forever, a covenant, because it involved a reciprocal action, - namely, that Jehovah would first of all found for David a permanent house, and then that the seed of David was to build the house of the Lord . . . David could found upon this certainty, that God would cause all the salvation to spring forth which had been pledged to his house in the promise referred to.”³²

The multifaceted David set the covenant to song as did other biblical songwriters, or psalm writers. Cited as David’s last words, 2 Samuel 23 gives us, “Now these are the last words of David:

The oracle of David, the son of Jesse, the oracle of the man who was raised on high,
the anointed of the God of Jacob, the sweet psalmist of Israel:

The Spirit of the LORD speaks; his word is on my tongue.

The God of Israel has spoken; the Rock of Israel has said to me

When one rules justly over men, ruling in the fear of God,

he dawns on them like the morning light,

like the sun shining forth on a cloudless morning,

like rain that makes grass to sprout from the earth.

For does not my house stand so with God?

For he has made with me an everlasting

covenant, ordered in all things and secure.

For will he not cause to prosper all my help and desire?"

(2 Samuel 23:1-5)

These references in 2 Samuel clearly indicate the perpetuation of the covenant with its promise of the land and its promise of prosperity (be fruitful and multiply). Added at this point is the everlasting promise to and through the house of David.

1 Chronicles cites another song of David, this time a song of thanks that begins with, "Oh give thanks to the LORD; call upon his name; make known his deeds among the peoples" (1 Chronicles 16:1). The second stanza of the song reads:

He is the LORD our God; his judgments are in all the earth.

Remember his covenant forever, the word that he commanded,

for a thousand generations,

the covenant that he made with Abraham, his sworn promise to Isaac,

which he confirmed as a statute to Jacob, an everlasting covenant to Israel, saying, “To you I will give the land of Canaan, as your portion for an inheritance.” (1 Chronicles 16:14-18)

David’s reference to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Israel and Canaan leaves no doubt that the covenant made between God and Abraham and passed to subsequent generations is the same covenant that David had in view.

Scripture’s greatest concentration of songs is collected in the Psalms, where numerous references to the covenant can be found. Not only would these psalms serve as repeated elements of worship and praise, but there would be a didactic element to the psalms, in this case, reinforcement of the covenant promises of God and the reciprocal responsibility of the people of Israel to Him. Psalm 89 is lengthy and speaks of the covenant from several angles. The psalm opens with praise to a steadfast God, linking that steadfastness to God’s covenant promises:

I will sing of the steadfast love of the LORD, forever;
with my mouth I will make known your faithfulness to all generations.
For I said, “Steadfast love will be built up forever;
in the heavens you will establish your faithfulness.”
You have said, “I have made a covenant with my chosen one;
I have sworn to David my servant:
I will establish your offspring forever, and build your throne for all generations.
(Psalm 89:1-4)

Psalm 89 continues with many verses of praise, recounting the goodness of God, and then, again, making reference to the covenant:

My steadfast love I will keep for him forever, and my covenant will stand firm for him.
I will establish his offspring forever and his throne as the days of the heavens.

(Psalm 89:28-29)

If Psalm 89 ended here, it would be categorized as a psalm of worship and praise, but it does not end here, and as it continues it reveals itself to be a psalm of lament. First comes what appears to be an objective reminder that if the people of Israel violate God's law, breaching the covenant, that there will be negative consequences. Though even in such a case God will not renege on his promise, stating, "I will not violate my covenant or alter the word that went forth from my lips" (Psalm 89:34). In truth, we find that this instruction concerning violation of God's law is more than an objective reminder, for the people of Israel have been unfaithful, and though the covenant remains in force, God's wrath is being felt: "But now you have cast off and rejected; you are full of wrath against your anointed. You have renounced the covenant with your servant; you have defiled his crown in the dust." (Psalm 89:38-39)

God has not truly renounced the covenant, but it seems as if He has in the eyes of the people who are experiencing His wrath, an apt reward for their violation of His law. The lament goes up:

How long, O LORD? Will you hide yourself forever?

How long will your wrath burn like fire? (Psalm 89:46)

But even in the midst of heart wrenching lament, the final verse honors God:

Blessed be the LORD forever! Amen and Amen. (Psalm 89:52).

Psalm 105 is much more upbeat and is clearly a psalm of thanksgiving and praise. The second stanza rehearses the covenant with all of its typical elements:

He is the LORD our God; his judgments are in all the earth.

He remembers his covenant forever, the word that he commanded,
for a thousand generations,

the covenant that he made with Abraham, his sworn promise to Isaac,

which he confirmed to Jacob as a statute, to Israel as an everlasting covenant, saying, “To you will I give the land of Canaan as your portion for an inheritance.” (Psalm 105:7-11)

This is a quote or a repetition of the song from 1 Chronicles 16. There are several ways to view this reiteration. First, God has included this song twice in His word; second, as a psalm writer, David used the same verses in different psalms; third, psalm writers might well have quoted each other in their original compositions. Regardless, the biblical point is clear – the covenant that God made with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob (Israel), Moses, Joshua and now David is of supreme importance.

Psalm 111 is a most interesting psalm that reveals a past, present and future orientation with a closing verse that summarizes, or perhaps provides a topic sentence for, the Book of Proverbs:

Praise the LORD!

I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart,
in the company of the upright, in the congregation.

Great are the works of the LORD, studied by all who delight in them.

Full of splendor and majesty is his work, and his righteousness endures forever

He has caused his wondrous works to be remembered;

the LORD is gracious and merciful.

He provides food for those who fear him; he remembers his covenant forever

He has shown his people the power of his works,

in giving them the inheritance of the nations.

The works of his hands are faithful and just; all his precepts are trustworthy
they are established forever and ever,
to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness.

He sent redemption to his people; he has commanded his covenant forever.

Holy and awesome is his name!

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom;

All who practice it have a good understanding.

His praise endures forever! (Psalm 111:1-10)

This psalm is rich with history and theology, covering the ground of God's deliverance of His people from captivity, His works past and present, many of His attributes, and the link between eternal redemption and an everlasting covenant. The benefits and responsibilities of this covenant are inescapable for the people of God. Frame posits, "God as covenant Lord selects a certain people from among all the nations of the earth to be His own. He rules over them by His law, in terms of which all who obey are blessed and all who disobey are cursed. Yet the covenant is not merely law; it is also grace. It was God's grace, or unmerited favor, by which the covenant people were chosen. And since all men are sinners, it is only by God's grace that there will be any covenant blessing . . . If God is covenant *head*, then He is exalted above His people; He is transcendent. If He is *covenant* head, then He is deeply involved with them; He is immanent."³³

The covenant was clearly alive in God's word and in song, celebrated by generation after generation throughout the history of God's people. More importantly, the covenant was in force and would remain so.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE NEW COVENANT

As we move through time and Scripture we come to Jeremiah and the introduction of a new covenant. The prophet declares, “Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD.’ For they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity and I will remember their sin no more” (Jeremiah 31:31-34). In this passage, God convicts the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah, his bride, of adultery as His covenant has been broken, His law violated.

The covenant of works had been breached again and again as Scripture attests, so God determines to enact a new covenant, one that will not and cannot be broken. This new covenant will not be an external law but an internal law that is written on the hearts of His people. The sin that had breached the old covenant will not breach this new covenant for the sin of God’s people will be forgiven and remembered no more. God will deal with the problem of sin. How will He overcome the covenant-destroying power of sin? Sin and death will be conquered through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Calvin writes, “We hence see that this passage necessarily refers to the kingdom of Christ, for without Christ nothing could or ought to have been hoped for by the people, superior to the Law; for the Law was a rule of the most perfect doctrine. If then Christ be taken away, it is certain that we must abide in the Law.”³⁴ Viewing this passage in Jeremiah from beyond the earthly

life of Jesus, the writer of Hebrews argues, “But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second” (Hebrews 8:6-7).

Through Christ the penalty of sin is paid and the power of death is overcome, but how is it that God’s law will be written on the hearts of His people? This inner writing will be carried out through the Holy Spirit who will be poured out on the Day of Pentecost. Calvin adds, “It is hence then sufficiently clear, that no one can be turned so as to obey the Law, until he be regenerated by the Spirit of God; nay, that there is no inclination in man to act rightly, except God prepares his heart by his grace; in a word, that the doctrine of the letter is always dead, until God vivifies it by his Spirit.”³⁵ God the Father’s new covenant with His people will come through God the Son’s atoning sacrifice and resurrection and through God the Spirit’s indwelling of the believer’s heart.

Jeremiah further prophesies the word of God with, “Behold, I will gather them from all the countries to which I drove them in my anger and will bring them back to this place, and I will make them dwell in safety. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God. I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me forever, for their own good and the good of their children after them. I will make with them, an everlasting covenant, that I will not turn away from doing good to them. And I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me. I will rejoice in doing them good, and I will plant them in this land in faithfulness, with all my heart and all my soul” (Jeremiah 32:37-41). As with the old covenant, God is the initiator of this new covenant, binding His people into covenant with Him as is His right and pleasure as Almighty God, Creator of all things.

Though Jeremiah speaks of a new covenant, this new covenant will have ties to the old covenant. Jesus both fulfills the old covenant and inaugurates the new. Note the prophesy of Zechariah in Luke 1, spoken in anticipation of the birth of Jesus, “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,

for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; to show the mercy promised to our father and to remember his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace” (Luke 1:68-79).

Zechariah notes that this child is of the house of David and that Jesus the Son will be God the Father’s agent for redemption and salvation. This is in keeping with God’s covenant promise to Abraham, sworn with Abraham in an eternally binding oath. Morris comments, “The salvation the Messiah will bring is spoken of first as deliverance, then as mercy to the fathers, and then in terms of the covenant. There are several covenants in the Old Testament, but that with Abraham stands out. The oath was a significant part of any covenant, and here it is emphasized. God will not go back on what he has sworn. The covenant with Abraham will be brought to its consummation.”³⁶ That consummation would require that the old covenant give way to the new.

Blood and the New Covenant

Blood was a necessary element of the old covenant, provided in the form of animals sacrificed according to the Law of Moses. God’s intense testing of Abraham required him to sacrifice his son, Isaac, through the shedding of Isaac’s blood. However, an angel of the Lord intervened at the last moment, saving Isaac in a picture of redemption and salvation as God provided a ram to sacrifice in

Isaac's place, a picture of the atoning sacrifice of Christ. In this atoning sacrifice, the blood of Jesus would be shed.

Jesus links His blood to the new covenant in His institution of the Lord's Supper. Matthew captures the words of Jesus on the night of his betrayal. "Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, 'Take, eat; this is my body.' And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom'" (Matthew 26:26-29). Mark echoes these instructions in Mark 14, "And he took the cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, and they all drank of it. And he said to them, 'This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many'" (Mark 14:23-24). Luke provides a slightly different phrase with, "And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, 'This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood'" (Luke 22:20). Though the Gospel of John does not include a parallel passage of institution as shared by the synoptic gospels, the Apostle John does provide a preview or perhaps an explanation of the meaning of the Lord's Supper in the teaching of Jesus concerning the bread of life. He writes, "So Jesus said to them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him'" (John 6:53-56). Clearly, without the blood of Christ there is no new covenant.

The Apostle Paul provides the text that is most often recited as preparation for partaking of the Lord's Supper in our day in his first letter to the Corinthians. Concerning the connection of the blood of Christ and the new covenant, we find the same phrasing as in the Gospel of Luke, perhaps no coincidence as Luke and Paul spent considerable time together. Paul writes, "For I received from

the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Corinthians 11:23-26). The Psalms and the Prophets often speak of God's remembrance of the covenant. In these words of institution, it is the people of God who are charged to remember.

The Book of Hebrews makes much of the supremacy of Christ, also connecting the supremacy of the blood of Christ to the new covenant and Christ's role in that covenant. The writer records, "But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. For if the sprinkling of defiled persons with the blood of goats and bulls and with the ashes of a heifer sanctifies for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God. Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant" (Hebrews 9:11-15).

The writer of Hebrews closes his epistle with an intriguing benediction that recognizes the powerful agency of the blood of the new covenant, "Now may the God of peace, who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen" (Hebrews 13:20-21). Bruce remarks, "[H]is resurrection is the demonstration that his sacrifice of himself has been accepted by

God and the new covenant established on the basis of that sacrifice.”³⁷ This new covenant will be an eternal covenant as there is no sacrifice that will ever be superior to the sacrifice of Christ and there is no blood that will ever be superior to the blood of Christ.

CHAPTER SIX: THE MISSION OF JESUS CHRIST

The shed blood of Jesus Christ would be the atonement for the new covenant, and the first hint of that sacrifice is found in Genesis 3 as God admonishes the serpent, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel” (Genesis 3:15). The woman, whose affections have been given over to Satan, will be redeemed, shifting her affections towards God, and her offspring, Jesus Christ, will be *bruised* at the cross, but will ultimately reign victorious through the resurrection as He *bruises*, or crushes, the head of Satan. Already, in the first book of the Bible, the new covenant is in view.

Isaiah clarifies, “[T]he Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel” (Isaiah 7:14). Immanuel means *God is with us* and indeed God the Son would be with humanity as He would become a man. The Gospel of John expands the understanding, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:1-5, 14).

The First Coming of Christ was indeed the First *Sending* of Christ, as God the Father, in love, sent God the Son into the world. John’s first epistle states, “In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him” (1 John 4:9). Grudem explains, “To complete the biblical teaching about Jesus Christ, we must affirm not only that he was fully human, but also that he was fully divine. Although the word does not explicitly occur in Scripture, the church has used the term *incarnation* to refer to the fact that Jesus was God in human flesh. The *incarnation* was the act of God the Son whereby he took to himself a human nature.”³⁸

The Incarnate Christ came as a Man on a Mission but He was more than a Man on a Mission, He was God the Son on a Mission. Fully God and fully man, this Son of God – Son of Man was Jesus Christ on a Mission. What was, what is, the mission of Jesus Christ? Luke 19 makes the mission of Jesus quite clear, “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10). Jesus Christ was and is on a Search and Rescue Mission to search or seek for lost people and to rescue or save these lost people from their sins.

How important are lost people to God? The people of God are often identified in Scripture as sheep. Lost people, then, might be considered lost sheep. Ezekiel, the prophet, delivered these words of God, “My sheep were scattered; they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them” (Ezekiel 34:6). In the same chapter of Ezekiel we find, “For thus says the LORD GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all the places they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land. And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country” (Ezekiel 34:11-13). These words of God delivered through the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel clearly connect with the promises of the old covenant. Jesus, bringing in the new covenant, reflects the heart of God the Father as He considers the lost. Matthew records, “And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send

out laborers into his harvest” (Matthew 9:35-38). The search and rescue mission began with God the Father and continues with God the Son. Again, how important are lost people to God?

The Lost and Found Chapter

What does it mean to be lost? Are the lost all who have never come to Christ by way of repentance of sin and profession of faith, or is there more to the story of what it means to be lost? Consider Luke 15, a chapter in the Bible that I have begun to call the Lost and Found Chapter. In this chapter, the Gospel writer includes three stories or vignettes or parables, and each is centered on something, or someone, that was lost. The first concerns a shepherd who has lost a sheep. Logic would say that this is no great cause for concern as he still had possession of ninety-nine other sheep. But Jesus states incredulously, “What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it” (Luke 15:4). The assumption by Jesus is that the only reasonable, responsible thing for this shepherd to do is to go after the lost sheep, even if it means leaving the ninety-nine who are where they were supposed to be. Note that the shepherd does not simply seek to replace the lost sheep by locating another; he determines to find this particular sheep, the one that is lost.

Having found the lost sheep, the story continues, “And when he found it, he lays it on his shoulders rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost’” (Luke 15:5-6). Jesus connects this simple story to a far grander scene with, “Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance” (Luke 15:7). Jesus connects the finding of a lost sheep to the repentance of a lost sinner. Now that the lost is found, there is celebration and rejoicing.

The second vignette concerns a woman who has ten coins that are of value to her. Jesus tells the story, “Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and

sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it” (Luke 15:8). Again, the assumption is that surely the woman would search relentlessly until the lost coin was found and returned to where it is supposed to be. Jesus explains, “And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost’” (Luke 15:9). Here Jesus connects the finding of a lost coin to the repentance of a lost sinner, “Just so, I tell you, there is joy in heaven before the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (Luke 15:10). Again, when the lost is found, there is celebration and rejoicing.

Finally, the text comes to a much more developed parable, the Parable of the Prodigal Son. In this vignette, the storyteller shifts to a lost person, a haughty and ungrateful son who essentially calls for his father’s death as he demands that his inheritance be given to him. Surely this was heartbreaking for the father, all the more so as the son left home and went a great distance away. The story reveals that the son was reckless in his living, one can only imagine, and ultimately squandered his inheritance, finally out of desperation hiring himself out as a fieldworker charged with feeding pigs, a revolting station for a young Hebrew man.

A turning point for this young man comes midway through the parable, “But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! I will go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your servants,’” (Luke 15:17-19). Repentance has come into the heart of this young man. He has seen his sin and he is ready to confess his sin and place himself at the mercy of his father. Any station in life with the father would be better than where he is now.

So, he began the journey home, and the text reveals, “But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him” (Luke 15:20). How is it that this father saw him while he was yet a long distance away? His father was watching for him,

searching for him, and it had to be him, not just any young man who came down the road. There would be celebration and rejoicing as the father explains to his older son, “It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found” (Luke 15:32).

The shepherd of Luke 15 searched for a particular sheep until it was found, the woman of Luke 15 searched for a particular coin until it was found, and the father of Luke 15 searched for a particular son until he was found. What does this tell us about what it means to be lost? Let’s connect a few dots. Lost people are not simply those who have never repented of their sin or who have never made a profession of faith in Jesus Christ. Lost people are people who have never repented of their sin or who have never made a profession of faith in Jesus Christ whose names are recorded in the Book of Life. They are not where they are supposed to be, which is in the family of God. They are not just lost as we usually define the word, they are missing, they are not where they are supposed to be. How important are lost people to God?

The Importance of One Little Man

The mission statement of Jesus is strong and crystal clear, “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10). There is no need for Scriptural context to understand what Jesus is saying here as this statement can easily stand alone. However, this clear mission statement of Jesus is delivered in a particular context and viewing the statement in context adds great depth to what Jesus is saying about His incarnation.

The context is the encounter between Jesus and Zacchaeus, a seemingly inconsequential man of no particular importance, recorded in Luke 19:1-10. Luke 19:1 informs the reader that Jesus was passing through Jericho. Why was Jesus passing through Jericho? He was headed for Jerusalem where He would be crucified, and on that cross He would bear the penalty for sin, making payment for that sin, and would bear the undiluted wrath of God the Father with whom He had been in perfect fellowship since eternity. In considering the humanity of Christ, it would be reasonable to project that

much would have been on the mind of Jesus at this point as the weight of the sins of the world was literally on His shoulders.

In Luke 19:2 we meet Zacchaeus, described as a chief tax collector who was rich. As a tax collector, in fact a chief tax collector, this Jewish man was viewed by his fellow Jewish people as a traitor, one who collaborated with the occupying Romans in the collection of taxes to Rome. It was through this traitorous collaboration that he had become rich. In the teaching of Jesus, it is noted how spiritually precarious it was to be rich, as Jesus taught, “How difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God” (Luke 18:24-25). According to Luke 19:3-4, on this particular day, this man who held a powerful professional position and who had wealth was seeking to see who Jesus was as Jesus was passing through Jericho. The text tells us that he was unable to see Jesus as He passed by as the crowd was thick and he was “small of stature.” So, Zacchaeus ran ahead of the crowd and climbed a tree to gain a better vantage point. One wonders when the last time was that Zacchaeus had run anywhere or climbed a tree.

Why was Zacchaeus so determined to see Jesus? Hendriksen remarks, “[S]o deep was his interest in seeing the Master that he was willing to do almost anything to see him.”³⁹ Was it simple curiosity or was there more? Regardless, he was, not surprisingly, determined to see Jesus. What is surprising is that Jesus was determined to see him. The text reads, “And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, ‘Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today’” (Luke 19:5). Jesus *must* stay at the house of Zacchaeus, apparently by divine imperative. How is it, why is it, that Jesus, en route to the cross of Calvary, must make this detour to spend time with a despised, chief tax collector? Whatever the reason, Zacchaeus hurried down the tree and “received him joyfully” (Luke 19:6).

Zacchaeus is surprised and thrilled that Jesus would not only address him by name, but would essentially invite himself to the house of Zacchaeus. Not everyone was thrilled, however, as we are told in Luke 19:7 that “they all grumbled.” Who are *they*? They are the religious people who were appalled that Jesus would violate the law by going to the house of a “sinner.”

The moment is not pinpointed for us in this text, but something clearly happens in the mind and heart of Zacchaeus as his encounter with Jesus unfolds. First, there is his rejoicing as he receives Jesus, rejoicing as when the shepherd of Luke 15 found his lost sheep, when the woman of Luke 15 found her lost coin, and when the father of Luke 15 found his lost son. This time, however, the rejoicing is on the part of the one being found, not on the part of the one who is finding. Second, there is the transformation that takes place in Zacchaeus. The text reads, “And Zacchaeus stood and said, ‘Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold’” (Luke 19:8). Zacchaeus is a changed man, shifting from greed to generosity, offering half of his possessions to the poor. It is interesting to note that fraud pops into the mind of Zacchaeus. Why is that? Is he just covering the bases of possible sins? No, there is no *if*. In the light of the holiness of Jesus, Zacchaeus is seeing his sin and he is repenting, going far beyond the cultural norm to make restitution. Morris informs, “[Zacchaeus] proceeded to give striking evidence of what Jesus’ visit had done for him by announcing the gift of half his goods for the poor and a fourfold restitution to anyone he had defrauded. Where voluntary restitution was made, the Law required no more than the original amount plus one fifth . . . Zacchaeus’s *if I have defrauded* implies that this was the case. Considering the way he had made his money it was unlikely that this would be a short list.”⁴⁰

Upon the repentance and confession of Zacchaeus Jesus says to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham” (Luke 19:9). How is Zacchaeus a son of Abraham? As a Jew, he is a biological descendent of Abraham, but he was Jewish from birth, long

before his encounter with Jesus. Jesus is not thinking about the body of Zacchaeus at this point, but He is thinking about the soul. Zacchaeus has repented of his sin and has embraced Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. He is now a spiritual son of Abraham, a follower of Jesus Christ, bound to Jesus through the new covenant.

Why did Jesus take a detour from the cross? This was no detour. Zacchaeus is the very reason Jesus is going to the cross. The name of Zacchaeus is recorded in the Book of Life, but up to that point Zacchaeus was lost, and *the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost* (Luke 19:10).

CHAPTER SEVEN: THE CO-MISSION OF JESUS CHRIST

Jesus Christ clearly explained His mission with words captured in Luke 19:10, “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” Numerous Scripture passages attest that it was God the Father who sent God the Son to fulfill this mission. In John’s Gospel we read, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (John 3:16-17). In John’s first epistle, he elaborates further as he teaches on the subject of God’s love with, “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God . . . In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, that we might live through him . . . And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world” (1 John 4:7, 9, 14). One can only conclude that God the Father sent the Son as Savior of those who would believe. These believers would first be among the lost, but they would be found as Jesus Christ, Savior of the world, would fulfill His Father-given mission of both seeking and saving them.

Jesus Christ, however, has left the planet having ascended into heaven where He reigns at the right hand of God the Father. Who, then, is now responsible for the seeking and the saving of the lost? Who is called to carry on the mission of Jesus Christ? Consider the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus that are recorded in the Gospels. To set the stage for this examination, note the statement of Jesus on the night that He was betrayed. Scripture records, “Truly, truly I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father. Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it” (John 14:12-14). How is it possible that the disciples of Jesus, then or now, will do greater works than He? Jesus explains, “These things I have spoken to

you while I am still with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you” (John 14:25-26). God the Father had sent God the Son and upon the Son’s ascension, God the Father and God the Son will send God the Spirit. Further, the Apostle John records these words of Jesus, “Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no longer, concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged” (John 16:7-11). Repentance will come to the lost through the convicting work of the Holy Spirit, the Helper, sent from the Father and sent from the Son.

As we examine the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus, we come to realize that the Helper will not only help the lost come to repentance, but that He will help the followers of Christ serve as Christ’s agents for carrying the message of Jesus Christ to the lost. It is through this helping work of the Holy Spirit in them that they will do these greater works to which Jesus referred. In fact, God the Son and God the Spirit are not the only ones to be sent. In one post-resurrection appearance, Jesus said to His disciples, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you” (John 20:21). The next verse reads, “And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’” (John 20:22). Jesus compares His being sent by the Father to His sending of the disciples. Their sending will be as His, to seek and to save the lost. Granted, they will not be the Redeemer Himself, but they will be agents of redemption.

The post-resurrection appearances of Jesus were used to prepare the disciples for what lay ahead. Luke 24 allows us to eavesdrop on Jesus as He appeared post-resurrection to two followers as they journeyed from Jerusalem to Emmaus. From our vantage point, we see that the conversation that

took place was post-resurrection, but as the conversation started, the vantage point of these two followers was weighted more toward post-crucifixion and having just heard that the tomb of Jesus was found empty that morning. Also, that a vision of angels saying that Jesus was alive had been reported. I wonder, given all that had happened and all that these two had heard, why they were headed away from Jerusalem? Why not stay and find out what had happened? What was so compelling about Emmaus? Perhaps they were exhausted or confused or overwhelmed and needed to get away from the furor. Perhaps they had families and jobs to which they needed to return. Whatever the reason, they were headed to Emmaus and were discussing all of the events of the past few days as they walked.

Suddenly Jesus drew near to them, overhearing and then joining their conversation while they were divinely kept from recognizing him. He acted as if He knew nothing of these events. One of the men asked incredulously, “Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there today” (Luke 24:18). Hendriksen comments, “He wanted to know if the intruder (Jesus) was the only stranger in, or visitor to, Jerusalem who had managed to remain completely uninformed about matters that were on everybody’s lips.”⁴¹ How ironic. In truth, Jesus was the only one who was completely informed about these matters.

As this game of cat and mouse unfolded, eventually Jesus began to teach them. The text reads, “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:27). Still unsure of His identity, and yet moved by Him and drawn to Him, they invited the stranger to stay with them. Luke records, “So he went in to stay with them. When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. And he vanished from their sight” (Luke 24:29b-31). They immediately left and headed back to Jerusalem to share their experience with the eleven disciples.

The text of Luke 24 continues with, “As they were talking about these things, Jesus himself stood among them, and said to them, ‘Peace to you!’” (Luke 24:36). They were anything but peaceful at that moment. He explained, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled” (Luke 24:44). Morris observes, “The solemn division of Scripture into *the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms* (the three divisions of the Hebrew Bible) indicates that there is no part of Scripture that does not bear its witness to Jesus.”⁴²

Jesus then took a very definitive action and revealed His intentions for the mission of His disciples. Luke writes, “Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and on the third rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending the promise of the Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high’” (Luke 24:45-49). Hendriksen remarks, “Jesus now does for the entire group he addresses what he had already done for the men of Emmaus: he gives them the key to the Scriptures. He illumines their minds so that in all the Scriptures they will see Christ.”⁴³ Jesus explains that He will be sending the promised Holy Spirit who will equip them with divine power, and that once this contingency was met, they would be His witnesses as His message was proclaimed to all nations, radiating out from Jerusalem.

The co-mission of Christ can clearly be seen at this point and the preparation for that co-mission has been spelled out. Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, opens the minds of His disciples, granting them the ability to understand the Scriptures. They are to wait for empowerment by the Spirit and then, with their new Scriptural understanding, they will be agents of redemption, carrying the Gospel message to all nations as His witnesses.

Several reinforcements of this co-mission are given in other post-resurrection appearances of Christ, appearances just prior to His ascension. Acts 1 records, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). This final instruction of Jesus strongly resonates with what we saw in Luke 24.

Matthew 28 and Mark 16 both include a passage of Scripture we know as the Great Commission. Mark reveals, “Afterward [Jesus] appeared to the eleven themselves as they were reclining at table, and he rebuked them for their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen. And he said to them, ‘Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned’” (Mark 16:14-16). The timing of this appearance seems to be the evening of resurrection day. The writer begins with “afterward” suggesting that this took place after the morning’s resurrection, the appearance to some women, and the appearance to the two followers on the road to Emmaus. Hendriksen comments, “[I]here is no indication of place or time; all we have is ‘later.’ It would appear, nevertheless, that in verse 14 the reference is still to Easter evening. It was then that lack of faith manifested itself, and this not only in the heart and mind of Thomas (John 20:24) but also on the part of the other ten disciples.”⁴⁴ But despite this unbelieving posture, the co-mission of Christ still goes forth. They will *go into all the world* and they will *proclaim the gospel to all nations*. Their weakness will not be prohibitive as we know from other Scripture that they will be empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Matthew’s Great Commission inclusion is by far the more prominent and more often quoted, arguably among the top Scriptures quoted along with John 3:16 and the Great Commandment of Matthew 22. Matthew ends his Gospel with these verses, giving them an obvious prominence as the ultimate declarative statement of Jesus Christ. As a final cadence to his Gospel Matthew writes, “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, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age’” (Matthew 28:18-20).

This comprehensive statement is pregnant with theological and missional meaning, perhaps a blend of Christology, missiology, and ecclesiology. There is great overlap in these theological categories, but some distinctions might be helpful. Concerning Christ, Christology, there are two important statements that bookend the Great Commission. First, Jesus speaks of His authority. This authority is all encompassing as it includes *all authority in heaven and on earth*. This is the sum total of all existing authority, close kin to omnipotence. There is no authority outside of the authority of Christ and all authority that exists is within the authority of Christ. How has this all-encompassing authority come to belong to Christ? It has been given to the Son by God the Father. God the Father has authorized the Son to carry out the Father’s plan and purpose by granting Him all existing authority. Second, at the end of Jesus’ statement, Jesus speaks of his presence. He will be present with them *always, to the end of the age*. This raises the question of what is the end of the age?

To answer this question, it is helpful to go back in Matthew’s Gospel to Matthew 24. The text reads, “As he sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, ‘Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age’” (Matthew 24:3). The disciples seemed to be speaking of two occurrences, first, the second coming of Christ, the parousia, and, second, the end of time. But in truth, they are speaking of one event. France explains, “This last phrase is governed by a single definite article in Greek, which indicates that the ‘coming’ (parousia) and the ‘close of the age’ are descriptions of the same event.”⁴⁵ The context is centered on teaching of Jesus that concerns the destruction of the temple, but the disciples are probably asking more than they realize. Jesus continues in His teaching recorded in Matthew 24 to reveal signs that

will be seen as the close of the age, the end of time, is drawing near. These will be dangerous and desperate days, but He promises, “But the one who endures to the end will be saved” (Matthew 24:13). He also describes one contingency that must be met for the end to come. Jesus says, “And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come” (Matthew 24:14).

In essence, Jesus previewed the co-mission that we read throughout His post-resurrection appearances here in Matthew 24. Moving back to Matthew 28, Jesus informs that His presence will be a constant companion to the disciples as they carry out their co-mission of going and making disciples. Their ministry will be empowered by the authority of Christ and surrounded by the presence of Christ. France adds, “The concluding promise of Jesus’ presence echoes the implication of the name Emmanuel in (Matthew) 1:23 and also the promise to ‘two or three gathered in my name’ in (Matthew) 18:20 . . . The promise of God’s presence often accompanied his call to service in the Old Testament (e.g. Ex. 3:12; Jos. 1:5); it is not so much a cozy reassurance as a necessary equipment for mission. That the risen Lord can now make such a promise as God made to his people in the past brings the Gospel’s portrait of Jesus (‘God with us’, 1:23) to a stupendous climax.”⁴⁶

Concerning mission, missiology, the command of Jesus to the disciples is to *go and make disciples of all nations*. There is a startling newness to this command that would be well outside the normal range of religious or spiritual thought for the Jew of that day. Prior to the coming of Jesus, the religious and spiritual life of the Hebrew community was inward, a central drawing of the community into the life of the temple or the synagogue. This required a facing inward posture that was exclusive in nature, deliberately ignoring and barring the non-Jew from participation. The religious and spiritual life of the Jew was about *coming* and not *going*, and yet Jesus commands that the disciples *go*. Not only this, but they were to go to people of all nations, not just to the Jews. With Jesus, religious and spiritual life was shifting outward, sending the life of the believer into the community. This would require a facing

outward posture that was inclusive in nature, deliberately bringing people of other nations into participation. The religious and spiritual life of the Christian would be more about *going* and less about *coming* than these Jewish followers had ever known before. Perhaps they were ready for this, yet another about face brought about by Jesus Christ, but perhaps not. It seems that only the outbreak of persecution ultimately scattered the Jerusalem Christian community throughout Judea and Samaria (Acts 8:1). Regardless, a new era was dawning, one that required new outward thinking and new outward action.

With disciples commanded to go out to the nations, what were they to do among these nations? They were to make disciples; they were to replicate what Jesus had done with them, calling others to belief and service of the King of kings and Lord of lords. The text reveals that the command of Jesus was to make disciples, a combination of evangelism, education and transformation. Empowered by the Holy Spirit they would evangelize the nations, proclaiming the message, person, love and work of Jesus Christ to those who had not heard the Gospel. As this Gospel would take root in their hearts and minds, also through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, men, women and children would believe and repent of their sins, becoming themselves followers of Christ. Lives would be transformed and the Gospel would gain traction as it spread throughout the nations, moving toward that time when the end would come. The missiological mission would be well on its way.

Concerning the church, ecclesiology, *going* was to become the standard mode of operation, not just to evangelize, but to baptize new believers in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and to teach. What was this believing community to teach? Teaching was to be centered on obedience to all that Jesus commanded. The command to teach was not centered on education alone; it was centered on living under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. The emphasis was more on Christian living than Christian education. The believing community was to live a life of spiritual fruitfulness, adopting the priorities of Christ as its own. Paul emphasizes the theme of obedience in

the opening and closing verses of his letter to the Romans. In his salutation, he informs that the very reason for his apostleship was to foster obedience. Breaking into another of his run-on sentences we read, "... Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations..." (Romans 1:4-5). The connection to the Great Commission is obvious. Paul reinforces this idea again at the doxological close of this epistle with, "Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith – to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen (Romans 16:25-27).

The goal was not to establish a worldwide religious organization that would be called Christianity. The goal was *to proclaim the gospel throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations* (Matthew 24:14), and calling all followers to lives of obedience. This goal, this mission, was to occupy the hearts, the minds, the creativity, the energy, the resources, the *everything* of the Christian community from the time that Jesus ascended until the time that He returns. The Great Commission, the Great Co-Mission, is to span the time and distance between the First Coming and the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, a span that includes this very moment.

Feed My Sheep

Another comment needs to be made about the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus. During one such appearance, Jesus concentrated on His relationship with Simon Peter. This, of course, was most meaningful and instructive for Peter, but says much to the church today. Three times during this encounter Jesus asked Peter, "Do you love me?" Each time Peter replied, "Yes," and each time Jesus instructed Peter, "Feed my sheep" (John 21:15-19). Most commentators suggest that the threefold questioning had to do with Peter's threefold denial of Jesus on the night of His arrest, and that this

was a reinstatement of Peter's calling to serve as Christ's disciple. That is probably true, but that is not what is significant in terms of our discussion. It was important that when His lost sheep were found and brought into the family of God where they belonged, that the leaders of the church would nurture and care for them, a pastoral care that is rooted in the love of Christ. Note that, at any given moment in time, not all of God's sheep, not all of God's people, have been gathered into the family. Some regard this encounter between Jesus and Peter as an apologetic for investing in the people of the church, the visible church, as a first priority. However, harkening back to our discussion of the Book of Life, "sheep" is a broader category than simply those who are in the church. "Sheep" includes all of those whose names are recorded in the Book of Life, so caring for the sheep is as much about evangelism as it is about pastoral care.

Indeed, an important element of the ministry of the church is the care and nurture of its people. I would argue that this kind of care and nurture is part of preparing and equipping the body of Christ to fulfill its mission, for divine love is the motivation for seeking and saving the lost. The Apostle John makes this connection between love and mission crystal clear in his first epistle, "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us" (1 John 4:7-12). Church leaders are to love, shepherd and feed the sheep in preparing them for the *going co-mission* commanded by Christ. "The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10) and we are co-missioners with Him. It is now our responsibility to carry out His mission.

In fulfilling this responsibility, it's important to note the importance of prayer. God the Father has given authority to God the Son and God the Son has promised the coming of God the Spirit, noting that He will be with us, through the Spirit, until the end of the age (Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 1:8). Our most direct access to the Spirit is through prayer that both builds relationship and harnesses spiritual power. Accompanying the teaching of Jesus concerning the plentiful harvest of souls, Jesus commands and instructs His disciples to pray to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest (Luke 10:2; Matthew 9:38). This is a prayer that would surely be answered in the affirmative as it is clearly a prayer that would be asked in Jesus' name. This would be praying in the expressed will of God the Son. As we go, co-missioners with Jesus Christ, we go in the power of the Holy Spirit and we connect with the Holy Spirit through prayer.

CHAPTER EIGHT: MULTIPLICATION – AN OVERVIEW

In searching the Scriptures for what God says about the numerical growth of the church, I have discovered that God says a great deal about this maligned subject, so much so that I am devoting three chapters to the subject of multiplication. The word *multiply* is used throughout Scripture, mostly in connection with the covenant, and the word *multitude* is used in Revelation 7 to describe the consummation of what all those centuries of multiplying will produce. Scripture reveals more than simple growth; it reveals multiplication, a prolific growth that is both intended and determined by God. This first chapter on multiplication will provide a biblical overview, the next chapter will investigate what can be known about multiplication from the Book of Acts, and the final chapter on multiplication will consider a multiplication object lesson that provides bookends to the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ.

Numerical growth begins in the first chapter of Genesis as God created living things on the fifth day of creation and commanded them to multiply. Scripture records, “And God said, ‘Let the waters swarm with swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the heavens.’ So God created the great sea creatures and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarm, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. And God blessed them, saying, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.’ And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day” (Genesis 1:20-23). It is significant to note that God’s plan for multiplication was not limited to people but included all living creatures with Scripture presenting this creature-multiplication in the same covenantal language used as when God addressed people.

Next God created man and woman and gave them dominion over the rest of the living creatures, “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over

all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth” (Genesis 1:26). Having created man and woman, and given them authority over all living creatures, He established His covenant of multiplication with them, “And God blessed them. And God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (Genesis 1:28). People were the highest order of God’s creation and were given the covenantal mandate to multiply and to rule over all other living things, who have received their own mandate to multiply. Qualitatively God pronounced all of creation as good, and quantitatively it is obvious that God’s plan and purpose called for significant numerical growth.

One might argue that the growth mandated in Genesis 1 was strictly in reference to biological growth, having nothing to do with the numerical growth of the family of God or the church. Our investigation of the covenant in earlier chapters explains the union of the biological and the spiritual in regard to the covenant, especially since the time of the Abrahamic covenant. The writer of Hebrews explains, “For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, saying, ‘Surely I will bless you and multiply you.’ And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise” (Hebrews 6:13-15). Hughes comments, “Of those whose example of faith and patience is to be imitated Abraham in particular is singled out here; for he was pre-eminent among all the heroic figures of the old dispensation for his unwavering faith in the promises of God and his patience in awaiting their fulfillment. It was his faith that engendered his firm hope that, though delayed, the fulfillment of the promises would not fail, and this hope stimulated his patient perseverance through prolonged and perplexing testings . . . God, moreover, confirmed his promise to Abraham by an oath.”⁴⁷

The certainty of this promise is abundantly clear in the prophecy of Jeremiah, “Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!’ declares the LORD. Therefore thus says

the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who care for my people: ‘You have scattered my flock and driven them away, and you have not attended to them. Behold, I will attend to you for your evil deeds, declares the LORD. Then I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will set shepherds over them who will care for them, and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be missing, declares the LORD’” (Jeremiah 23:1-4).

The southern kingdom of Judah had been exiled to Babylon, the consequence of their unfaithfulness, but God had preserved a remnant, a small group within the population of exiled Jews, that will be returned to the promised land of Canaan. By divine decree they will be productive and will multiply in number. All of them for whom this destiny is decreed by God will indeed secure that destiny as God proclaims *neither shall any be missing*. In other words, none of the remnant would remain lost but all would be found and secured. Calvin comments, “God then intimates by these words, that after he had collected his flock into the fold it would be the object of his constant care; for he would appoint pastors, who would discharge their office in a far different way from wolves and sacrilegious robbers. He then adds a promise as to their security.”⁴⁸ Though the number would be decreased in terms of total population of God’s chosen people, the preserved remnant would provide yet another starting point for the multiplication of His people that God ultimately intends. It is significant to note that Scripture reveals numerous times when a remnant has to be preserved and that these times are seasons of God’s judgment and not of God’s blessing.

A word picture of God’s restoration following the exile to Babylon is painted later in Jeremiah, “Thus says the LORD: Behold, I will restore the fortunes of the tents of Jacob and have compassion on his dwellings; the city shall be rebuilt on its mound, and the palace shall stand where it used to be. Out of them shall come songs of thanksgiving, and the voices of those who celebrate. I will multiply them, and they shall not be few; I will make them honored, and they shall not be small” (Jeremiah

30:18-19). Keil and Delitzsch remark, “Thence proceeds, resounds praise or thanksgiving for the divine grace shown them, and the voice, the tones or sounds, of those who laugh, i.e. of the people living in the cities and palaces, rejoicing over their good fortune.”⁴⁹ The origin, or originator, of this divine grace and good fortune is God Himself, who determines that He *will multiply them and make them honored*, and that they *shall not be few and shall not be small*. Divine grace and good fortune will result in their being honored, and this honor will be rooted in the magnitude of their growth through multiplication.

As with many Old Testament prophecies, this prophecy serves a dual purpose. It speaks of God’s restoration of the exiled Jews back to Jerusalem and the southern kingdom of Judah, but it also applies to a final restoration that will come through Christ and the establishing of a new heaven and a new earth. As we have already seen in a previous chapter, Jeremiah 31 provides prophecy of a new covenant that will be forthcoming.

Isaiah provides parallel prophecy that serves this dual purpose. Isaiah 61 speaks of a similar restoration as that seen in Jeremiah, “They shall build up the ancient ruins; they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations” (Isaiah 61:4). This suggests the restoration following the exile. But we see in Luke, at the very beginning of Jesus’ public ministry, that Jesus applies this prophecy of Isaiah to Himself. The text reads, “And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor’” (Luke 4:16-19).

From the scroll, Jesus reads the prophecy of Isaiah now contained in Isaiah 61:13. The text continues, “And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, ‘Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing’” (Luke 4:20-21). Jesus makes it clear that the ultimate application of Isaiah concerns His coming as the one who brings ultimate reconciliation between a sinful people and a holy God. Central to the prophecy of Isaiah 61 are these words, “For I the LORD love justice; I hate robbery and wrong; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. Their offspring shall be known among the nations, and their descendants in the midst of the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge them, that they are an offspring the LORD has blessed” (Isaiah 61:8-9).

Isaiah, along with other prophets including Jeremiah and Ezekiel, speak of this everlasting covenant and connect that covenant to Jesus Christ. It is through Christ that ultimate joy, peace, love, rest, and all other ultimate blessings will come to the people of God. In the language of Isaiah 61, Robertson sees a connection to the year of jubilee, occurring as a special Sabbath every fiftieth year. He writes, “Israel also was to celebrate the jubilee year. At the end of seven groups of seven years, a special Sabbath celebration was to be held. Each fiftieth year had a unique sabbatical significance (Lev. 25:8-22). In this year, the trumpet was to sound and liberty was to be proclaimed throughout the land (v. 9). All debts were cancelled. Interestingly, the prophet Isaiah subsequently employed this sabbatical imagery to describe the proclamation of liberty associated with the coming of the anointed Messiah (Isa. 61:1-3). Christ himself chose this prophetic message to characterize his personal ministry as he began to preach in Nazareth (Luke 4:18, 19).”⁵⁰

Jesus alludes to this prophecy again when questioned by the disciples of John the Baptist. The text reads, “The disciples of John reported all these things to him. And John, calling two of his disciples to him, sent them to the Lord, saying, ‘Are you to one who is to come, or shall we look for another?’

And when the men had to come to him, they said, ‘John the Baptist has sent us to you saying, Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?’ In that hour he healed many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many who were blind he bestowed sight. And he answered them, ‘Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have the good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me’” (Luke 7:18-23). Jesus knew that when John heard what was being done and accomplished through His ministry, John would know that He is the one who was to come, the Messiah. With the coming of Christ, the covenant shifts from old to new, from works to grace, and its mandate to be fruitful and multiply intensifies.

A smattering of Scripture passages from the synoptic Gospels lend further support to the overarching commitment that God has made to seeing His family multiply. The words of Jesus recorded in Matthew 16 clearly state that He is taking personal responsibility for the building of His church, “And I tell you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18). How will Jesus build His church? He will build His church as God the Father reveals through God the Spirit that God the Son is the Christ, the Son of the living God.

Matthew 9 reveals the compassionate heart of Jesus for the lost as He spoke of a harvest of souls that is abundant. Scripture records, “Then he said to his disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest’” (Matthew 9:37-38). This abundant harvest will ultimately be gathered as the family of God is multiplied. Though the Holy Spirit has not yet been sent, and, therefore, the disciples are not yet ready to gather the harvest through the proclamation of the Gospel, Jesus prods them to begin praying for the laborers, the disciples of Jesus Christ, who will go into the harvest for the ingathering.

Mark 4 records the Parable of the Sower or the Parable of the Soils. Uniquely, in the case of this parable, both the parable and its meaning are given. Jesus explains, “The sower sows the word. And these are the ones along the path, where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy. And they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. And others are the ones sown among thorns. They are those who hear the word, but the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. But those that were sown on good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold” (Mark 4:13-20).

What is Mark, or more precisely, what is God saying by quantifying the good soil’s bearing of fruit by using numerical multiplication language, *thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold*? This is a very important question and tends to serve as a dividing line in the thinking of many Christian people. Is this multiplication to be viewed in terms of character and spiritual giftedness as in the fruit of the Spirit, or is this multiplication to be viewed in terms of evangelistic effectiveness? Hendriksen provides broad and convincing commentary that includes both. He posits, “The importance of spiritual fruitbearing, as the mark of the true believer, is stressed even in the Old Testament (Ps. 1:1-3; 92:14; 104:13). This line of thought is continued in the Gospels (Matt. 3:10; 7:17-20; 12:33-35; Luke 3:8; John ch. 15) and the rest of the New Testament (Acts 2:38; 16:31; Rom. 7:4; Gal. 5:22; Eph. 5:9; Phil. 4:17; Col. 1:6; Heb. 12:11; 13:15; James 3:17, 18).

“There is, however, a difference in the degree of fruitfulness. Not all are equally penitent, trustful, loyal, courageous, meek, etc., hence, also, not all are equally productive in bringing other lives to Christ. In the case of some believers the seed, the message, yields thirtyfold, that is thirty times as

much as was sown; in some sixty, and in some a hundred.”⁵¹ Following a comparison of the fruitful productivity of Timothy, Titus and Paul, Hendriksen adds, “Let everyone do his best to produce much fruit (John 15:5), always remembering however that even though the parable emphasizes that the result of the hearing of the gospel depends on the condition of the hearts of those to whom it is addressed, so that human responsibility is stressed, in the final analysis every good thought, disposition, word, deed, character has its source in God and his sovereign grace (Rom 11:36; 1 Cor. 4:7).”⁵² Note that the seed that is being sown is the word of God and that the multiplication identified suggests sowing in like kind; i.e. thirty times more word sown, sixty times more word sown and a hundred times more word sown. It is through this exponential sowing of the word that more word, or seed, will fall on good soil and more harvest will be produced as the word multiplied produces an expanding family of God.

Revisiting several already mentioned Scripture passages, Matthew 28:18-20 commands the disciples of Christ to *go and make disciples of all nations*, Matthew 24:14 explains that the coming of the end of time with the return of Christ demands that the Gospel of the kingdom be *proclaimed throughout the whole world*, and Luke 19:10 declares that the mission of Jesus Christ is *to seek and to save the lost*. The result of this word-sowing multiplication is seen in Revelation 7:9 in the *multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and people and languages*. Far more than incidental numerical growth, this multitude is the goal, the divine destination, of multiplication that is aggressive and intentional, and that is according to the plan, purpose and decree of God.

CHAPTER NINE: MULTIPLICATION – THE ACTIONS OF THE APOSTLES

From Ascension to Dispersion

Luke is the author of the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. He opens the Book of Acts with a reference to his Gospel. He states, “In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen” (Acts 1:1-2). In short, the Gospel of Luke is an account of what Jesus, who is God the Son, did before he ascended into heaven, while the Book of Acts is an account of what God the Spirit did just after God the Son ascended into heaven. Luke contains the earthly ministry of Jesus while Acts contains the early ministry of the church. Kistemaker informs, “Although the word *ἐκκλησία* (church) occurs only three times in the four Gospels . . . it appears twenty-three times in Acts.”⁵³ Acts, then, is largely about the church and as such adds much to a comprehensive ecclesiology.

More than a simple history of the church, the Book of Acts chronicles the movement of the Holy Spirit in establishing the Christian church through the actions of the apostles. Kistemaker further posits, “Granted that Luke has composed a book on the early history of the church, he has never been regarded as the father of church history. Instead, Luke is known as an evangelist.”⁵⁴ What might God be saying by His selection of Luke, an evangelist, to write this particular book of the Bible, especially when considering the pivotal role that Acts plays in the canon? Williams explains, “Acts is the only authentic record we have of the first years of the church’s history. There are a few meager hints in Paul’s letters of events that took place in these years. Josephus provides valuable background material and a number of corroborative details, but if Acts had been lost, the rest of the New Testament would lie before us in two disjointed fragments, for Acts is the necessary link between the Gospels and the Epistles.”⁵⁵ Consider, too, that Acts reveals the catalytic explosion of the Holy Spirit’s outpouring that

begins the exponential gathering of the saints on Pentecost that culminates in the multitude of believers “from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb” envisioned in Revelation 7:9. Surely the Book of Acts is the quintessential revelation of church multiplication.

Consider the unfolding multiplication of the church from beginning to end contained in the Acts of the Apostles. As the book opens, Jesus is spending post-resurrection time with his disciples. He instructs them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for the Holy Spirit to come in fulfillment of the promise made to them previously (Acts 1:4). Jesus teaches, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Bruce remarks, “When the Holy Spirit came upon them, Jesus assured them, they would be vested with heavenly power – that power by which, in the event, their mighty works were accomplished and their preaching made effective. As Jesus had been anointed at this baptism with the Holy Spirit and power, so his followers were now to be similarly anointed and enabled to carry on his work. This work would be a work of witness-bearing.”²⁵⁶

Once again, the emphasis on prayer should be noted. In between the promise of the coming Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8) and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1ff) we find the small band of disciples gathered with others devoting themselves to a focused activity. The text reads, “All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers,” (Acts 1:14). This devotion to prayer is seen again in Acts 2:42 and many other passages throughout the Book of Acts. This is vastly important as it sets a precedent of prayer as a practical spiritual discipline for the church in the building of the church. One could make a case for the Book of Acts establishing practices and principles that might be analogous to the creation

ordinances of Genesis. In that case, creation ordinances are tied to all of Creation, while the Book of Acts is tied to the creation of the Christian church.

Acts 2 opens with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the ingathering of the saints, the family of God, as the New Testament era begins. Simon Peter, clearly moved and enabled by that Spirit, delivers the first Christian sermon, proclaiming from Old Testament texts the fact that Jesus is indeed the Christ, the Son of the living God (Matthew 16:16), and that He had been raised from the dead and is alive still. Regarding the response of the crowd Scripture records, “Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’ And Peter said to them, ‘Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.’ And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, ‘Save yourselves from this crooked generation.’ So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls” (Acts 2:37-41).

Jesus had explained before His ascension that the Holy Spirit would come upon the disciples and that they would be his witnesses. Now the Spirit had come and they were bearing witness, resulting in great conviction within the hearts and minds of people and the exponential numerical growth of the church.

What follows the recording of this event in Scripture is a description of that early church in Jerusalem. One might argue that this snapshot of the early church is more than descriptive, but is prescriptive for the church of Jesus Christ in any place and time. A quality of life is seen in this early expression of the church that is linked to a quantitative gain in the body of Christ as we read, “And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47b).

The disciples continued their witness-bearing ministry in Jerusalem and we see this in Acts 4, “And as they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came upon them, greatly annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. And they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. But many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand” (Acts 4:1-4). The challenge for the temple authorities is that the ministry of these disciples, in both word and deed, was fully charged by the power of the Holy Spirit. It could not be contained, stopped or negated, and hundreds of people were responding to the calling of God and the power of the Gospel.

In summary, Acts 5 informs, “Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon’s Portico. None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem. And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women, so that they even carried the sick into the streets and laid them on cots and mats, that as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them. The people also gathered from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all healed” (Acts 5:12-16). These signs and wonders were surely the power of the Holy Spirit working through the apostles, and this same power was working in the hearts and minds of the people as many, in fact more than ever, were becoming true believers and were being added to the family of God. This is an amazing statement considering that numbers such as three thousand and five thousand men had been seen before.

Up until this point, it seems that the challenges to the spreading of the Gospel were external challenges coming from outside the Christian community, but upon reaching Acts 6, an internal challenge arises that had the potential to derail the growth process. The Grecian widows were being

neglected in the daily distribution of food and this oversight was brought to the attention of the disciples. Consider that throughout Scripture there are multiple mandates charging the people of God to provide for the care of widows and orphans. One would expect the disciples to drop everything, repent, and immediately throw all their energy into correcting this grievous error. Instead we see this, “And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, ‘It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables . . . But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word’” (Acts 6:2, 4). Taking care of the widows, a long-standing biblical mandate, is characterized as serving tables. Indeed, they did appoint a team of men, led by no less than Stephen, to take care of the matter, but they maintained a disciplined focus on the witness-bearing ministry for which they had been called and empowered.

In meeting this internal challenge with the same qualitative focus, commitment and intensity with which they had met external challenges, we see the quantitative effect with, “And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith” (Acts 6:7). One can imagine that had the disciples diverted their attention from the witness-bearing ministry of the Word and prayer, that the Word of God would have decreased and would have negatively impacted the number of those becoming obedient to the faith.

Jesus had told his disciples that they would be His witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout all of Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth (Acts 1:8), but to this point witness-bearing had not spread beyond Jerusalem. That was about to change. Stephen, the same Stephen who was selected as the leader of the Feed the Grecian Widows Ministry Team, was stoned, becoming the first Christian martyr (Acts 7). Scripture notes that Saul, later to become the Apostle Paul, approved of his execution, and we read, “And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and

they were scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles” (Acts 8:1). The stoning of Stephen and the subsequent outbreak of fierce persecution proved catalytic in dispersing the early Christian community out from Jerusalem and into other territories both near and far, ultimately resulting in the spread of the Gospel. One way or another, this first generation of Christian disciples would take the Gospel throughout all Judea and Samaria and this Gospel would make its way to the end of the earth.

From Damascus to Rome

At this point in the Book of Acts, the scene shifts from Peter’s ministry in Jerusalem with the Jews to Paul’s ministry through missionary journeys to the Gentiles. Acts 9 records Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus and his early years of preparation and witnessing, as well as his coming to Jerusalem in an attempt to join the disciples, who were understandably suspicious of this man who had been their bitter enemy. But Barnabas intervened on Paul’s behalf so Paul was accepted as one of the brothers. Scripture describes this particular stretch of time with, “So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied” (Acts 9:31). Bruce comments, “With this summary of progress Luke’s narrative of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus comes to an end. The persecution that broke out after Stephen’s death died out with the conversion and departure of the leading persecutor.”⁵⁷

The scene shifts back to Peter for a few chapters, revealing in Acts 9 that Peter ministered to a woman named Tabitha who had died. Scripture records, “But Peter put them all outside, and knelt down and prayed; and turning to the body he said, ‘Tabitha, arise.’ And she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter she sat up. And he gave her his hand and raised her up. Then calling the saints and

widows, he presented her alive. And it became known throughout all Joppa, and many believed in the Lord” (Acts 9:40-42).

Acts 11 gives another glimpse of the quantitative effect of the dispersion following the stoning of Stephen. “Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one but Jews. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord. The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord” (Acts 11:19-24).

Paul and Barnabas became a ministry team and began to minister in Antioch. Scripture records, “And Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, ‘It was necessary that the word of God be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it aside and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles. For so the Lord has commanded us saying, ‘I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.’ And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed. And the word of God was spreading through the whole region” (Acts 13:46-49).

At this midway point in the Book of Acts, what are we seeing in regard to the growth of the early church? We are seeing the results of the Spirit empowered witness-bearing commissioned by Jesus in Acts 1:8. Granted, this growth has taken a circuitous route that includes neglect of Grecian widows, stoning, persecution, dramatic conversion, healing, raising from the dead and many other signs and wonders. What are the common denominators that pull it all together? There are at least

three: 1. Witness-bearing is centered on Gospel proclamation grounded in the ministry of the Word and prayer; 2. Multiplication is both wide and deep, widely expanding the geography of the Gospel movement, and deeply rooting the local Gospel effect in both the quality of Christian living and the ingathering of new believers. Note that these new believers are not randomly embracing the faith, but are appointed to do so (Acts 13:48); 3. The apostles are moving through distinct callings such as Peter's calling to the Jews and Paul's calling to the Gentiles. Today's church leaders might ask, "How well are these three common denominators represented in our current ministries?"

As we reach the middle of the Book of Acts, the chronology has progressed to the point that Paul and Barnabas have separated in a dispute over whether or not to include Mark on further missionary excursions since Mark has failed once before. Barnabas says, "Yes," while Paul says, "No." So, the two men part ways, Barnabas taking Mark and Paul taking Silas, later to be joined by Timothy. Like the dispersion seen in Acts 1:8, this parting of Paul and Barnabas, though seeming to be a negative development, proves to be very positive as the one team becomes two and multiplication of the church continues. The ministry of the threesome of Paul, Silas and Timothy is described in Acts 16 with, "As they went on their way through the cities, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem.⁵⁸ So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily" (Acts 16:4-5). It should be noted that on this tour, Paul and his companions were visiting churches that were already in existence, having been planted during a previous missionary journey, so this numerical growth was not simply the growth that often accompanies the launch of a church plant, but was sustained growth generated through established churches.

Acts 17 provides three accounts of numerical growth. First, Paul and Silas came to Thessalonica. Scripture records, "And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he

reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, 'This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.' And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women" (Acts 17:2-4). Of their visit to Berea we read, "The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue. Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so. Many of them therefore believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men" (Acts 17:10-12). It is interesting if not remarkable to note that even in resistant Thessalonica conversions took place. Chapter 17 closes with the account of Paul's ministry in Athens and its result. "Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, 'We will hear you again about this.' So Paul went out from their midst. But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them" (Acts 17:32-34).

Paul next settled in Corinth for a season, working as a tentmaker with Aquila and Priscilla, later to be joined by Silas and Timothy. We learn that Paul "reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks" (Acts 18:4). Jews opposed Paul so he shifted his focus entirely to reaching the Gentiles. We read, "And he left there and went to the house of a man named Titius Justus, a worshiper of God. His house was next door to the synagogue. Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed in the Lord, together with his entire household. And many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptized. And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, 'Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people.' And he stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them" (Acts 18:7-11).

A key insight into numerical growth is contained in Acts 18:10. God informs Paul through a vision that He has “many in this city who are my people.” This is God’s promise to Paul that if he stays the course, continuing to speak, continuing to proclaim the Gospel message of Jesus Christ, that he will bear the fruit of conversion. Jesus drives this home in his teaching found in Matthew 9, “The harvest is plentiful.” How is it that the harvest is plentiful? It is plentiful because God has many in one city, another city, another town, another rural community, in every place. How do we know this? We know this because Jesus has called us, has sent us, to bear witness to His Gospel in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the end of the earth (Acts 1:8). In so doing, the harvest of God’s people is gathered into the family of God. Concerning Acts 18:10 Bruce comments, “[Paul] should abandon all fear and go on proclaiming the gospel boldly. He would reap an abundant harvest by so doing, for the Lord had many in Corinth who were marked out by him as his own people.”⁵⁹ Kistemaker encourages, “The pastor, the evangelist, and the missionary should never forget that the Lord Jesus Christ is always with them. Jesus is the commander-in-chief who sends his servants into the world to be his ambassadors. Furthermore, he gives them assurance that he will bless their labors. Scripture teaches that God the Father has chosen his people from eternity (Eph. 1:4). Through the proclamation of God’s Word and the power of his Spirit, he will bring his people to salvation in Christ. Therefore, preachers who faithfully proclaim the gospel message can put their full confidence in God and ask him for tangible results.”⁶⁰

In moving on to Ephesus, Paul applied his usual methodology, teaching, reasoning and persuading in the synagogue. It seems that there were mixed results so Paul shifted his ministry platform from the synagogue to the hall of Tyrannus. The text reveals little about numerical growth of the church per se, but states, “This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks” (Acts 19:10). This is an example of what would be

labeled *saturation evangelism* in our day. Saturation evangelism is a condition that is reached when all residents in a particular community or geographic area have heard the Gospel fully proclaimed and explained. Such was the case regarding Paul's ministry in Ephesus. A bizarre incident is recorded in Acts 19 regarding seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish high priest. As these seven sons attempted to invoke the name of Jesus in casting out an evil spirit, the spirit attacked them. The text reads, "But the evil spirit answered them, 'Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?'" And the man in whom was the evil spirit leaped on them, mastered all of them, so that they fled out of the house naked and wounded. And this became known to all the residents of Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks. And fear fell upon them all, and the name of the Lord was extolled. Also, many of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices. And a number of those who had practiced magic arts brought their books and burned them in the sight of all. And they counted the value of them and found it came to fifty thousand pieces of silver. So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily" (Act 19:16-20).

What does it mean that the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily? Williams informs, "The word of the Lord spread widely, that is, more and more people were hearing the lordship of Jesus proclaimed and, as many gave their lives to Jesus as Lord, so the message grew in power, in the sense that its effects were being increasingly felt both in Ephesus itself and in the province."⁶¹

Luke the Evangelist finally traces Paul's sojourn to Rome. He gives us a glimpse into the life of Paul the prisoner in Acts 28, "When they had appointed a day for him, they came to him at his lodging in great numbers. From morning till evening he expounded to them, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the Law of Moses and the Prophets. And some were convinced by what he said, but others disbelieved . . . He lived there for two whole years

at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance” (Acts 28:23-24, 30-31).

Paul would die in Rome by execution; always the evangelist, always the teacher, always the preacher of the Gospel. Throughout the Book of Acts, we witness the church grow through the power of God and through the actions of the apostles in word and deed, in quality of Christian life and commitment, and in quantity of believers as thousands upon thousands of men, women and children were brought as lost sheep to new life with the Good Shepherd. God, indeed, has many who are His.

CHAPTER TEN: MULTIPLICATION – FISH STORIES

Many of the first disciples were fishermen who lived in Galilee, so it is no surprise that Jesus encountered them at the Sea of Galilee. As Jesus was beginning His earthly ministry, He interrupted the lives of these men and called them to follow Him. In explaining this calling in a most vivid and economical way, Jesus used the cultural language of their livelihood. In Mark 1 we read, “Passing alongside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, ‘Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.’ And immediately they left their nets and followed him. And going on a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets. And immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and followed him” (Mark 1:16-20).

Even in this most succinct passage of Scripture, the event described is remarkable. Mature men who were professional fishermen, who had surely repeated these fishing operations of casting and mending nets hundreds and hundreds of times, suddenly walked away from their livelihood and their families to follow Jesus just because He said so. Obviously, the power of the Spirit of God was moving and Jesus Christ was an utterly unique individual with authority that these men had never seen. They were compelled to do as He commanded, to follow Him. For them, fishing was a skill that had been honed over many years of practice, a process that they had come to know well and fully understand, but in their thinking and experience, fishing was an exercise focused on one simple purpose, catching fish. They were fishers of fish and prior to this moment there would have been little reason to think of fishing otherwise. The prospect of becoming fishers of men must have seemed strange indeed and one wonders what they thought they were getting into. Lane offers, “The call to come after someone implies discipleship because it is the disciple who breaks all other ties to follow

his master as a servant. Yet far more than this was involved in the call to become ‘fishers of men.’ To interpret this phrase only as a play on words appropriate to the situation is to fail to appreciate its biblical background and its relevance to the context, which has focused its attention on God’s eschatological act in sending Jesus. In the Old Testament prophetic tradition, it is God who is the fisher of men. The passages in which the image is developed are distinctly ominous in tone, stressing the divine judgment.”⁶² For example, in Jeremiah 16 we find, “Behold, I am sending for many fishers, declares the LORD, and they shall catch them. And afterward I will send for many hunters, and they shall hunt them from every mountain and every hill, and out of the clefts of the rocks. For my eyes are on all their ways. They are not hidden from me, nor is their iniquity concealed from my eyes. But first I will doubly repay their iniquity and their sin, because they have polluted my land with the carcasses of their detestable idols, and have filled my inheritance with their abominations” (Jeremiah 16:16-18). Habakkuk 1 gives us, “You make mankind like the fish of the sea, like crawling things that have no ruler. He brings all of them up with a hook; he drags them out with his net; he gathers them in his dragnet; so he rejoices and is glad. Therefore he sacrifices to his net and makes offerings to his dragnet; for by them he lives in luxury, and his food is rich” (Habakkuk 1:14-16).

Lane continues, “The summons to be fishers of men is a call to the eschatological task of gathering men in view of the forthcoming judgment of God. It extends the demand for repentance in Jesus’ preaching. Precisely because Jesus has come fishing becomes necessary. Between Ch.1:15 and Ch. 1:17 there is a most intimate connection; fishing is the evidence of the fulfillment which Jesus proclaimed, the corollary of the in-breaking kingdom.”⁶³ Were Simon, Andrew, James, John and perhaps others able to put all of this together at the moment Jesus called them to become fishers of men? That is unlikely, but even if they did not fully comprehend all that was taking place, Jesus surely did. Jesus knew that His coming was the beginning of the last days and that there would be a judgment

that would come for all people. The opportunity for belief, repentance and eternal life would surely be there, but not all would believe, not all would repent, not all would have eternal life. There would be a dividing judgment and there would be, to use another biblical metaphor, the separation of the sheep and the goats. These disciples would be employed in this work of judgment and salvation as they would learn to cast the net of the Gospel widely.

The First Miraculous Catch of Fish

The Book of Luke gives us a comprehensive account of Jesus' calling of His first disciples. Luke writes, "On one occasion, while the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he was standing by the lake of Gennesaret, and he saw two boats by the lake, but the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. Getting into one of the boats, which was Simon's, he asked him to put out a little from the land. And he sat down and taught the people from the boat. And when he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, 'Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.' And Simon answered, 'Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets.' And when they had done this, they enclosed a large number of fish, and their nets were breaking. They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' feet, saying, 'Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.' For he and all who were with him were astonished at the catch of fish that they had taken, and so were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, 'Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men.' And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him" (Luke 5:1-11).

One cannot be sure of the disposition of these fishermen when Jesus suggested that they move to deep water and let down the nets again. This was both an odd and inconvenient request that Jesus

was making. First, the common practice of the day was to fish at night, and night had produced nothing. Second, however far along the fishermen were in cleaning the nets, this effort would prove meaningless and once the nets were cast again, they would have to be gathered and washed again. Third, there was no reasonable evidence that Jesus knew anything about fishing and these men were professionals. Why let a spiritual teacher tell you how you should run your fishing business?

Regardless, there was something about Jesus or His words that evoked a positive response in Simon Peter and the others so they headed back out and let down the nets. This obedience to the instruction of Jesus proved most profitable as an enormous catch of fish was forthcoming, a catch that was of such magnitude that it defied explanation. Morris comments, “The number of fish is not given, but clearly the catch was abnormal. It was not to be explained along the usual lines of fishing technique.”⁶⁴ This was not about technique; it was about power and authority, the power and authority of Jesus. Simon Peter’s response was fascinating; no apparent excitement about the catch of fish, no apparent speculating as to how much these fish might bring at the market, and no apparent attempt to capitalize on the special fishing prowess of this teacher. Simon Peter sees the fish, sees Jesus, and knows that he is the presence of power, authority and holiness, and Simon, like others before him, is confronted in the light of this holiness with his own sin. Again, Morris comments, “Perhaps surprisingly Peter did not welcome the great catch. He recognized the miracle and reacted as one in the presence of God . . . [T]his was a miracle in Peter’s own area of expertise. He knew fishing; and therefore he knew what this haul implied.”⁶⁵

Similar reactions to being in the presence of God are found throughout Scripture. In the presence of God Abraham said, “Behold, I have undertaken to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes” (Genesis 18:27). In the presence of God Job confessed, “I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eyes see you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes” (Job

42:5-6). In the presence of God Isaiah exclaimed, “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!” (Isaiah 6:5). In the presence of absolute power, weakness is clearly seen; in the presence of absolute righteousness, unrighteousness is clearly seen; in the presence of absolute purity, impurity is clearly seen. Such was the case for Simon Peter. The catch of fish was the last thing on his mind. The power, authority and righteousness of Jesus Christ held center stage, and yet he dared not look but begged Jesus to depart, to leave him alone.

The catch of fish was really not on the mind of Jesus either, but was an object lesson that revealed His authority and that set the stage for His induction of Simon, Andrew, James and John into His mission. He explained that from now on they would be catching men. It must be noted that the miracle was not that they caught fish at the command of Jesus, but that they caught a substantial catch of fish that was so large in number that it defied reason, it defied nature; it was, in fact, supernatural. These fishermen would become His disciples, they would be called to catch men, and through them others would become disciples and they would catch men. The catching of men, women and children with the Gospel of Jesus Christ continues today and will continue until the end. Hendriksen remarks, “Simon has been catching *fish*. He is going to be catching *men*. He has been catching in order *to kill*. He will be catching in order *to impart life*, that is, to be an instrument in God’s hand in doing this. All this may well be implied in the words used in the original, which can also be rendered, ‘From now on you will be catching men alive,’ implying ‘and for life.’”⁶⁶ This was the very reason that Jesus had been sent by the Father, and this is the reason that Jesus will send His disciples. Hendriksen continues, “The reason Jesus wanted to catch men in his gospel net, and wanted his disciples to follow his example, was that this was a very important part of the task the Father had assigned to him.”⁶⁷ In Jesus, these

fish in large numbers were ready for the catching. In Jesus, the catch of men in large numbers is ready for catching, for, if I may mix metaphors, the harvest is plentiful and is ready for harvesting.

The Second Miraculous Catch of Fish

The miraculous catch of fish, or perhaps I should again say the first miraculous catch of fish, occurred at the beginning of the earthly ministry of Jesus. A second miraculous catch of fish occurs at the end of the earthly ministry of Jesus, the center piece of one of His post-resurrection appearances. The Apostle John records, “After this Jesus revealed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias, and he revealed himself in this way. Simon Peter, Thomas (called the Twin), Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples were together. Simon Peter said to them, ‘I am going fishing.’ They said to him, ‘We will go with you.’ They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, ‘Children, do you have any fish?’ They answered him, ‘No.’ He said to them, ‘Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some.’ So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in, because of the quantity of fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved therefore said to Peter, ‘It is the Lord!’ When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment, for he was stripped for work, and threw himself into the sea. The other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, but about a hundred yards off. When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire in place, with fish laid out on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, ‘Bring some of the fish that you have just caught. So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, 153 of them. And although there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, ‘Come and have breakfast.’ Now none of the disciples dared ask him, ‘Who are you?’ They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the

bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus was revealed to the disciples after he was raised from the dead” (John 21:1-14).

Why would Peter suggest a fishing trip and why would the others decide to go with him? In recent days, Jesus Christ had been crucified and had apparently been raised from the dead. John 21:14 informs that He had appeared to the disciples on two occasions prior to this fishing trip. Why go fishing? Morris observes, “The fishing expedition plainly reveals the uncertainty of the disciples, an uncertainty that contrasts sharply with their assured sense of purpose from the day of Pentecost on.”⁶⁸ This makes sense to me. Life for the disciples at this point must have been confusing, swinging from the lowest of lows with the crucifixion to the highest of highs with the post-resurrection appearances, all in a span of a few days and without benefit of the Holy Spirit, the Helper, who would come later on that Day of Pentecost. So, they reverted to the comfortable and familiar activity that they had known so well before Jesus interrupted; they went fishing. One might speculate that there was something therapeutic for them out on the water. Perhaps like riding a bicycle, they fell into their former routine with ease, feeling a sense of relief to be able to concentrate on the preparation for the excursion, the casting of the nets, the drawing of the nets, and the chatter that would accompany such an activity. I would go so far as to suggest that they probably were not concerned that they did not catch any fish, as this trip was not really about fish; it was more about trying to establish some sense of equilibrium.

Jesus interrupts their fishing life again, as He had at the beginning of His earthly ministry, calling to them and directing them to cast their nets again. And, again, they haul in a miraculous catch of fish. John 21:4 alerts us to the fact that the disciples did not recognize Jesus by sight. In fact, at the very end of this passage, when they were eating with Jesus having been served by Him, they still did not recognize Him by sight. John 21:12 tells us that none of the disciples dared to ask him, “Who are

you?” Yet, they knew who He was. If it was obvious by sight that this was Jesus, this verse would make no sense as there would be no need to consider asking who He was. John 21:7 reveals that it was John, who referred to himself several times in Scripture as the disciple whom Jesus loved, who first identified the man on the shore as Jesus.

How did he know that this was Jesus? He recognized his Lord in the authority of the miracle. Who else could it be but Jesus? Morris remarks, “The miracle gave the Beloved Disciple all the clue that he needed. In what had happened he recognized the touch of the Master, so he would say to Peter, ‘It is the Lord!’”⁶⁹

As with the first miraculous catch of fish, the size of the catch was significant, one hundred fifty-three large fish. Catching a few small fish would not have revealed a miracle but would have revealed at most good fishing fortune. The fact that there was a huge catch marked this event as a miracle, so far beyond typical outcomes that only one explanation could be given, “It is the Lord!”

Why did Jesus appear to the disciples at this precise moment? Why instruct them to cast the net again, as He had some years before? Why cause this second miraculous catch of fish? Could it be that Jesus was re-establishing His calling for these disciples, the calling to be fishers of men? They were confused; they were, as Morris posits, *uncertain*, but Jesus puts the ground back beneath their feet with a virtual repetition of that first miraculous catch of fish. That first catch had nothing to do with catching fish and everything to do with catching men. Likewise, this second catch was about catching men, lots of men, women and children as a wide Gospel net was to be cast in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth (Acts 1:8). The first and second miraculous catches of fish provide matching bookends to the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ. More than fish stories, these are vision stories, calling stories, mission stories; plan and purpose stories. Men, women and children were going to be caught in the net of the Gospel, and the miraculous catch would be supernaturally large.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: LEADING VOICES - PART 1

MOVING TOWARD MISSIONAL

Church growth has been central to the development of the church since Peter preached the first Christian sermon on the Day of Pentecost and three thousand souls were added. The Church Growth Movement, however, is a recent phenomenon that has spawned an ongoing debate over the merit of numbers. In looking back over the past few decades, certain names are prominent in the arena of church growth, an arena that has become a blend of evangelism, church planting, renewal, revitalization, and missions. Early voices include David Bosch, Lesslie Newbigin, Donald McGavran, and Peter Wagner. More recently the voices of Tom Ranier, Ed Stetzer, Tim Keller, George Barna, Reggie McNeal, Alan Roxburgh, Fred Romanuk, Alan Hirsch, Michael Frost, Aubrey Malphurs, Gary McIntosh and a host of others are being heard.

The word “missional” has come to dominate the ministry landscape as the latest ministry buzz word, but I would argue that this is more than a trendy buzz. Sure, the word itself might go out of vogue sometime in the future, but there is nothing trendy about the concept of bearing witness to the Gospel in the midst of unbelieving people, which is at the very core of being missional. The issue today is the same issue that has always been at the frontline of growing the church, the issue of Christ and culture. How does the body of Christ penetrate an unbelieving culture with the good news of Jesus Christ? Buzz words might come and go, but the calling to witness will be constant until the day that Jesus returns.

To take the message of Christ into culture effectively, one must know Christ and one must know culture. The evangelical church has tended to place its emphasis on Christ while often ignoring or even escaping or avoiding culture in an attempt to maintain purity. But this is a misguided attempt and I would argue that it is an unbiblical posture to embrace. If this is the model that Jesus wanted to

advocate, He would have stayed with God the Father and never become the Incarnate Christ. The incarnation of Jesus Christ is centered on His connecting with an unbelieving culture as He came to seek and to save the lost. As long as the people of God remain distant from the lost, the lost will remain distant from God.

Newbigin reveals a Trinitarian view of mission. He writes, “The fundamental belief is embodied in the affirmation that God has revealed himself as Father, Son, and Spirit. I shall therefore [look] at mission in three ways – as proclaiming the kingdom of the Father, as sharing the life of the Son, and as bearing witness of the Spirit.”⁷⁰ Each of these three perspectives has an outward orientation. Proclamation of the kingdom of the Father is made to the lost, the life of the Son is shared with the lost, and the witness of the Spirit is also made to the lost. The object of mission is the reaching of the lost, and the responsibility of reaching the lost is on each and every believer. Stott remarks, “I think we should agree with the statement of the Lausanne Covenant that ‘in the church’s mission of sacrificial service evangelism is primary’ (para. 6 *The Church and Evangelism*). Christians should feel an acute pain of conscience and compassion when human beings are oppressed or neglected in any way, whether what is being denied them is civil liberty, racial respect, education, medicine, employment, or adequate food, clothing and shelter. Anything which undermines human dignity should be an offense to us. But is anything so destructive of human dignity as alienation from God through ignorance or rejection of the gospel?”⁷¹ Yet, evangelism is often among the lowest priorities of our churches and we often neglect or even resist any accountability to growing numerically by conversion. McGavran observes, “It is common to scorn church statistics – but this is part of the fog. Advocates of this, casting about for biblical support, sometimes find that God was displeased with King David for taking a census of the people (2 Sam. 24:1-10), conveniently overlooking many chapters of Numbers in which God himself commands a meticulous numbering of all Israel and every part of every tribe . . . Also

frequently overlooked is Luke's great emphasis on numbers in the book of Acts and his careful record of the numerical increase of the church . . . On biblical grounds one has to affirm that devout use of the numerical approach is in accord with God's wishes. On practical grounds, it is as necessary in congregations and denominations as honest financial dealing."⁷²

Consider Acts 2 one more time. Jesus had ascended into heaven and the Holy Spirit had been poured out, not only on the disciples who, by the power of the Holy Spirit, were gifted to speak in other languages so that the multi-national gathering of people could hear the Gospel in their own native tongues, but also on the three thousand plus who received that Gospel with conviction and repented. Why do we struggle with this simple model in our churches today? Stott, in noting that God was the one who added to the number that day, comments, "He did not add them to the church without saving them . . . The early church's evangelism was not an occasional or sporadic activity . . . No, just as their worship was daily so was their witness. Praise and proclamation were both the natural overflow of hearts full of the Holy Spirit. And as their outreach was continuous, so continuously converts were being added. We need to recover this expectation of steady and uninterrupted church growth."⁷³ Imagine a church imbedded in the culture of today that is expecting and experiencing steady and uninterrupted conversion growth.

To take Christ effectively into culture, the church must know the culture, and to some degree knowing contemporary culture requires hitting a moving target. In the late twentieth century David Bosch observed the emerging shift from the modern paradigm to the postmodern paradigm, stating, "I suggested that the 'modern' or 'Enlightenment' era would not be the last epoch of world history to exercise an influence on the thought and practice of mission. One more paradigm would follow, which, for the moment, I am calling the 'postmodern' paradigm . . . New paradigms do not establish themselves overnight. They take decades, sometimes even centuries, to develop distinctive contours.

The new paradigm is therefore still emerging and it is, as yet, not clear which shape it will eventually adopt. For the most part we are, at the moment, thinking and working in terms of *two* paradigms.”⁷⁴ Newbigin, a contemporary of Bosch, noted one striking development, the rise in pluralism, in this emerging postmodern paradigm, observing, “The gospel is news of what has happened. The problem of communicating it in a pluralistic society is that it simply disappears into the undifferentiated ocean of information. It represents one opinion among millions of others. It cannot be ‘the truth,’ since in a pluralistic society truth is not one but many. It may be ‘true for you,’ but it cannot be true for everyone. To claim that it is true for everyone is simply arrogance. It is permitted as one opinion among many.”⁷⁵ Pluralism, and its close companion relativism, is central to postmodern thinking while lurking somewhere below the surface in modern thought. Absolutes are not welcomed in the rocky terrain of pluralistic relativism. How, then, can the Christian church foster numerical conversion growth when embracing the narrow, non-pluralistic, non-relativistic conviction that Jesus, and Jesus alone, is the way, the truth, and the life, and that no one comes to God except through Him (John 14:6)?

The discussion of Christ and culture is dead center of the issue of numerical conversion growth. For the *invisible* church to experience numerical growth it must grow by conversion and with each new convert the invisible church grows by one, a number that can never be retracted. The *visible* church, however, can grow numerically without conversion necessarily taking place. This is the case with transfer growth or with growth when someone attends or even becomes a member of a visible church who has not truly been regenerated and converted. Reaching the lost through conversion demands that the visible church embrace the ministries of outreach and evangelism as priorities. Rare is the church that does so.

Outreach and evangelism are not synonymous as many pastors and church leaders seem to think. Outreach is connecting with people out in the neighborhoods and communities in which our churches reside in order to establish credible and sustainable relationships with them. This is most effectively done through a church's commitment to addressing the perceived needs and interests of such communities. In the context of these relationships, evangelism is given opportunity. Evangelism is connecting people who have not received Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior with the crystal-clear message of the Gospel and giving them the opportunity to respond. If the Gospel has not been made crystal clear, evangelism has not taken place. For the church to earn the opportunity to evangelize, it must connect Christ with culture.

There are dangers for the church that seeks to be what church modernists call *culturally relevant*. Guinness warns the church about *employing modern insights and tools*. He writes, "In the case of the church-growth movement, this idolizing trend can develop in one of two ways: either the insights and tools of modernity are themselves relied upon idolatrously, or the churches themselves become idolatrous because their very success as institutions makes them into an end in themselves."⁷⁶ He continues, "In short, the exaggerated half-truth about the church's 'needing to meet needs' once again breeds unintended consequences. Just as the church-growth's modern passion for 'relevance' will become its road to irrelevance, so its modern passion for 'felt needs' will turn the church into an echo chamber of fashionable needs that drown out the one voice that addresses real human need below all felt needs. After all, if true needs are a first step toward faith and prayer, false needs are the opposite."⁷⁷ Indeed, the quest for cultural relevance is fraught with danger, but so is the quest for cultural separation, cultural avoidance, and cultural escape that often lead to cultural irrelevance. Jesus certainly engaged the people of the culture, much to the chagrin of the grumbling church crowd.

Niebuhr identifies a balanced possibility. He writes, “When Christians deal with the problem of Christ and culture, there are at all times some who see that they are not dealing with an ‘either-or’ but a ‘both-and’ relation.”⁷⁸ The Christian who seriously commits to the Great Commission and the Great Commandment, who joins Jesus in His mission to seek and save the lost, must abide in Christ *and* connect with culture, the field where the harvest grows. Christians must engage the culture, not succumbing to culture, but effectively witnessing to the truth about Jesus Christ among all the ideas in culture that pass for knowledge.

There is a remarkable book on this subject by author Nancy Pearcey titled, *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity*. The scope of this book is far reaching, but within the many issues that Pearcey addresses, there is one thread that weaves its way through this book that I find relevant to the discussion of numerical conversion growth. She laments that today’s Christian, modern or postmodern, has allowed culture to marginalize the Christian faith, accepting culture’s privatization of faith, removing it from the public square. Standing on the shoulders of Francis Schaeffer and Phillip Johnson, Pearcey identifies the *fact/value* split, describing a two-story truth that drives mainstream secular thought in our day, assigning values to a subjective *upper story* and facts to an objective *lower story*.⁷⁹ She pleads, “The reason it’s so important for us to learn how to recognize this division is that it is the single most potent weapon for delegitimizing the biblical perspective in the public square today.”⁸⁰ What is at stake here? If the public square can be *protected* from the biblical perspective, the effectiveness of evangelism is greatly threatened, therefore, impeding the progress of numerical conversion growth.

Pearcey explains the fact/value split, “Here’s how it works: Most secularists are too politically savvy to attack religion directly or to debunk it as false. So what do they do? They consign it to the *value* sphere – which takes it out of the realm of true and false altogether. Secularists can then assure

us that of course they ‘respect’ religion, while at the same time denying that it has any relevance to the public realm.”⁸¹ In other words, by privatizing religion, or faith, into a subjective values sphere, they allow faith to be personal, but bar faith from the facts sphere where disciplines such as math and science objectively determine what is true and what is false. Therefore, faith can be personally relevant but is void of any cultural relevance.

Pearcey’s concern is not so much that secularists think this way, but that Christians today tend to think this way as well, essentially abandoning the public square, retreating to their churches where they collectively practice their private faith together. She does, however, sound a note of encouragement. She observes, “But today as I travel around the country, I sense an eagerness among evangelicals to move beyond a purely privatized faith, applying biblical principles to areas like work, business, and politics.”⁸² This kind of biblical application to all of life puts the Christian back in the public square, bearing witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, both intellectually and behaviorally. Pearcey remarks, “[H]aving a Christian worldview is not just about answering intellectual questions. It also means following biblical principles in the personal and practical spheres of life.”⁸³ This is what cultural relevance looks like on the personal level, and lived in the context of collectively embracing a Christian worldview among fellow believers living in community, the visible church truly becomes culturally relevant.

Not surprisingly, churches relate to culture in different ways, some more effective than others. McIntosh observes, “Churches tend to approach culture from one of three perspectives – isolation, domination, or incarnation. Isolation takes place when a church . . . is so far removed from culture that it can no longer communicate the Good News in effective ways . . . Domination occurs as a church lashes out harshly against the perceived evils of culture . . . Incarnation happens when a church adapts itself in appropriate ways to its culture so that the culture will receive a hearing of the gospel.”⁸⁴

Appropriately connecting Christ and culture moves the church forward into the culture with an effective Gospel witness, and the result is numerical conversion growth.

CHAPTER TWELVE: LEADING VOICES – PART 2

A MISSIONAL MOVEMENT

Missional momentum has continued to swell through the late twentieth century and into the early twenty-first century, now moving past the close of its second decade. The missional church is now a full-blown movement, engulfing church leaders from the liberal to the conservative, from the mainline to the evangelical, from traditional preservationists to cutting edge innovators. The missional conversation is clearly on the table throughout the American church with wide ranging interpretations and applications. There is both a positive and a negative thrust to this missional movement. Positively, more and more church leaders are coming to grips with a new passion for reaching lost people and are not just settling for church as usual. Negatively, with over eighty percent of American Protestant churches in plateau and decline, church leaders are searching for ways to survive, not so much compelled by a desire to reach the lost as by a desperate desire to preserve the churches of the found. The focus of this chapter will be on the positive side.

Defining Missional

The first challenge is one of definition; what is the missional church? Roxburgh and Romanuk offer, “The question is familiar: ‘What do you mean by the missional church?’ . . . [T]he church’s very nature is to be God’s missionary people . . . A missional church is a community of God’s people who live into the imagination that they are, by their very nature, God’s missionary people living as a demonstration of what God plans to do in and for all of creation in Jesus Christ.”⁸⁵ This is perhaps a curious use of the word *imagination*, but that word is popping up throughout the missional conversation. Roxburgh and Romanuk further remark, “The narrative imagination of Scripture challenges our assumptions about what God is up to in the world and reminds us that leaders can do great things when they align their expectations with God’s. An important role of a missional leader is

cultivating an environment within which God's people discern God's directions and activities in them and for the communities in which they find themselves."⁸⁶ Imagination, it seems, is closely linked to excitement, hope, confidence and openness to possibility. Discernment is a key as vision, or imagination, in the church is a function of godly discernment and not human creativity. The goal is not to be clever but to be discerning. How does God want to express Himself through a given church in a given community at a given time?

Van Gelder links imagination to the missional nature and purpose of the church. He writes, "This different conversation is being shaped by a biblical and theological imagination for understanding the very *nature* of the church. The key premise is that understanding the *nature* of the church is foundational for being able to clarify the *purpose* of the church, and for developing any strategies related to that purpose. And understanding the nature of the church is also seen as being foundational for discerning how to address changing cultural contexts. This represents a *change of kind* in the conversation about the church, and is a change of kind being developed around the concept of the 'missional church'."⁸⁷ Ironically, this *change of kind* is not a new innovation but rather a return to former expressions of the church, especially a return to how we perceive the first century church to have been. Mancini links missional thinking to a church's being, proposing, "The idea of the missional church has singlehandedly captured the imagination of church leaders of all backgrounds . . . But what does it mean? Essentially it is a way of thinking that challenges the church to re-form and reforge its self-understanding (theologically, spiritually and socially) so that it can relearn how to live and proclaim the gospel in the world. Perhaps the best motto of the reorientation is the imperative to 'be the church.' Church is not something you do or a place you go to, but *what you are*."⁸⁸

In an effort to be the church, it is important to note that *being* is closely and unavoidably associated with *doing*, for it is in the doing of the church that the being of the church is revealed. Stetzer

comments, “A church becomes missional when it remains faithful to the gospel and simultaneously seeks to contextualize the gospel (to the degree it can) so the gospel engages the hearers and transforms their worldview.”⁸⁹ Stetzer connects being, i.e. becoming, with doing, i.e. engaging the hearers and transforming their worldview. This suggests that a church cannot be missional without engaging hearers with a contextualized gospel and without transforming the worldview of these hearers, at least some of them. Being missional, then, is about bearing positive fruit, not just about engaging in particular ministry activities.

One way to help define missional is to consider what missional is not. Roxburgh and Boren observe:

1. *Missional church* is not a label to describe churches that emphasize cross-cultural missions.
2. *Missional church* is not a label used to describe churches that are using outreach programs to be *externally focused*.
3. *Missional church* is not another label for church growth and church effectiveness.
4. *Missional church* is not a label for churches that are effective at evangelism.
5. *Missional church* is not a label to describe churches that have developed a clear mission statement with a vision and purpose for their existence.
6. *Missional church* is not a way of turning around ineffective and outdated church forms so that they can display relevance in the wider culture.
7. *Missional church* is not a label that points to a primitive or ancient way of being the church.
8. *Missional* is not a label describing new formats of church that reach people who have no interest in traditional churches.⁹⁰

Chester and Timmis cite a warning that those pursuing the missional should heed. They exhort, “Far more important than any ecclesiastical or missiological innovations is a passion for God

. . . The glory of God and the grace of God are the heartbeat of Christian life and mission.”⁹¹ They call for balance that emanates from being *gospel-centered*, instructing, “Being gospel-centered actually involves two things. First, it means being word-centered because the gospel is a word – the gospel is news, a message. Second, it means being mission-centered because the gospel is a word to be proclaimed – the gospel is good news, a missionary message.”

Van Gelder adds to this missional exhortation, “The premise is that it is crucial to understand the Spirit’s role in the creation of the church if we are to correctly understand its missionary nature. So also, it is crucial to understand the leading of the Spirit in shaping the church’s ministry if we are to correctly understand its purpose.”⁹²

In drawing these missional observations together, a missional definition and description emerges:

Missional churches are communities of God’s missionary people – Roxburgh/Romanuk

Missional churches align their expectations with God’s – Roxburgh/Romanuk

Missional churches understand the nature and purpose of the church – Van Gelder

Missional churches develop strategies related to that purpose – Van Gelder

Missional churches address changing cultural contexts – Van Gelder

Missional churches remain faithful to the gospel and contextualize the gospel – Stetzer

Missional churches engage the hearers and transform their worldview – Stetzer

Missional churches have a passion for God and are gospel-centered – Chester/Timmis

Missional churches understand the Spirit’s role and are led by the Spirit – Van Gelder

A Missional Code

Stetzer and Putman propose that communities have a built-in resistance to the Gospel and that overcoming that resistance requires *breaking the missional code*. Despite the fact that communities in

North America have this built-in resistance, some church leaders are having great impact as they break the code. Stetzer and Putman remark, “They have the ability to read the culture and translate ministry into a biblically faithful and culturally appropriate expression of church.”⁹³ In addressing this resistance, they explain, “Breaking the code requires a belief that there is a code to be broken. Breaking the code means that we have to recognize that there are cultural barriers (in addition to spiritual ones) that blind people from understanding the gospel,”⁹⁴ stating further, “Breaking the code is the recognition that there are visible and invisible characteristics within a community that will make its people resistant to or responsive to the church and its gospel message.”⁹⁵ Seminal to missional code breaking is an intense commitment to connecting with the culture that inhabits a church’s mission field, a commitment that is somewhat foreign to domestic church leaders but is standard operating procedure for missionaries. To be missional, today’s church leader must see the community through a missionary lens, the starting point for breaking the missional code.

Stetzer and Rainer are concerned that a primary barrier to being missional as a church is that we tend to measure a church’s ministry by wrong criteria. They pose, “One of the issues the church wrestles with today (at least in North America) is what we measure and how we measure it . . . The ultimate measure of a church is to see people following Christ and living on mission. Redemption is always a central value for the church . . . We are calling for a new scorecard. This scorecard would count what’s important – people coming to Christ and living in Christian community – but also counts the other important issues as well. At its essence the new scorecard must measure how well we are making disciples.”⁹⁶ Stetzer and Rainer call for a new scorecard that measures criteria that are linked to missional productivity, which suggests that the bull’s-eye of ministry be re-drawn.

McNeal vehemently agrees, stating, “The missional church in North America needs to be measured in a completely different way from the metrics the traditional church has been using.

Typically, results have been measured in church-centric and one-dimensional ways: how many, how often, and how much. This approach fails to capture the externally focused dimension of a missional expression of ministry. It assumes that church efforts and kingdom agenda are synonymous. Current scorekeeping actually keeps the church from going missional!⁹⁷ How so? The conventional method of measuring or evaluating ministry is based on management criteria such as attendance figures, finances, numbers of programs and activities, and the like. Little attention is given to the measuring of outreach and evangelism efforts or results in the community, with little to no accountability placed on leaders in these outward categories of ministry. Many churches perceive themselves to be biblically sound and healthy while reaching no one with the Gospel message of Jesus Christ.

According to McNeal, “Going missional will require that you make three shifts, both in your thinking and in your behavior:

From internal to external in terms of ministry focus

From program development to people development in terms of core activity

From church-based to kingdom-based in terms of leadership agenda

These shifts are the signature characteristics of what missional means. They are not destinations; they are compass settings.”⁹⁸

Amidst all of the definitions and descriptions of the missional church and the twenty-first century missional church movement, the central thrust is numerical growth by conversion. This conversion focus in ministry has a companion and that companion is simplicity. Rainer and Geiger observe, “Simple is in. Complexity is out. Out of style at least. Ironically people are hungry for simple because the world has become much more complex . . . The simple revolution has begun.”⁹⁹ Why is that important? Rainer and Geiger add, “The significance is that, in general, simple churches are growing and vibrant. Churches with a simple process for reaching and maturing people are expanding

the kingdom. Church leaders who have designed a simple biblical process to make disciples are effectively advancing the movement of the gospel. Simple churches are making a big impact.”¹⁰⁰ The post-World War II program-driven model of church has given way to a leaner and healthier model of church that is focused on executing a few missional initiatives well. These are the churches that are gaining ground in the community, accomplishing *more ministry* while providing *fewer ministries*. In this sense, quantity gives way to quality, but in so doing the quantity of those reached by the Gospel increases, the response to the Gospel increases, and the visible church as well as the invisible church grows by conversion.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: PASTOR PERSPECTIVE

The reader will recall that I presented a brief discussion of the Church Growth Champion and the Church Growth Critic in the Introduction. In the modern era debate regarding the so-called Church Growth Movement and its Church Growth Theory, there are those who strongly advocate Church Growth and those who strongly attack Church Growth, and there are infinite varieties in between these two poles. Pastors, of course, are not immune to these perspectives, and are, in fact, the primary purveyors of these varied points of view as they tend to be the most informed, the most involved, and from both a career and ministry standpoint, have the most at stake of any church leaders.

Given the nature of my ministry as a church vitalization/revitalization trainer and consultant, I spend a great deal of time with pastors, and I have seen in these pastors a wide array of attitudes and perspectives when it comes to the numerical growth by transfer and/or conversion of their churches. It occurred to me that surely there is a link between a pastor's attitude and perspective in this regard and the actual growth of that pastor's church. This gave birth to a simple question, "How does a pastor's perspective toward numerical growth affect the actual growth of that pastor's church?"

I set out to answer that question with a survey that ultimately engaged ninety-two conservative evangelical pastors. By way of disclaimer, I must confess that I am not educated in the art and science of designing or analyzing the findings of surveys, but I have earned several graduate degrees and have a productive history of practical insight and common sense. Armed with these, and with the input of a few colleagues, I designed and re-designed the survey and was able to secure credible survey responses from the ninety-two aforementioned pastors. Upon receiving the data, I began the arduous task of analysis and soon discovered that I was in over my head. Tabulations were easy enough, but implications were harder to identify, though I was able to isolate a number of Key Observations and offer a Five-Point Brief Analysis which I will include in this presentation.

A few years ago, I presented a lecture on Turnaround Churches at a conference of the Great Commission Research Network hosted at Biola University. In this lecture, I made mention of this survey, shared a number of my tabulations as well as my brief analysis. Following this lecture, a gentleman approached me to inquire about the survey. He indicated that he was fascinated by what I had presented and wanted to know if I would be willing to share all of the findings that I had determined from the data that I had collected. I had to admit to him that I had, in fact, shared all of my findings and that I had more data than I knew how to handle.

As it turns out, this gentleman was an assistant professor in the psychology department at a leading Christian university and one of his specialties is statistical analysis. We subsequently began a partnership to develop the data fully and to publish our findings.

My lecture to the Great Commission Research Network was converted into print and published in the Great Commission Research Journal (VOL. 3 NO. 2 Winter 2012). It carries the title, *Church Turnaround: Perspectives, Principles and Practices*. Further, an article based on the survey, co-authored with David R. Dunaetz, Ph.D., was published in the Great Commission Research Journal (VOL. 5 NO. 2 Winter 2014). It carries the title, *Pastoral Attitudes that Predict Numerical Church Growth*. It continues to be available at academia.edu.

On the pages that follow, I offer my complete survey data, including my tabulations, my Key Observations, and my Five-Point Brief Analysis, as follows:

PASTOR SURVEY – 92 Evangelical Pastors Participating

The Facts: The following ten questions require a single numeric answer. Please answer as accurately as you are able. This section of the survey is designed to acquire foundational data that can easily be measured. If you do not know the answer to any of these questions, simply reply, “Don’t know” or leave the question blank and skip to the next question.

1. How long has your church been in existence?

| | |
|---------|---------------|
| Range | 1 – 241 years |
| Average | 68.4 years |

2. How long have you served in pastoral ministry?

| | |
|---------|--------------|
| Range | 1 – 46 years |
| Average | 18.0 years |

3. How long have you served as senior/lead pastor of a church?

| | |
|---------|--------------|
| Range | 1 – 44 years |
| Average | 14.6 years |

4. How long have you served as senior/lead pastor of your current church?

| | |
|---------|--------------|
| Range | 1 – 26 years |
| Average | 8.6 years |

5. What is your current church’s average attendance in your primary weekly worship service or services?

| | |
|---------|-----------|
| Range | 12 – 2000 |
| Average | 163.2 |

6. What was your current church’s average attendance in your primary weekly worship service or services over the past year?

| | |
|---------|-----------|
| Range | 14 – 1900 |
| Average | 154.8 |

7. What was your current church's average attendance in your primary weekly worship service or services five years ago?

| | |
|---------|----------|
| Range | 0 – 1400 |
| Average | 141.4 |

8. How many adults were added to your congregation in the past year by way of transfer?

| | |
|---------|--------|
| Range | 0 – 80 |
| Average | 8.0 |

Note: Churches with 0 = 19.5%
 Churches with 1 = 6.5%
 Churches with 2 = 13%
 Total Churches with 0-2 = 39%

9. How many adults were added to your congregation in the past year by way of conversion, by way of profession of faith?

| | |
|---------|--------|
| Range | 0 – 35 |
| Average | 5.5 |

Note: Churches with 0 = 28%
 Churches with 1 = 14%
 Churches with 2 = 10%
 Total Churches with 0-2 = 52%

10. What percentage of your current church's budget is allocated for local outreach and evangelism?

| | |
|---------|---------|
| Range | 0 – 34% |
| Average | 6.7% |

Note: Churches with 0 – 5% = 65%
 Churches with 6 – 10% = 16%
 Churches with 2 = 13%
 Total Churches with 10% or less = 81%

Key Observations:

1. 39% of churches reported 0 – 2 transfers in the past year.
2. 52% of churches reported 0 – 2 professions of faith in the past year.
3. 81% of churches reported 10% or less of its current budget allocated for local outreach and evangelism.

Levels of Agreement: Please indicate your level of agreement with the following ten statements. This section of the survey is designed to indicate your growth preferences and perspectives.

1. I am personally committed to the numerical growth of my congregation.

| | |
|-------------------|-----|
| Strongly Agree | 52% |
| Agree | 42% |
| Disagree | 5% |
| Strongly Disagree | 1% |

2. Low conversion growth indicates poor congregation health.

| | |
|-------------------|-----|
| Strongly Agree | 19% |
| Agree | 53% |
| Disagree | 26% |
| Strongly Disagree | 2% |

3. I am well acquainted with church growth literature of the last quarter of the 20th century.

| | |
|-------------------|-----|
| Strongly Agree | 29% |
| Agree | 57% |
| Disagree | 14% |
| Strongly Disagree | 0% |

4. Transfer growth is an indicator of positive congregational health.

| | |
|-------------------|-----|
| Strongly Agree | 0% |
| Agree | 48% |
| Disagree | 45% |
| Strongly Disagree | 7% |

5. The proper preaching of the Word is of greater importance than outreach and evangelism.

| | |
|-------------------|-----|
| Strongly Agree | 15% |
| Agree | 38% |
| Disagree | 42% |
| Strongly Disagree | 5% |

6. The numerical growth of my congregation is not a biblical mandate.

| | |
|-------------------|-----|
| Strongly Agree | 1% |
| Agree | 35% |
| Disagree | 50% |
| Strongly Disagree | 14% |

7. The emergence of mega churches in the United States has been a positive influence for the cause of Christ.

| | |
|-------------------|-----|
| Strongly Agree | 4% |
| Agree | 37% |
| Disagree | 52% |
| Strongly Disagree | 7% |

8. Evangelism is primarily the responsibility of those who have the gift of evangelism.

| | |
|-------------------|-----|
| Strongly Agree | 2% |
| Agree | 1% |
| Disagree | 60% |
| Strongly Disagree | 37% |

9. The shepherding of the congregation is of greater importance than local outreach and evangelism.

| | |
|-------------------|-----|
| Strongly Agree | 4% |
| Agree | 27% |
| Disagree | 62% |
| Strongly Disagree | 7% |

10. I am well acquainted with current church growth literature.

| | |
|-------------------|-----|
| Strongly Agree | 20% |
| Agree | 50% |
| Disagree | 28% |
| Strongly Disagree | 2% |

Additional Tabulations:

I am personally committed to the numerical growth of my congregation.

| | |
|----------------------------|-----|
| Strongly Agree/Agree | 94% |
| Disagree/Strongly Disagree | 6% |

The numerical growth of my congregation is not a biblical mandate.

| | |
|----------------------------|-----|
| Strongly Agree/Agree | 36% |
| Disagree/Strongly Disagree | 64% |

Transfer growth is an indicator of positive congregational health.

| | |
|----------------------------|-----|
| Strongly Agree/Agree | 48% |
| Disagree/Strongly Disagree | 52% |

The proper preaching of the Word is of greater importance than outreach and evangelism.

| | |
|----------------------------|-----|
| Strongly Agree/Agree | 53% |
| Disagree/Strongly Disagree | 47% |

The emergence of mega churches in the United States has been a positive influence for the cause of Christ.

| | |
|----------------------------|-----|
| Strongly Agree/Agree | 41% |
| Disagree/Strongly Disagree | 59% |

Key Observations:

1. 94% of pastors strongly agreed or agreed with the statement, “I am personally committed to the numerical growth of my congregation,” yet 36% of pastors strongly agreed or agreed with the statement, “The numerical growth of my congregation is not a biblical mandate.”
2. Pastors were virtually evenly split regarding the statements, “Transfer growth is an indicator of positive congregational health,” and, “The proper preaching of the Word is of greater importance than outreach and evangelism.”
3. The majority of pastors disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, “The emergence of mega churches in the United States has been a positive influence for the cause of Christ.”

Ministry Categories: On a scale of 1-10 (1 = least; 10 = most) indicate the importance of the following ten ministry categories from your perspective. This section of the survey is designed to reveal the value you place on various ministry priorities.

1. On a scale of 1-10, how important is financial stewardship of church assets?

| | |
|---------|--------|
| Range | 4 – 10 |
| Average | 8.4 |

2. On a scale of 1-10, how important is shepherding the congregation?

| | |
|---------|--------|
| Range | 2 – 10 |
| Average | 8.6 |

3. On a scale of 1-10, how important is supporting foreign missions?

| | |
|---------|--------|
| Range | 3 – 10 |
| Average | 8.3 |

4. On a scale of 1-10, how important is providing outreach to the local community?

| | |
|---------|--------|
| Range | 2 – 10 |
| Average | 8.5 |

5. On a scale of 1-10, how important is Christ-centered worship?

| | |
|---------|--------|
| Range | 8 – 10 |
| Average | 9.7 |

6. On a scale of 1-10, how important is supporting domestic missions?

| | |
|---------|--------|
| Range | 2 – 10 |
| Average | 7.8 |

7. On a scale of 1-10, how important is preaching the Word?

| | |
|---------|--------|
| Range | 8 – 10 |
| Average | 9.8 |

8. On a scale of 1-10, how important is evangelizing the local community?

| | |
|---------|--------|
| Range | 3 – 10 |
| Average | 8.5 |

9. On a scale of 1-10, how important is personal and corporate prayer?

| | |
|---------|--------|
| Range | 4 – 10 |
| Average | 8.8 |

10. On a scale of 1-10, how important is growing the congregation numerically by conversion?

| | |
|---------|--------|
| Range | 1 – 10 |
| Average | 8.0 |

Summary of Ministry Categories:

| CATEGORY | RANGE | VARIANCE | SCORE |
|-----------------------------------|--------|----------|-------|
| Preaching of the Word | 8 – 10 | 2 | 9.8 |
| Christ-Centered Worship | 8 – 10 | 2 | 9.7 |
| Personal & Corporate Prayer | 4 – 10 | 6 | 8.8 |
| Shepherding the Congregation | 2 – 10 | 8 | 8.6 |
| Evangelizing the Local Community | 3 - 10 | 7 | 8.5 |
| Outreach to Local Community | 2 – 10 | 8 | 8.5 |
| Financial Stewardship | 4 – 10 | 6 | 8.4 |
| Supporting Foreign Missions | 3 – 10 | 7 | 8.3 |
| Growing Numerically by Conversion | 1 – 10 | 9 | 8.0 |
| Supporting Domestic Missions | 2 – 10 | 8 | 7.8 |

Key Observations:

1. Preaching, Worship and Prayer recorded the highest scores.
2. Only two points separate the top and bottom scores (9.8 – 7.8)
3. The variance in individual scoring of Preaching and Worship is 2.
4. The variance in individual scoring of Growing Numerically by Conversion is 9.

Bonus Round – Ministry Priorities: Please arrange the following ten ministry categories into their order of priority from your perspective. This section of the survey is designed to press you into making hard choices of one ministry over another. Note: 78 Pastors Participating

The Categories:

| | | |
|-------------|------------------|----------------------|
| Prayer | Outreach | Preaching |
| Worship | Stewardship | Domestic Missions |
| Shepherding | Foreign Missions | Growth by Conversion |
| | Evangelism | |

The Ranking – Measured against a 100% score of 780 Maximum Points:

| | |
|-------------------------|-----|
| 1. Worship | 84% |
| 2. Peaching | 81% |
| 3. Prayer | 79% |
| 4. Evangelism | 58% |
| 5. Shepherding | 54% |
| 6. Outreach | 53% |
| 7. Growth by Conversion | 34% |
| 8. Foreign Missions | 32% |
| 9. Domestic Missions | 30% |
| 10. Stewardship | 26% |

Key Observations:

1. Worship, Preaching and Prayer are high priorities.
2. Growth by Conversion, Foreign Missions and Domestic Missions are low priorities.

Brief Analysis:

1. Pastors as a group are unable to differentiate common ministry terminology.
2. Pastors as a group operate without ministry priorities.
3. Pastors as a group struggle to give one ministry priority over another.
4. Pastors as a group resist assigning comparative value to ministries.
5. Pastors as a group value inward ministry over outward ministry.

Anonymous Comments from Participants:

1. “Thanks. Difficult to prioritize some of these issues, but great exercise.”
2. “Survey presented not hard choices but false dilemmas. And words such as ‘outreach,’ ‘evangelism,’ ‘domestic missions/foreign missions’ could be synonymous or interchangeable, with not much difference in nuance at all.”
3. “I’m afraid the prioritization section will produce misleading if not harmful results. Once again, we have lies, damn lies, and statistics to deal with. I know these are ever-popular in academia and even useful for the church, but trying to rank one of the vital areas of ministry over another will only capture a snapshot of where they rank at this moment. It could change by this afternoon, depending on the situation the Lord presents.”
4. “Priorities are a constant concern in the church. If we aren't careful, we will let circumstances dictate our priorities in the end. We will realize that we weren't very careful about how we served the Kingdom.”
5. “I don't agree with the breakdowns you have on ministry priorities or the idea of Shepherding vs. Growth by Conversion. All these are one in the spiritual work of discipleship, and ultimately God grows his church using us as he pleases.”

Relevant Quote: *This is proving to be one of the most disturbing assignments as of yet in my seminary career, because I am faced with the undeniable reality that what our church claims to be and what we really are, are two polar opposites. Our website lists our top ten ministry priorities (convenient for this assignment) and reading through the list was almost like being at a funeral. The person who is typically described at this funeral is a far cry from who he really was. **

*This statement was made via email to me by a seminary student working through a Categories/Priorities assignment very similar to the Ministry Priorities content of this survey.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: CONNECTING THE MULTIPLICATION DOTS

God is greatly concerned about quality and quantity, and at the risk of sounding circular, I will go a step further and suggest that God is concerned about the quantity of quality and He is concerned about the quality of quantity. As we noted in Chapter One, Peter exhorts, “For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 1:5-8). Through the writing of Peter, God mandates not only that we possess godly qualities, but that these qualities must increase in us. Why must this be? It must be so that we will be effective and fruitful in our knowledge of our Lord. Stetzer and Rainer lament, “Regrettably, it has become acceptable to sit in church week after week and do nothing but call yourself a follower of Christ. It is time to put this Laodicean notion to bed forever in the Western church. We must work for nothing less than the church’s mission to see people transformed to look like Christ, churches to act like the body of Christ, and communities changed to reflect the kingdom of God. The living goal of the church must be the living Christ alive in others.”¹⁰¹ This is the substance of being effective and fruitful in Christ. God demands quality that grows in quantity.

Our study throughout the New Testament makes it clear that numerical, or quantitative growth in numbers of people, is the natural state of the church. The Book of Acts is a chronological journey through the days of the early church, a journey that features growth upon growth upon growth. Some argue that the growth of the first century church was unique and was required to establish a foundational footing for the church. One has to agree that a foundational footing for the church was established, but is there any biblical support that suggests numerical growth in the church should cease? I think not. This argument, in fact, is more an alibi or excuse for a lack of numerical

productivity than it is a rationale for the cessation of numerical growth. That said, however, the numerical growth of the church must be rooted in qualitative integrity and credibility. The goal of biblical numerical growth is not the numbers themselves, but the transformation of lives impacted by the truth of the Gospel through regeneration by the Holy Spirit. Growth of any other kind is not biblical growth and lacks both integrity and credibility, but failure to grow numerically is not the biblical solution to improper numerical growth. Rather, it is an indicator of a different set of problems, often associated with the fear of change.

Van Gelder encourages, “[E]ncountering change is inherent in what it means to be human, and it is also inherent in what it means to be a Christian. The church should expect to change as it interacts with its community/environment. The church should expect to change as growth and development take place through its ministry. And the church should expect to change as the Spirit works to bring about transformed lives living out of a new nature.”¹⁰² Roxburgh and Romanuk add, “Creating a missional congregation is a stretching, confusing experience for people. They fear the transformation means losing traditions and beliefs that have sustained them all their lives. In some ways, this is the case. It is important for leaders to connect with the biblical narratives, where God draws both Israel and the church out of their established comfort zone for them to rediscover their true purpose in being people of witness and mission in the world.”¹⁰³ God demands quantity that grows in quality.

God is determined to advance His own glory through the advancement of His kingdom, and the primary means of so doing is through the growth of the invisible church, and while the invisible church is growing, there is no biblical reason whatsoever for the visible church to fail to grow. The growth of the visible church and the invisible church should go hand in hand, much as it did in the church’s movement in the first century. God has chosen to gather His eternal church family by means of establishing an eternal covenant with that family, charging them to be fruitful and multiply.

This gathering of God’s family is guaranteed by God Himself. All who are called will be brought in and none will be found missing, and numbers are important. As a final biblical reference, consider the teaching of Paul in Romans 11. He writes, “Lest you be wise in your own conceits, I want you to understand this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in” (Romans 11:25). My intention here is not to go deeply in the particular context, but to note what is being revealed in terms of numerical growth. Briefly stated, Paul is concerned that Gentile Christians might become prideful about their inclusion in the faith, which at first had seemed exclusive to the Jews. So, he counsels them that their inclusion, referred to often in Scripture as a *mystery*, was just for a season, that Israel has suffered a temporary hardening that will one day be lifted. When will that day come? That day will come when *the fullness of the Gentiles has come in*.

The key question concerns what God is saying through Paul when He speaks of *fullness*. Consider how this verse is rendered in the NIV, “I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in” (Romans 11:25 NIV). Murray comments, “The thought is, therefore, that of Gentiles entering into the kingdom of God. The perspective is that of the future, at least from the standpoint of the apostle. The only way whereby those who had already entered could be included is to suppose that the ‘fullness of the Gentiles’ means the total number of elect from among the Gentiles.”¹⁰⁴

The Greek word translated *fullness* in many English translations and translated *number* in the New International Version is the word, *πληρωμα* (pleroma). The verb form of that word is found in Revelation 6:11, *πληρωθωσιν* (plerothosin), rendered in the English Standard Version, the New International Version, and the New American Standard Version as *number*. The context concerns the souls of departed martyrs and reads, “When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. They cried out

with a loud voice, ‘O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?’ Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been” (Revelation 6:9-11). In the plan, purpose and decree of God there is a specific number of Christians who will be martyred for their faith, as there is a specific number of Gentiles who will be brought into the faith before the season of Israel’s hardening will cease. Some commentators see the use of “martyrs” here as less literal and more representative of all who will live lives of sacrifice as followers of Christ. Regardless, the specificity of the number is still in view. The role of the visible church is the gathering of God’s people from the harvest as those harvested are brought into the invisible church through conversion growth. Again, the goal is not the number but the individual, but as individuals are gathered the number grows.

A Missional Multiplication Movement

Jesus came to seek and to save the lost, ushering in the New Covenant. He is building His church through His disciples, whom He sent as the Father had sent Him. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, these disciples are taking the Gospel to the end of the earth, and when the Gospel has been proclaimed throughout the entire world the end will come. Christ has promised an abundant harvest from the nations, yielding fruit that is thirty-fold, sixty-fold and even a hundred-fold for seed that falls on good soil. The Apostle John describes that harvest as a multitude from all nations that is too numerous to count. Why are we hesitant? Why are we fearful? Why are we waiting?

Cole encourages, “[T]he potent mix necessary to release the real, spontaneous multiplication movement of God’s kingdom is found in the most obvious but least expected place of all . . . It is inside of you. It is inside of me. It has been in us all along, every one of us who follows Christ and is indwelt by His Spirit.”¹⁰⁵ The question is not, “Does our theology allow for a commitment to numerical growth?” The question is, “Do we care about lost people?” If we do, we must break out of

our churches and break into our communities with the Gospel. Stetzer and Putman offer both warning and encouragement, “Missionaries have known this for centuries. They know that they must have a profound understanding of their host culture before planting a strategy to reach the unique people group that exists in their cultural context. This is why they first study the culture to find strategies that will work among the people who live in that cultural setting. Mission history is filled with great revivals because missionaries were able to ‘break the code,’ and the church exploded in their community. The missionaries found a redemptive window through which the gospel could shine . . . Evangelism is telling people about Jesus; missions is about understanding them before we tell them.”¹⁰⁶

The Book of Life

Numerical growth by conversion is not driven by a random marketing blitz concocted to draw a crowd of people to easy-gospel, non-committal churches. Numerical growth is driven by a passion to bring in our brothers-to-be and sisters-to-be whose names were recorded in the Book of Life before the foundation of the world. Numerical growth by conversion, in the invisible church and the visible church, is biblically mandated and theologically sound and must be embraced by every individual Christian and every individual Christian church. Numerical growth by conversion is not about numbers; it is about names; many, many, many names. We must commit ourselves fully to finding who’s missing and bringing them home, into the family of God, the house of God; into the church of Jesus Christ.

Our Seeking God

In Luke 19:10, Jesus gives us His identity and His mission, “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” Our God is a seeking God, seeking the lost that they might be gathered into His eternal kingdom family. I wondered, though, what else, or whom else, is God seeking. In my own search for an answer to this question, I came upon the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well recorded in the fourth chapter of John’s Gospel. There is much to be learned from

that encounter, but I want to zero in on one thing that Jesus said to this woman. Jesus said, “But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him” (John 4:23).

Yes, God is seeking the lost, but He is also seeking true worshipers. Of course, I had been aware of Luke 19:10 and John 4:23 for years, but I had never connected these two verses in this way. It made me realize that coming to salvation was not the finish line for the lost, but that it was the starting line. The finish line is coming to be a true worshiper. Why is God seeking the lost? He is seeking the lost so that they might become true worshipers, giving glory to Him forever as members of His family. So, the goal of evangelism, the goal of numerical growth, in fact, is not simply the salvation of the lost. The ultimate goal is the development of true worshipers. The ultimate goal is the glory of God.

So, what does it mean to be a true worshiper, to worship God in spirit and truth? Volumes have been written about this matter and I will not attempt to give an exhaustive answer to the question here. Rather, consider this brief snapshot, coming to us from Romans 12:1-2. What does it mean to worship God in spirit? Romans 12:1 states, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” To worship God in spirit, then, is to live a life of godly sacrifice. What does it mean to worship God in truth? Romans 12:2 instructs, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” To worship God in truth, then, is to be transformed by the renewal of your mind. What renews the mind? The word of God is our source of renewal as we love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and mind (Matthew 22:37), and that word is truth.

The plan of God is to gather His lost sheep, His lost people, and to see them become true worshipers, living lives of godly sacrifice with biblically renewed minds. Again, numerical growth is

not about numbers, it's about names, the names of those who were among the lost but who have become true worshipers. Indeed, our God is a seeking God and He is a finding God. The lighted sign is flashing, "Vacancy, Vacancy, Vacancy." Let's put our theology of church growth into practice. By the grace of God and to the glory of God, let us find who's missing and bring them home.

END NOTES

- ¹ McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 67.
- ² Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way*, 15.
- ³ Engle, series editor, McIntosh, general editor, *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement 5 Views*, 15.
- ⁴ Keller, *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope That Matters*, 3.
- ⁵ Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 881.
- ⁶ Morris, *Luke: An Introduction and Commentary*, 321-322.
- ⁷ Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John*, 13.
- ⁸ Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation*, 59-60.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 60.
- ¹⁰ *Westminster Confession of Faith* 3.3-4
- ¹¹ Bruce, *The Gospel & Epistles of John*, 153.
- ¹² Bauckham, *Word Biblical Commentary*, Jude, 2 Peter, 188.
- ¹³ Tasker, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries – John*, 173.
- ¹⁴ Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, p. 194
- ¹⁵ *The Book of Confessions*, Part 1, 195284.
- ¹⁶ Ladd, *A Commentary of the Revelation of John*, 181.
- ¹⁷ Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries Vol. III*, 361.
- ¹⁸ Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Luke*, 582.
- ¹⁹ Longman, *Daniel*, *The NIV Application Commentary*, 284. Ferguson, *Daniel*, *The Preacher's Commentary OT Vol. 1*, 224.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 225

- ²¹ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 332.
- ²² Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 196.
- ²³ Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 315.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 321.
- ²⁵ Ladd, 57-58.
- ²⁶ Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors*, 172-173.
- ²⁷ Alcorn, *Heaven*, p. 324
- ²⁸ Ladd, 273.
- ²⁹ Grudem, 517.
- ³⁰ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 211.
- ³¹ Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament Vol. 2*, 498.
- ³² Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 12-13.
- ³³ Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries Vol. X*, 124-125.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 133.
- ³⁵ Morris, *Luke: An Introduction and Commentary*, 88.
- ³⁶ Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 388.
- ³⁷ Grudem, 543.
- ³⁸ Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Luke*, 855.
- ³⁹ Morris, *Luke: An Introduction and Commentary*, 298.
- ⁴⁰ Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Luke*, 1061.
- ⁴¹ Morris, *Luke: An Introduction and Commentary*, 373.
- ⁴² Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Luke*, 1075.

- ⁴³ Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Mark*, 689.
- ⁴⁴ France, *Matthew*, 337.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 416.
- ⁴⁶ Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistles to the Hebrews*, 229.
- ⁴⁷ Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries Vol. X*, 134.
- ⁴⁸ Keil & Delitzsch, *Commentary to the Old Testament, Vol. 8, (Book 2)*, 11.
- ⁴⁹ Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*, 70.
- ⁵⁰ Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Mark*, 159-160.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 160.
- ⁵² Kistemaker, *Acts*, 27.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, 33.
- ⁵⁴ Williams, *Acts*, 1.
- ⁵⁵ Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, 36.
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 196.
- ⁵⁷ See Acts 15 for full account. ⁵⁹ Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, 350-351
- ⁶⁰ Kistemaker, *Acts*, 657.
- ⁶¹ Williams, *Acts*, 335.
- ⁶² Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, 67.
- ⁶³ *Ibid.*, 68.
- ⁶⁴ Morris, *Luke: An Introduction and Commentary*, 125.
- ⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 125.
- ⁶⁶ Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Luke*, 284.

- ⁶⁷ Ibid., 285.
- ⁶⁸ Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 759.
- ⁶⁹ Ibid., 762.
- ⁷⁰ Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 29.
- ⁷¹ Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, 35.
- ⁷² McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 67-68.
- ⁷³ Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 87.
- ⁷⁴ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 349.
- ⁷⁵ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*, 243.
- ⁷⁶ Guinness, *Dining with the Devil*, 32.
- ⁷⁷ Ibid., 67.
- ⁷⁸ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 120.
- ⁷⁹ Pearcey, *Total Truth*, 21.
- ⁸⁰ Ibid., 21.
- ⁸¹ Ibid., 21.
- ⁸² Ibid., 17.
- ⁸³ Ibid., 361.
- ⁸⁴ McIntosh, *Biblical Church Growth*, 122-123.
- ⁸⁵ Roxburgh and Romanuk, *Missional Leadership*, xv.
- ⁸⁶ Ibid., 16-17.
- ⁸⁷ Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church*, 16.
- ⁸⁸ Mancini, *Church Unique*, 33.

- ⁸⁹ Stetzer, *Planting Missional Churches*, 25.
- ⁹⁰ Roxburgh and Boren, *Introducing the Missional Church*, 31-33.
- ⁹¹ Chester and Timmis, *Total Church*, 203.
- ⁹² Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church*, 19.
- ⁹³ Stetzer and Putman, *Breaking the Missional Code*, 20-21.
- ⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.
- ⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.
- ⁹⁶ Stetzer and Rainer, *Transformational Church*, 31.
- ⁹⁷ McNeal, *Missional Renaissance*, 67-68.
- ⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, xvi.
- ⁹⁹ Rainer and Geiger, *Simple Church*, 8.
- ¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.
- ¹⁰¹ Stetzer and Rainer, *Transformational Church*, 230.
- ¹⁰² Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church*, 155.
- ¹⁰³ Roxburgh and Romanuk, *The Missional Leader*, 181.
- ¹⁰⁴ Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 93.
- ¹⁰⁵ Cole, *Church 3.0*, 66-67.
- ¹⁰⁶ Stetzer and Putman, *Breaking the Missional Code*, 2-3.

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SCRIPTURES

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| Introduction: | Romans 1:24 |
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What's the GO CENTER all about?

The GO Center inspires hope, instills vision, informs strategy and invigorates action in pastors, leaders and congregations as they serve God by finding who's missing and bringing them home. The GO Center is a Virginia not-for-profit corporation serving cross-denominationally that trains, coaches and consults with ministry leaders in gaining, sustaining or regaining Great Commission effectiveness. Led by its Founder and Executive Director, Dr. Ken Priddy, the GO Center works throughout the U.S. and occasionally beyond through on-site and online interaction.

Inspires Hope: Statistics indicate that over 80% of American churches are in plateau or decline. The typical congregation is a shrinking, aging congregation that struggles with a lack of funding, a lack of leadership, a lack of young adults and families, and a lack of energetic, relevant programming. Many of these congregations have lost hope that revitalization is possible and are resigned to a future beyond their control. The GO Center inspires hope by presenting a future that is biblically guided by the truth that Jesus Christ Himself is building His church and that God's blessing can spark health, growth and multiplication.

Instills Vision: Congregations in plateau or decline have often lost their sense of vision and leaders wonder what God's vision might hold for them. The GO Center encourages leaders to seek a vision *of* God before seeking a vision *from* God. Rather than beginning with the question, "What is God's vision for our church," the GO Center encourages leaders to ask, "What is God's vision for Himself," and then, "How can our church serve that vision?" With this big picture firmly in place, leaders are then led to a key vision question that captures the application of God's big vision in the context of a local church. That question is, "How does God want to express Himself through our church in our community at this time?" This perspective, and the exercise of finding answers to this question, instills godly vision into church leaders of a clear direction toward a godly destination.

Informs Strategy: In the King James Version, Proverbs 29:18 reads, "without a vision, the people will perish." Here's another truth, "without a strategy, the vision will perish." Discerning and developing God's vision for a congregation is a vital and necessary investment, but words on a page do not make ministry happen. Articulating vision is an important first step but other steps must follow. The GO Center informs strategy with a process that flows from self-discovery through assessment to the practice of congregational Great Commission disciplines to forming a Vision Team that is surrounded by Prayer Teams, to nuts and bolts strategic planning through a proven strategic tool called the Great Commission Matrix that channels ministry through a congregation into the surrounding community.

Invigorates Action: With hope inspired, godly vision instilled and a Great Commission informed strategy, leaders are positioned to take action. The GO Center invigorates that action by challenging leaders and congregations to step out in faith in a proactive and timely way, and by supporting those leaders with ongoing coaching, consultation and training reinforcement. When leaders and congregations work the process, the process works!

Finding Who's Missing & Bringing Them Home: Simply stated, the mission objective of the GO Center is to equip and empower pastors, leaders and congregations in finding who's missing and bringing them home. The lost are the missing and Jesus came to seek and save the lost. As the Father has sent Him, so He is sending us. We are to go and make disciples of the lost, the missing, and the harvest is plentiful with fields ripe for harvest. We are to be His witnesses. The GO Center promotes finding the missing and bringing them home through outreach and evangelism, and, once home, they are to be disciplined in their faith en route to becoming true worshipers who worship the Father in spirit and truth. The Father is seeking such people to worship Him. Hallelujah! Amen!

Luke 19:10, John 20:19-22, Matthew 28:18-20, Matthew 9:35-38, John 4:34-38, Acts 1:8, John 4:23, Romans 12:1-2



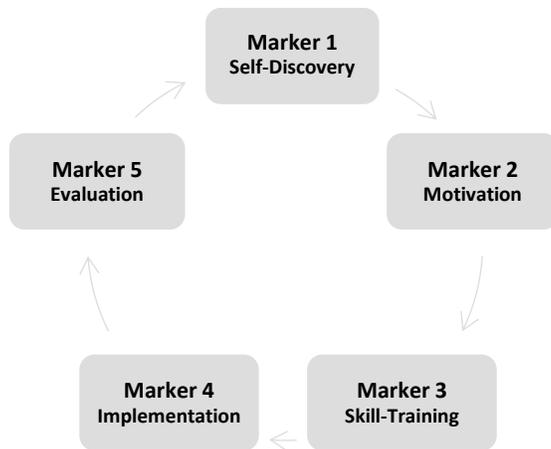
Finding Who's Missing & Bringing Them Home!
 A Ministry of Vitalization & Revitalization in the
 Greater American Evangelical Church through
 Training, Coaching, Consulting & Assessment

GO Center Objectives: Reaching the Lost and Developing the Found through 3 GO Initiatives:

- GO Initiative 1: Equipping missional pastors and missional leaders to lead missional congregations

- GO Initiative 2: Equipping Christian business owners, business executives and managers and working people to see their workplaces as mission fields, thinking and acting like workplace missionaries

- GO Initiative 3: Equipping faith-based non-profit leaders to complete their missions and expand their service capacity



**The ROADMAP
 to
 Missional Vitality**

**An
 18–24 Month Journey**

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