

YOU



WILL BE MY



WITNESSES



*Theology for God's Church
Serving in God's Mission*

BRIAN A. DEVRIES

“By arguing convincingly that ‘bearing witness’ is both the central aspect of the church’s mission and the identity of God’s people, DeVries helps correct a number of mistaken notions about mission and opens up new avenues for embracing our own calling as witnesses. This book is a tremendous resource: careful, clear, confessional, biblical, hopeful, inspiring, and practical. This will be one of the first books—if not *the* first book—on missions that I recommend to pastors, students, and church members.”

Kevin DeYoung, Senior Pastor, Christ Covenant Church, Matthews, North Carolina; Associate Professor of Systematic Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte

“In this book, Brian DeVries helps us to see that we as Christians are called to be witnesses of what we have come to know of God’s saving purpose in Christ. He shows this across the Bible and across history since the days of the apostles. I love the fact that he wrestles with how we can carry out this task in light of today’s challenges. I am grateful for this warm and informative book!”

Conrad Mbewe, Pastor, Kabwata Baptist Church, Lusaka, Zambia; Founding Chancellor, African Christian University

“Brian DeVries has put together a wonderful arching overview of God’s redemptive plan throughout history and the role of his people, through the church, in seeing his glory made known among all peoples. The quality of research, historicity, and biblical rooting make this book a must-read for serious students of missions. May its impact be felt by those in the academy but even more by those faithful Christians in the pew, who through persevering witness will see the gospel of Jesus Christ reach the ends of the earth.”

Brooks Buser, President, Radius International

“This book is itself a witness. It’s a witness to a mature understanding of a discipline refined by years and years of teaching and ministry. A rich confessional depth coupled with crystal clarity and concision will surely make *You Will Be My Witnesses* a standard missiology textbook relevant to both seminaries and local churches around the globe. Highly recommended.”

Daniel Strange, Director, Crosslands Forum, United Kingdom; Vice President, The Southgate Fellowship

"You Will Be My Witnesses should be the default introductory textbook for classes in missions, laying the theological groundwork carefully and thoroughly. But it also deserves to be read by a multitude of pastors and ordinary Christians who will be stimulated and encouraged to pray for and to participate in the task of bringing the gospel to all nations."

Iain M. Duguid, Professor of Old Testament, Westminster Theological Seminary

"You Will Be My Witnesses is an essential work for all who long to understand and effectively participate in God's mission. This book not only captures the essence of the divine mission but also translates it into practical terms, solidly grounded in Scripture. DeVries, with erudition and theological depth, guides the reader on a journey that spans from the biblical call for faithful witness to its contemporary application in the local church. This book is a valuable resource that encourages and equips the church to obey Christ's Great Commission."

Augustus Nicodemus Lopes, Pastor, Esperança Bible Presbyterian Church, Orlando, Florida; former Chancellor, Universidade Presbiteriana Mackenzie, Brazil

"For years I have been waiting for a book to recommend that helps Christians think biblically about their place in God's glorious mission today. This is it. Brian DeVries has drawn together in one accessible book an appreciation of the biblical foundations, historical development, and contemporary challenges of Christian witness. This is a book that lifts our gaze, warms our hearts, and provides practical steps that we and our churches can take to be more faithful witnesses wherever we find ourselves in God's world."

Simon Gillham, Vice Principal and Head of Department of Mission, Moore Theological College, Australia

"At its heart, this fresh reflection on witness and mission in the Scriptures, church history, and the world today is a book about the sort of piety that truly honors God. It shows how love for God and obedience to his command to bear witness to the great acts recorded in his holy word results in what DeVries rightly calls 'missional piety': a spirituality marked by passion and intentionality when it comes to sharing one's faith. All in all, an important reminder!"

Michael A. G. Haykin, Professor of Church History and Biblical Spirituality, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“We are not ‘building’ but ‘receiving’ a kingdom. Brian DeVries shows from Genesis to Revelation that God’s mission in Christ is center stage. Instead of bearing this mission on our shoulders, we get to be ambassadors of this good news! This paradigm-shifting message from a veteran in missions should be at the top of any reading list on the subject.”

Michael Horton, J. Gresham Machen Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics, Westminster Seminary California

“If you seek to respond faithfully to the redemptive work of Christ, I urge you to read this book. It will embolden you to proclaim the gospel with confidence, recognizing that without mission, there is no church; without evangelism, there is no advancement of Christ’s kingdom; and without witness, there is no growth. Brian DeVries’s work can add a relatable and impactful dimension to the recommendation for those who have missionary zeal. May the Lord’s saving grace permeate our society through our faithful witness.”

Changwon Shu, Emeritus Professor, Chongshin Theological Seminary, South Korea

“The author has provided us with a comprehensive, robust biblical theology of what it means to be Christian witnesses within the mission of God. It is a scholarly work of high caliber and should be recommended as an academic textbook, yet it is also a practical resource for all serious Christians who seek to understand their role in God’s saving plan.”

Mohan Chacko, Principal Emeritus and Professor of Theology and Mission, Presbyterian Theological Seminary, India

“Drawing from years of personal engagement in God’s universal mission and enriched by insights from church history, Brian DeVries challenges us to reexamine the local church’s role in God’s mission. With a balanced blend of biblical theology of mission, historical perspective, and practical wisdom, this book inspires us to move into a deeper, more fervent commitment to Christ’s kingdom. It is a call to rediscover the passion for missions within our church communities as we align ourselves in God’s sovereign plan for the world. This book is a must-read for anyone seeking to ignite a renewed zeal for God’s mission.”

Sherif A. Fahim, New Testament Chair, Alexandria School of Theology, Egypt; General Director, El-Soora Ministries

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Theology for God's Church

Serving in God's Mission

Brian A. DeVries

 **CROSSWAY®**

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To Lanae, a faithful witness and my best friend.

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Preface

Your Church Serving in God's Mission

HOW IS YOUR OWN LOCAL CHURCH a part of God's universal mission? Most of our churches are involved in some form of witnessing activity. Perhaps your church is faithfully sending out and supporting missionaries, either internationally or for other good causes locally. Perhaps some members of your church participate regularly in local ministries: speaking with inmates at a prison, helping the homeless at a shelter, or counseling at a crisis pregnancy center. Perhaps other activities of your church could be grouped into the larger category of outward-facing ministries: leading short-term mission trips to needy areas in your region, donating money to global relief organizations, engaging publicly with political and cultural leaders, or participating in local campus evangelism or even open-air street preaching. These all are often wonderful ways to do our part, to share our time and resources for a good cause around us and across the world.

Many of us, however, wish our churches were more faithful in Christian witness. Our church is the community of God's people in our locality with whom we gather weekly for worship. We love our church and know the community well, and so we are in a position to ask probing questions about ourselves: Are the majority of our members filled with the Spirit of mission, a holy passion for the cause of Christ and his kingdom around

the globe? Are we praying fervently for a revival of true religious affections in our community, and for the salvation of our unsaved neighbors next door? Are the majority of our fellow church members participating in at least one form of local witness? Are we living consciously as witnesses of Christ, commissioned to “make disciples” in our local region “and to the end of the earth” (Matt. 28:19; Acts 1:8)? Is our church truly zealous for God’s mission, in soul and passion, or are we only associated with several outward-facing ministry projects from time to time?

Some of us may admit that our churches are not yet where they ought to be in this area. We admit that we have been distracted by other things—good things, perhaps, but still diversions from faithful Christian witness. It is a good church, we might say, but this is not our area of strength. Or perhaps we are praying fervently that the Holy Spirit would stir up more of this zeal within our church. We desire to see the witness of Christ become the driving heart-passion of God’s people in our church community.

My Prayer and Purpose

My prayer is that this book will help you motivate your church to more faithful participation in God’s mission. In his sovereign wisdom, God has appointed his church to be his witness in the world, especially in the present age following the Spirit’s outpouring at Pentecost (Isa. 43:8–12; 44:8; Acts 1:8). The collective witness of God’s people has always been his primary human agency within the history of his mission. For this reason, we will reflect in later chapters on the empowered witness of all believers and the public witness of the communion of saints. We desire to reform our churches so that they will be more faithful witnesses of Christ. This book is designed to be a resource for Christians who are prayerfully working to stir up their church communities for increased participation in God’s mission.

Our motivation for mission, however, must be built on biblical knowledge and vision. Often the weakness of a church’s witness is due

to an incomplete understanding of God's mission and the best way to participate in it. We do not have a rich and robust biblical theology of mission. We have not reflected biblically on contemporary issues in Christian witness. We have not yet been inspired with biblical hope and passionate desire to see Christ's kingdom filling the earth as the waters cover the sea (Isa. 11:9). We are still distracted by the church's growing ministry challenges in a world that is increasingly hostile to our gospel. Like Christ's disciples experiencing the demonic storm in Matthew 8:23–27, we are distracted by the fearsome winds and waves, forgetting that the Lord of glory is with us in the boat. Christ must first refocus our vision and strengthen our faith before rebuking the circumstantial distractions.

What will motivate us to more faithfulness in Christian witness? We do not want another five-point pep talk about how to be successful witnesses. We also do not want more nebulous dreams built on ungrounded hopes. Instead, we need a biblical theology of God's mission, and especially a robust theology of Reformed experiential witness that is grounded in Trinitarian missiology. We need to see the vision of God's glorious plan that will soon be consummated.

Mission is *God's work within the world to save sinners* for the praise of his glory.¹ He planned this work from eternity, and his mission is now being accomplished in the world. God's mission of redemption started in time when he first came to the world to evangelize fallen sinners (Gen. 3:9–15). Jesus Christ, the sent one, is the center of this mission. God's mission will end when the last of God's elect have been gathered. The Holy Spirit continues this mission today by gathering God's people and empowering them to be his witnesses. God's people have always been called to serve in God's mission by bearing witness to God's Son among all nations.

1 We will further explain and expand this preliminary definition of mission in the chapters that follow. Theologians speak of God's external works of creation, providence, and redemption. In this classification, we consider God's mission as parallel with his work of redemption. As with all his works, the purpose of God's salvific mission is to the praise of his glory (Eph. 1:3–14).

Bearing witness to Christ is the work of the church in the world today. Our role, as God's people living within this un-Christian world, is to serve in evangelism, apologetics, global gospel partnerships, church planting, compassion ministries, biblical counseling, cultural engagement, gospel worship, gospel suffering, and the many other activities that faithfully bear witness to Christ. Christian witness is the activity of the church serving within God's mission. The many conflicting definitions of mission, however, require us to ground our understanding of the church's task in a biblical theology of God's overarching mission, to illustrate this definition with practical examples from church history, and to reflect theologically on practical activities of Christian witness in the contemporary world.

The goal of this book, therefore, is to precisely define *mission* and *witness* by studying the story of God's mission and the church's participation in it. My primary method is not an exegetical examination of specific biblical passages but a missiological reflection on how Scripture as a whole portrays the grand metanarrative of God's mission and guides our reflection on issues in contemporary Christian witness. We will define and shape our understanding of the church's witness from Scripture in a way that is grounded in and consistent with the bigger picture of God's sovereign plan and purpose. In this way we guard ourselves from the many extremes and deviations in the history of Christian witness. We can also evaluate and correct recent differences among evangelicals about mission, evangelism, apologetics, and related activities. With this in view, let me sketch a quick picture of where we are going together.

This book begins with an introduction that gives preliminary definitions, continues with three parts, and then ends with a conclusion that brings it all together. Part 1, the biblical story of God's mission (chaps. 1–4), concisely explains the triune God's mission, highlighting ten aspects of the church's witness as taught by the Old and New Testaments, with a specific focus on the ministries of both Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. My objective is to lay a foundation of biblical theology and identify principles for the contemporary theological reflection that follows.

Part 2, a concise history of Christian witness (chaps. 5–6), further describes the witness of the church in the world, looking at the apostolic age and mission history from God's perspective and highlighting seven major themes of faithful Christian witness throughout the past two thousand years. This section could have been much longer, but space was limited and there are many excellent historical accounts and missionary biographies available today.

Part 3, our witness in an un-Christian world (chaps. 7–10), reflects theologically on the church's contemporary witness, based on the preceding biblical theology and brief historical review. We look specifically at the church's witness in four areas: identity and calling of gospel presence, effectual and effective gospel communication, apologetic response to idolatry and opposition, and the public witness of the community of saints. The conclusion is more practical, ending with a case study of the missional hope that motivates our Reformed experiential witness.

Becoming More Faithful

There is much we can do, by God's grace, to help our own church members become more faithful in Christian witness. Throughout church history God has often used the following three activities to arouse and encourage the missional zeal of his people.

First, we can *strive together in prayer* for our churches to be filled with the Spirit of mission. As William Carey writes, we “must be men [and women] of great piety, prudence, courage, forbearance; of orthodoxy in [our] sentiments . . . and, above all, must be instant in prayer for the effusion of the Holy Spirit upon the people of [our] charge.”² Many times in the past our sovereign God has graciously answered the passionate prayers of his people for a fresh outpouring of Christ's Spirit.

2 William Carey, *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens* (Leicester, UK: Ann Ireland, 1792), 75–76. Likewise, Andrew Murray (1828–1917) states, “The man who mobilizes the Christian church to pray will make the greatest contribution to world evangelization in history.” Jason Mandryk, *Operation World*, 7th edition (Colorado Springs, CO: Biblica, 2010), 301.

Therefore we continue steadfastly in prayer for the Holy Spirit to fill our church communities afresh, so that our churches will be empowered with boldness and endurance to witness of Christ, and so that Christ's mission will advance both locally and globally (Acts 4:29–31; cf. Rom. 15:30; Col. 4:2–3; 2 Thess. 3:1–5).

Second, we can *remember together* the wonderful works of God in church history, how “the word of God” has “continued to increase” and “multiplied greatly” and prevailed “mightily” around the world (see Acts 6:7; 12:24; 19:20). We must remember these glorious deeds of the Lord; we must not hide them from our children, since forgetting will confuse our vision and kill our zeal for God's mission. The countless biographies of faithful Christian witnesses should be greatly treasured, not only to learn from their strengths and weaknesses but also because God has often used their stories to stir up missional hope and renew missional piety for contemporary Christian witness, as we will consider in the conclusion. Though usually forgotten by the world, the undying testimony of thousands of Christ's faithful witnesses continues to speak (Heb. 11:4).

Third, along with praying and remembering, we must also *carefully study together* God's word to reflect on the mission of God's people, both theologically and practically, in order to learn how our local churches should best participate in God's universal mission. The systematic study of God's people serving in God's mission is the focus of this book. My hope is that this book will help you better understand the significant role of your church within the bigger story of God's redemptive history. Thus we study all of Scripture, both Old and New Testaments, reflecting on how each part of the story relates to Christian witness and considering the many examples in Scripture of how God's people were called and commissioned to serve in his mission.

My primary audiences are faithful Christians, church members and church leaders together, who long to see their own church community more committed to the cause of Christ and his kingdom in this world.

The conclusion's closing section is especially designed for church leaders to use as a template to aid discussion within their own church communities. This book can also be used as a textbook or for supplemental reading at the many faithful Bible schools and seminaries around the world. Additionally, I hope this book will aid your personal reflection and spiritual growth, and especially I desire that this study motivates you to both fervent prayer for the success of God's mission and faithful service in your various activities of Christian witness.³ This book is especially designed for Bible study groups, with discussion questions at the end of each chapter to stimulate further reflection. It can be used as a fourteen-week study series, starting with an initial discussion and time of prayer, then reading one chapter per session, and concluding with a final review and prayerful reflection on how our churches can be intentional about growing in Christian witness.

Personally, I have taught this material many times over the past twenty years, at various levels of learning, to hundreds of Bible students in both Africa and America. During this time, my academic ministry was never divorced from ministry practice: by God's grace, I planted three churches in Pretoria, South Africa, served as leader of Mukhanyo Theological College, and participated in a number of local and global ministries. Though I do not yet fully understand the mystery of God's mission, and while I certainly do not pretend to have all the answers, I can unreservedly say that I have wrestled personally with all the content in this book. My prayer still is "to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth" of this mystery (Eph. 3:18). Along with many other faithful Christians around the world, I am trying to practice the principles of Christian witness and can, by God's grace, share from personal experience a few

3 As George Muller (1805–1898) often stated: "This is one of the great secrets in connexion with successful service for the Lord; to work as if everything depended upon our diligence, and yet not to rest in the least upon our exertions, but upon the blessing of the Lord." Mueller, *A Narrative of Some of the Lord's Dealings with George Muller; Written by Himself. Jehovah Magnified. Addresses by George Muller Complete and Unabridged*, 2 vols. (Muskegon, MI: Dust and Ashes, 2003), 2:290.

things that may be helpful to others. My desire is that you will find this format helpful as you prayerfully motivate other people to reflect biblically on God's mission and Christian witness.

I am indebted to the many students at various schools, as well as my ministry coworkers over the past three decades, who have helped me think through this material and test it in various ways. I am also indebted to colleagues who read earlier drafts of this work, including Iain M. Duguid, Simon J. Gilham, Terreth J. Klaver, Ronaldo Lidório, John W. Span, Daniel Strange, Jan H. van Doleweerd, Alistair I. Wilson, and other friends who gave valuable advice along the way. I am especially grateful for my family: my wife and co-witness, Lanae, carried a heavier load so that I could carve out time for writing in the midst of many other ministry commitments. My children also—Krista, Micah, Titus, Andrew, and Mercy—received less attention from me than desired during the past year—but now Daddy's book is finally finished. We as a family continue to pray that the Lord will use this meager contribution as he continues to bless all the families of the earth (Gen. 12:3).

Introduction

Witness within God's Mission

WHAT IS MISSION? Many Christians answer this question by turning to Jesus's familiar words in Matthew 28:19: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations . . ." Known as the Great Commission, these words are essential for understanding the mission of the church in the world. But using only the Great Commission creates an incomplete picture. There is so much more to the story of God's mission!

I often start by asking my students to make a list of Bible passages that speak about mission. These lists always include Matthew 28 and usually many other verses: Acts 1:8 (witness); 2 Timothy 4:5 (evangelism); Matthew 5:16 and 1 Peter 2:12 (gospel community); 1 Peter 3:15 and 2 Corinthians 10:5 (apologetics); or related activities like Hebrews 13:2 (hospitality). Some students add Old Testament passages, like Genesis 12:1–3, Exodus 19:5–6, and Psalm 67, or even Isaiah 45:22 and 61:1–3.

The deeper concern, however, is how these (and similar) passages fit together to form a comprehensive theology of mission. We know instinctively that faithful mission practice must be grounded in a biblically-based theology, but we often struggle to present a clear and concise—yet also comprehensive—definition of mission. My goal is to help us do just that.

We begin by sketching a preliminary definition of mission in this introduction. It will take several chapters, though, to see how mission fits within the full panorama of Scripture before we can formulate a more comprehensive definition. For now, let's look briefly at two pivotal passages: Genesis 3:1–21 and Acts 1:1–11.

God's Mission in the Garden

In Genesis 3:9, God speaks to Adam for the first time after the fall, asking: "Where are you?" God had spoken the world into existence at creation, but now he speaks within his world for the purpose of redemption. Now we see God seeking out sinners who are trying to hide from him. This divine activity in Genesis 3 is the beginning of God's mission of redemption. It is the start of the story, a glorious history of redemption that will continue until Christ concludes God's mission when he comes the second time to judge all nations.

Consider the mission activity of the Lord, the first evangelist in the fallen world. First, the Lord *comes* to his world (Gen. 3:8). God's world had been created very good, perfectly displaying his power, wisdom, goodness, and beauty. The whole creation, with Adam and Eve at the pinnacle as God's vice-regents, had unfailingly declared his glory. Adam's sin, however, brought into God's world the reign of death (Rom. 5:12). As a result, the sovereign Creator could have destroyed all nature and created something new in its place. But God acts with sovereign grace, choosing rather to redeem dying sinners from their fallen state in the now sinful world.

The Lord also *calls out* to sinners in hiding (Gen. 3:9). Before the fall, Adam and Eve had enjoyed fellowship with God as their Creator. But after their rebellion against him, they also know God as their Judge and his righteous wrath against sin (Rom. 1:18). Now Adam and Eve experienced fear, guilt, and shame for the first time. They responded in fear by running from God, hiding behind human attempts to cover their sense of guilt and shame. But God, being rich in mercy, chose to seek and to save these lost sinners (Luke 19:10; Eph. 2:4).

The Lord then *convicts* sinners by exposing their lies with probing questions (Gen. 3:9, 11, 13). God already knew where Adam was hiding and what he had done, but he asked these questions so that Adam would be convicted with a sense of his own guilt and shame. God drew Adam out of hiding, unmasking his human attempts to hide from the truth and exposing his fallen condition.

Finally, the Lord *comforts* sinners with the gospel promise. This first promise is the beginning of the story of redemption: another Adam is coming who will carry the curse of sin, crush Satan's head, and remedy the mess that the first Adam had made (Gen. 3:15; cf. 1 Cor. 15:45). The Lord himself is the first evangelist; he himself comes to this sinful world to declare the glorious gospel message of forgiveness and hope.¹

All three persons of the Trinity are at work already in Genesis 3. The Christ enters his world in his preincarnate form as the Word to evangelize sinners who are running away. The Spirit is also present, working with the Word to expose guilt and shame; he convinces Adam and Eve of sin, righteousness, and coming judgment (John 16:8). In this way, the Father begins to reveal his plan of redemption. This passage introduces mission as, first and foremost, the work of the triune God.

We will return to these themes in later chapters. For now, we may summarize several essential truths about mission already taught in Genesis 3, in the aftermath of the fall. We see *the context of mission*: God's created world, once beautiful and very good but now cursed after sin, having become a mixture of both the truth of God's revelation and the opposition of Satan's lie. We see the *objects of mission*: humans created in God's image to glorify him but now running from God's righteous judgment. We also see the *consequences of sin*: fear, guilt, and shame, which motivate man-made religions and ethical systems as attempts to hide from God's truth. We learn the *wonder of mission*: God has

1 J. H. Bavinck uses God's activity in Genesis 3 to lay the foundation for all evangelistic witness. *An Introduction to the Science of Missions*, trans. David H. Freeman (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1960), 270–72.

sovereignly chosen to save sinners who deserve eternal death. We get a glimpse into God's *comprehensive plan of mission* in the first promise of the gospel (Gen. 3:15), though the details are not yet clear. We also realize that there is more to the story than merely the redemption of elect sinners; there are also strong hints of a *coming final judgment*, when Satan will be punished and God's righteousness will be fully vindicated. With these principles in place, let's turn to another crucial passage.

Empowered to Be Witnesses

Acts 1:1–11 is the second pivotal passage for a biblical theology of mission. It comes at the conclusion of Jesus's earthly mission, forty days after his resurrection. It is also ten days before Pentecost, serving as a prelude to mission in the New Testament. Verse 8 is central in this passage and for the entire book of Acts: "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." This verse completes the "Great Commission collection" (Matt. 28:18–20; Mark 16:15–18; Luke 24:46–49; John 20:21–22). This passage gives us at least three keys to understand the witness of the church in the world.

First, Jesus's words in Acts 1:8 are rooted in the Old Testament. We do not fully understand this verse until we see it in the light of God's whole story. Many readily acknowledge the clear allusion to Psalm 2:8, the Father's promise to the anointed Son: "Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession." But there is more. With these words, Jesus quotes the prophet Isaiah to give us a much grander vision of mission than what could be had by limiting it to its New Testament context. Already in the Old Testament, the Lord described his people as his witnesses among the unbelieving nations: "'You are my witnesses,' declares the LORD, 'and I am God'" (Isa. 43:12; cf. 44:8; 49:6). They were to worship him alone and declare that he is the only true God.

We will consider the Old Testament foundations of the church's witness in chapter 1. For now, we simply note how Jesus grounds the witness of the New Testament church in the identity and role of God's Old Testament people. As in Isaiah's day, God's people today are called to be his witnesses among the nations. This has not changed. But something very significant has changed, which the disciples realized only after Pentecost.

Second, Jesus's parting words in Acts 1:8 are not news to the disciples. Surely, these words did not surprise them. Bearing witness to Christ was not a new concept for these men; Jesus had already plainly taught them about their task: "But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me. And you also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning" (John 15:26–27).

Furthermore, the followers of Christ had already practiced what they were now commanded to perform. The apostles had been chosen and sent out to proclaim the good news about the coming kingdom of God (Matt. 10:5; Mark 6:7; Luke 9:1). Seventy-two others had also been appointed and sent out to do the same (Luke 10:1).

Although the activity described in Christ's parting words was not new in essence, what followed in his instruction as he left them was very significant. Now they would be filled with his Spirit to accomplish the task for which they had been trained. Now the promise of the Father was to be poured out upon the church, as anticipated by the Old Testament prophets. Now God's people would receive much greater empowerment for this task of bearing witness, preparing them for the much greater scope of the Gentile mission.

Did they fully understand the significance of this truth? Perhaps not immediately, but within days they would experience its reality. Ten days later, they all were filled with the Spirit and empowered to testify to the saving truth of their Lord. This event in Jerusalem on Pentecost was only the beginning of the story of New Testament mission. Soon the

apostles went out, joined by an ever-increasing crowd of evangelists, to bear witness of Christ in all Judea, Samaria, North Africa, Asia Minor, and to the ends of the earth.

Third, the truth of Acts 1:1–11 is very important for the church today. In this passage, it is clear that the disciples did not yet fully understand God's larger plan. Jesus gave them final parting instructions not as an afterthought, but as central to God's mission of redemption. But they were only beginning to see the big picture of God's plan.

Our definition and practice of Christian witness today can also be limited if we fail to see the bigger picture of God's plan: his mission of redemption. It is easy to be distracted by details—even important details—while, in practice, we lose sight of what is most important. As a result, the witness of many churches becomes cluttered, if not confused or misguided. So we need to step back to see the whole scope of God's mission of redemption, and then allow Scripture to reform our understanding about our own role and responsibility in the light of it.

These two stories—narrated in Genesis 3:1–21 and Acts 1:1–11—are both pivotal parts of the one story of God's mission in the history of redemption. They help us reflect theologically on God's mission and the church's role in it. We started in the preface with a simple definition of mission as *God's work within the world to save sinners*.² But now let's build upon these insights, first by considering briefly the mission activity of the triune God and then by reflecting theologically on the place of the church within this mission.

2 This preliminary definition is merely the starting point for our study. Since this book deals with theology for God's church, we will not give attention to the divine missions that theologians have described as part of God's internal works. Likewise, we will deal only implicitly with God's external work of creation, the context of God's mission, and conclude with practical reflection on God's zeal for his own universal glory. While God's nonsaving works also declare his glory faintly (Ps. 19:1), God's salvific work of mission in Christ testifies of his glory to a much greater degree, all to the eternal praise of his glorious grace (Eph. 1:6, 12, 14). Thus our focus in this book is primarily on God's salvific mission, his external work in world history that directly concerns the redemption and witness of his people, the church. As will be described, the church is both an object of this mission and also an agent in God's mission.

The Mission of the Triune God

Each of the triune persons is at work in the history of God's mission. As we already observed from Genesis 3, the three persons of the Godhead have specific roles in the salvation of sinners. While never working inseparably, it is helpful to distinguish these three roles (fig. 1).



Figure 1. The mission of God the Father.

God the Father decreed the plan of mission before the creation of the world (Ps. 2:7–9). The Father's mission is rooted in his plan from eternity to save sinners (Eph. 1:4–6).³ He enacts his plan in the history of redemption: the Father prepares for Christ's coming in the Old

³ We will give attention to God the Father's missional purpose and plan of redemption throughout the entire book, instead of only one chapter about the mission of the Father. My primary focus in part 1 is a biblical theology of God's redemptive mission, not a systematic theology of Trinitarian missiology. The Father's eternal election, his sending of the Son and Spirit, his ultimate purpose and glory, and the eschatological perspective of his mission will be treated in many places as they relate to our study of Christian witness. The mission of God the Father cannot be adequately covered in one chapter since it is the background and purpose of the whole, a point also made by John Piper in *Let the Nations be Glad: The Supremacy of God in Missions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1993).

Testament (Gal. 3:8), sends his Son in the fullness of time to secure redemption (John 3:16), and sends his Spirit to empower his people for witness (Luke 24:48–49). This plan of mission will be fully accomplished when all God’s chosen people have been gathered, when every knee bows before Christ, when the rebellious nations are judged with equity, and when God’s creation is restored in perfect righteousness. The Father’s mission will be completed when all enemies of Christ are punished (Rev. 19:11–21), when Christ’s kingdom has fully come (1 Cor. 15:24–28), and when his glory is climactically magnified (Rom. 11:36).⁴

God the Son was sent as the great missionary-apostle (John 20:21; Heb. 3:1). He was commissioned by the Father to display God’s truthfulness in this sinful world and to confirm the Old Testament’s messianic promises (Rom. 15:8–9; cf. Isa. 42:1–9). Christ came into the world “to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10) and “to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). He also came to institute the messianic kingdom and to inaugurate the Gentile mission (Matt. 24:14; Rom. 15:9–12). Christ now reigns in heaven, gathering God’s people from all nations through the gospel witness of his people and Spirit. He will soon return to judge all people and to consummate the kingdom. Christ’s work has a unique place in God’s mission, which we will consider more fully in chapter 2.

God the Spirit was sent into the world, by the Father and the Son, to bear witness to Christ and to gather God’s chosen people from all nations. As the divine evangelist, the Spirit convicts people in the world of sin (John 16:8), he illumines sinners with gospel truth, and he regenerates those dead in trespasses and sins, granting faith (Eph. 2:3, 8–9). As the divine church planter and church revitalizer, he revives

4 Thus God’s mission of redemption takes place within the context of God’s creation, as the remedy of humanity’s fall, and with a view to God’s re-creation and glorification. “There was no ‘mission’ in the Garden of Eden and there will be no ‘mission’ in the new heavens and the new earth (though the results of ‘mission’ will be evident).” Andreas J. Köstenberger and Peter T. O’Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 251.

and edifies God's people and he educates and unites all believers (John 16:13; 1 Cor. 12:11; Eph. 4:3). As the divine apologist, he exposes Satan's lie and ensures that the gates of hell will never prevail against the church (2 Cor. 10:4). The mission of the Spirit also includes empowering us to bear witness to Christ, gifting us with spiritual abilities to make us competent gospel witnesses (2 Cor. 3:4–6), and sovereignly guiding our witness in order to accomplish God's eternal plan (Acts 16:6). In chapter 3, we will consider more fully the Spirit's mission and its implications for us.

Recently there has been a renewed focus on the work of the triune God in mission.⁵ The term *missio Dei*, Latin for “the sending of God” or “the mission of God,” has become popular in the past century for explaining mission as the work of God.⁶ The Great Commission passage in John's Gospel conveys this concept clearly: “As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you” (John 20:21).

The concept of *missio Dei*, however, is not new. It is rooted in the fourth-century teaching of Augustine of Hippo (354–430) on God's triune sending work in salvation. It was also clearly taught in the seventeenth century by Dutch theologian Gisbertus Voetius (1589–1676), who developed the first comprehensive Protestant theology of mission.⁷ For Voetius, the will of God is the primary theological foundation for mission, which includes the eternal decree to save sinners, the gospel promises of Christ's coming and the messianic kingdom of peace, and

5 This return in mission studies to a Trinitarian framework is helpful for many reasons, including defending against unbiblical principles and practices, since many recent errors come with a departure from this foundation. For example, Timothy Tennent uses this framework for his introduction to missiology, *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2010). See also Leslie Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission* (London: Edinburgh House, 1963).

6 The term was popularized in modern missiology with Georg Vicedom's *The Mission of God* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1965), following Karl Hartenstein who used this term in 1934 to distinguish God's mission activity from the role of the church.

7 Jan A. B. Jongeneel, “The Missiology of Gisbertus Voetius: The First Comprehensive Protestant Theology of Missions,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 26, no. 1 (1991): 47–49.

the specific mandate for the church's witness given after Christ's resurrection. Voetius used the term *missio Dei* to distinguish God's activity in mission from all subordinate human activity.⁸

As a popular term today, *missio Dei* is used in many divergent ways. Some define it as "everything God does in relation to the kingdom and everything the church is sent to do on earth."⁹ In this view, the church's task in the world is usually seen as collaborating with God as he establishes *shalom* and his reign over all peoples and places on earth. Others go further to define mission as a divine attribute, describing God as missional.¹⁰ Others are more restrained, using *missio Dei* to describe the hermeneutical key that unlocks the Bible's story, and seeing God's mission—and the participation of God's people in it—as a framework for the whole Bible.¹¹

Unfortunately, the diverse uses of *missio Dei* have made this term ambiguous.¹² It is important, therefore, to be precise as we define *mission* since slight ambiguity here often results in critical confusion later. In my opinion, *missio Dei* is a helpful concept when used in a limited way to distinguish God's overarching work of redemption from the church's activity. For example, missiologist J. H. Bavinck (1895–1964) continues in the tradition of Voetius by defining mission as God's work

8 Ronaldo Lidorio, *Theology, Piety, and Mission: The Influence of Gisbertus Voetius on Missiology and Church Planting* (Grand Rapids, MI: RHB, 2023), 14–15.

9 A. Scott Moreau, Gary R. Corwin, and Gary B. McGee, *Introducing World Missions* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker, 2004), 73, quoting John A. McIntosh, "Missio Dei," in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), 631–33.

10 For example, South African missiologist David Bosch explains how, in this view, "mission is not primarily an activity of the church, but an attribute of God. God is a missionary God." Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 390. Many missiologists today, both conciliar and evangelical, follow Bosch and others who take this direction. See Thomas Schirrmacher, *Missio Dei: God's Missional Nature* (Bonn, Ger.: Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft, 2017).

11 Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 17.

12 As mission historian Stephen Neill complained many years ago, "If everything is mission, then nothing is mission." Neill, *Creative Tension* (London: Edinburgh House, 1959), 81. See also Tennent, *World Missions*, 55–56.

and distinguishing this work from the church's work in mission.¹³ It is most helpful to follow Voetius by grounding the study of mission in God's will and eternal decree, and by framing all that Christians think and do in mission as only part of the mission of the triune God.

For our present study, therefore, I use the term *God's mission* simply to draw attention to the triune God's overarching work of redemption, and to distinguish between the mission activities of the triune God and of his people in both Old and New Testaments. To avoid misunderstanding, however, we must be careful to affirm the following. First, God's mission activity in the world flows out of but must be distinguished from his gracious character.¹⁴ Second, Christ our mediator has a unique and central role in the history of God's mission. Third, God's people, in both Old and New Testaments, have specific roles and responsibilities within God's mission. Fourth, to be considered in later chapters, God's church has a subordinate role within God's mission, participating in it with many activities of Christian witness. Hence we consider next the place of God's people, the church, within the different periods of God's mission.

My Church in God's Mission

Your local church has an important place in the bigger story of God's mission as part of God's plan for his church worldwide. We confess this fact as true. It is crucial, though, to define clearly how the church—and specifically, each of our local churches—fits within this bigger story.

13 Bavinck, *Introduction*, 57. Likewise, George Peters affirmed the use of the term as promoted by Vicedom but was careful to insist on a Christological mission and the distinct place of the church, while also affirming God's ultimate purpose: "The end result of such *missio Dei* is the glorification of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." Peters, *A Biblical Theology of Missions* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), 9.

14 There was a time before God's mission began in world history, and there will be a time after his mission has ended, yet God himself is eternal and unchanging. My focus in this book, however, is on God's external work in redemptive history, not on intra-Trinitarian relations (the Son eternally begotten and the Spirit eternally proceeding), the divine sendings of the Son and the Spirit (John 14:24, 26; 15:26), or God's eternal decree (Ps. 2:6–9).

Three distinctions help us better understand the place of God's church within God's mission.

First, as considered above, the church's witness must be distinguished from the mission of the triune God. The mission of the church is only part of God's bigger plan. This fact is both humbling and liberating. My local church's witness is only a small part of what God is doing in the world. We trust God to use our local churches in a way that advances his mission and brings him greater glory.

The witness of the church is also different than the mission of Christ. Our activity cannot duplicate or repeat the unique place of Jesus Christ in God's mission. Rather, our primary role is to proclaim the gospel of Christ as we bear witness to what he has done.¹⁵ Furthermore, the church's witness is guided by the sovereign mission of Christ's Spirit. Since the Holy Spirit is the primary agent of mission, the spiritual success of the church's witness is dependent upon him.

Second, the witness of God's people has progressed and expanded within the history of God's mission. The Old Testament, as the start of God's story of mission, lays the foundation for a comprehensive biblical theology of mission. It was the textbook for the apostle Paul's Gentile mission, which he quotes at crucial points to explain his mission theology and practice (Acts 13:41, 47; 28:26–28; Rom. 15:8–13).

Mission in the New Testament is a continuation of what was started in the Old Testament. Already in the Old Testament, God's people were called to be separate from the nations (Gen. 12:1) and to declare God's glory among them (Ps. 96:3). They were called to be a "light for the nations" (Isa. 49:6), though not to the same extent as we see in the New Testament after Pentecost (Acts 13:47). The witness of God's people

¹⁵ For example, there has been much discussion on the relationship of word and deed in mission. The starting point for answering these questions is located here as we distinguish Christ's unique mission from the mission of the New Testament church. How should the church follow Christ who is both our mediator in salvation as well as our leader and exemplar in mission? More attention will be given to this and related questions later.

started in the Old Testament before the flood (2 Pet. 2:5); it continued and was greatly expanded in the New Testament after Christ's coming and the Spirit's empowerment.

Yet witness in the Old Testament was not identical to witness in the New Testament. God's people in the Old Testament were not commanded by Christ to make disciples of all nations. They were not equally empowered by the Spirit of Christ for this enlarged task, though the Old Testament saints were certainly led by the Spirit of Christ to proclaim the gospel (Gal. 3:8; 1 Pet. 1:10–11) and to anticipate the enlargement of its scope (Isa. 54:2–3; Mal. 1:11). It is helpful, therefore, to compare and contrast God's mission in both Testaments, and to trace the progression of the church's witness within the bigger story of God's mission (fig. 2).

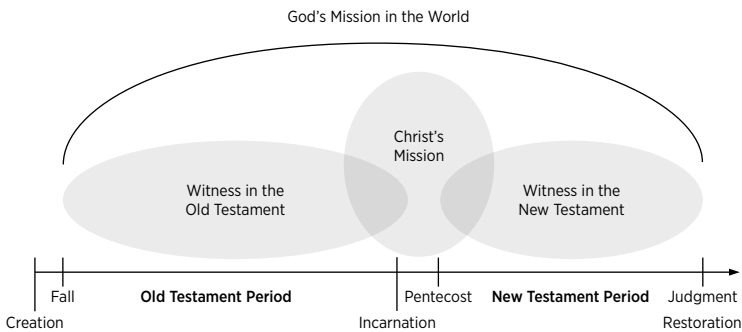


Figure 2. Witness in God's mission in world history.

Third, the church as God's people is both the object of God's mission and an agent in it. We must keep this distinction in mind, not only as we interpret the biblical story of God's mission, but also as we seek to better understand our own role and responsibilities within it. We are the objects of God's mission. God came to this world to seek and to save us, so we bear witness to what God has done for us, in us, and through us.

God has also, in his sovereign wisdom, chosen to use his people as agents to further the cause of his mission. God could have evangelized sinners without any human agency, as he did in Genesis 3. He could

have used angels as his messengers. But instead, he chose to use fallen sons and daughters of Adam to proclaim the message of Christ to lost sinners and to declare his glory among the nations. Thus, as agents of God's mission, we bear witness to Christ through our lifestyle and with our words.

These three distinctions help to define the place of our church in God's mission. We will continue to expand our understanding of God's mission in chapters 1–4 (part 1), then develop it further with examples from church history in chapters 5–6 (part 2), and finally add more detail with theological reflection on the church's witness in chapters 7–10 (part 3).

Our Witness in the World

We started our study with a simple definition of *mission*, but it should be obvious by now that this subject area has many nuances and complexities. One word alone is unable to capture the richness and intricacy of this concept. In fact, a whole cluster of words is needed, each in relation with the others, to understand the story of God's mission and our participation in it. Let's now consider several of these words to further introduce this subject.

The word *mission* is most popular today, though it has become ambiguous due to many divergent definitions and uses.¹⁶ This English word is derived in part from the Latin *mittere* and *misso*, meaning to send or sending. It corresponds with several Greek words: a noun, *apostolos*, meaning one who is sent to represent with authority, and two verbs, *pempo* and *apostello*, meaning to send a message or a person for a particular purpose. Hence the concept conveyed by the English word *mission* is associated with the activity of sending or being commissioned

¹⁶ It is telling to see that even the titles of recent books on mission contain a question about how it should be defined. For example, see J. Andrew Kirk, *What Is Mission?: Theological Explorations* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000). For a helpful discussion about the need for clarity in defining this term, see Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 15–27.

(Matt. 11:10; 28:19; John 20:21; Rom. 10:15; 1 John 4:14) and the apostolic ministry of gospel proclamation (Rom. 1:5; Eph. 4:11; Gal. 2:8; Heb. 3:1).

From this word *mission* are derived other related words: *missionary*, a person who is called and sent to serve in the ministry of mission; *missiology*, the study of the theology, history, integration, and practice of mission; *missions* (plural), the activities we do to accomplish the goal of mission;¹⁷ and *missional*, an adjective for mission that has taken on a diversity of connotations.¹⁸

In addition to its ambiguity, the word *mission* also has unhelpful baggage.¹⁹ For example, in the minds of many today, Christian mission is often linked inseparably with geographic expansion and Western colonialism.²⁰ Some who equate mission with geographic expansion even accuse the Protestant church after the European Reformation of being very slow to engage in mission since the church's witness at that time was focused locally with much less attention on distant regions.²¹ Others

17 Evangelical missiology often distinguishes mission (singular) from missions (plural). For example, Moreau makes three categories: *missio Dei* is "all that God does to build the kingdom"; mission is "what the church does for God in the world"; and missions, as a subset of mission, is "evangelism, discipleship, and church planting." Moreau, Corwin, and McGee, *Introducing World Missions*, 72–73. The same distinction can be made by defining *mission* as everything God is doing in redemption and *witness* as all the activities of the church's participation within God's mission.

18 Being *missional* often means thinking, behaving, and serving like a missionary in order to reach others with the message of the gospel. Like the term *missio Dei*, however, this word has a range of meanings, even among evangelicals, some using it simply as an adjective for mission and others arguing it is the central principle that defines the church, consequently redefining ecclesiology around their conception of what it means to be "missional." DeYoung and Gilbert characterize *missional* as "a big trunk that can smuggle a great deal of unwanted baggage," *What Is the Mission?*, 21.

19 Michael W. Stroope argues that the word *mission* should be replaced since it has become ambiguous and since it is a term derived mostly from Roman Catholic expansionist ambitions patterned in many ways after the Crusades. See his *Transcending Mission: The Eclipse of a Modern Tradition* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017).

20 Michael W. Goheen complains about this perception as he defines the subject: "Mission is considered to be a unidirectional activity that proceeds from the West to other parts of the world. . . ." Goheen, *Introducing Christian Mission Today* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 15.

21 This unfair critique has been repeatedly refuted. See Michael A. G. Haykin and C. Jeffery Robinson Sr., *To the Ends of the Earth: Calvin's Missional Vision and Legacy* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway,

unintentionally bifurcate mission and evangelism, limiting mission to ministry activity that is geographically removed from the local church.²²

Therefore, I suggest that the biblical word *witness* is a much better term to comprehensively describe the church's participation in God's mission.²³ This term is central to the book of Acts and a key concept in the entire New Testament (Acts 1:8; John 15:26–27; 16:16).²⁴ In this book, therefore, I use the term *witness* to describe all the various ways in which God's people participate in God's mission.

There are two Greek root words for witness, the noun *martus* and the verb *martureo*. These root words are used with at least four overlapping areas of meaning: the identity, character, and conduct of the church in the world (Acts 1:8; 1 Pet. 2:12); the verbal proclamation of the gospel of Christ (Acts 23:11; John 1:34; 1 John 1:2); testifying to the truth of Christ despite opposition (Acts 28:23; Rev. 11:3); and suffering persecution for the sake of Christ (Rev. 2:13; 17:6).

As a noun, *witness* (often translated as “testimony”) denotes the identity of God's people as those who bear witness to Christ. As a verb, *witness* (often translated as “testify” or “testifying”) denotes the activity of God's people as those who communicate the gospel message about Christ. This holistic concept of witness permeates two terms, used throughout this book somewhat interchangeably: *Christian witness* is

2014) and Kenneth J. Stewart, “Calvinism Is Largely Antimissionary” in *Ten Myths About Calvinism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2011), 123–50.

22 The eighteenth-century Western church usually defined mission as being sent away to distant lands in order to teach the gospel in un-Christian nations (Rom. 15:22–23) with less attention given to the local witness of the church, in part because Western society at that time was mostly populated by people with a Christian worldview. As a result, the organizational structures of many churches and denominations today still bifurcate foreign mission and local ministry.

23 The title of this book, taken from Isaiah 43:10, 44:8 and Acts 1:8, reflects my opinion that the biblical term *witness* best captures the essence of the church's participation within God's mission. Michael Green regards *witness*, along with evangelism and preaching, to be “singularly appropriate” for describing the church's mission in *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 70–76.

24 See James M. Boice, *Witness and Revelation in the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1970); and Allison A. Trites, *The New Testament Concept of Witness* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

the personal practice of all believers by which they testify to the gospel of Christ; and *the witness of the church* is the corporate testimony of God's people by means of their gospel presence, evangelistic message, apologetic response, and loving community within society.

The word *witness* is also used in Scripture to describe divine activity in the world (1 John 5:6–12). God witnesses about himself through general revelation (Ps. 19:1–6; Acts 14:17) and special revelation (Deut. 31:19, 26; cf. Isa. 44:8). Christ made an exemplary confession in his witness before Pilate (1 Tim. 6:13). The Holy Spirit bears witness to Christ, and he witnesses within our hearts (Acts 15:8; Rom. 8:16). Thus the word *witness* can be used to speak of both divine and human agency in mission.

Related terms in Scripture are also helpful. For example, the apostles were eyewitnesses of Christ, so likewise, we who have personally experienced Christ's truth and love are sent out to bear witness of him. Other related concepts include testifying (Acts 20:24), making defense (1 Pet. 3:15), living as examples (Matt. 5:14–16), and suffering for the sake of Christ (1 Pet. 4:1).

Therefore, we will structure our study of the church's witness in the world around the overlapping nuances of the word *witness*: the witness of gospel presence as the identity and calling of the church to display Christ's truth in the world (chap. 7); the witness of gospel message in the preaching, teaching, writing, and other modes of evangelistic communication (chap. 8); the witness of gospel response in the church's apologetic ministry within the context of false teachings and ideologies (chap. 9); the witness of gospel community by faithful churches within un-Christian and even hostile societies (chap. 10).

In addition to the terms *mission* and *witness*, many other biblical concepts pertain to our present study. We will unpack these in later chapters; here I only give several short definitions, for the sake of clarity, of various activities included in Christian witness.

Gospel communication is central to the witness of the church. Evangelism is sharing the gospel by public preaching or personal witness.

Preaching is the public proclamation and application of God's word. An impressive range of terms is used in Scripture to describe various communication modes: speaking, teaching, proclaiming, exhorting, reasoning, appealing, urging, convicting, testifying, and so on.

Discipleship ministries are also central to the church's witness in the world, following Christ's example and in obedience to his command (Matt. 28:20). Discipleship is the process of training believers with God's word, in Christian relationship and for ministry, so that they will grow in their spiritual walk and mature in their witness of Christ (1 Cor. 11:1). It includes theological education, an advanced form of training church leaders (Acts 18:24–28; 2 Tim. 2:2).

Apologetics and its related activities have an important role in the church's witness "to make a defense to anyone" who questions or opposes God's truth (1 Pet. 3:13–17; 2 Cor. 10:4–6). All apologetic ministries serve to promote the witness of God's church, though various ministries often specialize in specific areas to witness more effectively to targeted audiences.

Church planting and church revitalization are also important. Church planting is the activity of establishing a spiritually mature church in a new area. Church revitalization is the activity of leading an unhealthy church back toward a state of spiritual maturity. With God's blessing, these ministries of gospel witness lead to the upbuilding and multiplication of local churches.

Gospel partnerships, both local and global, often assist the church's witness (Phil. 1:5). Many other related ministries also find their origin in the witness of the New Testament church, such as hospitality (Heb. 13:1–3), the witness of good works (1 Pet. 2:12), and gospel suffering (2 Tim. 1:8). We will consider many of these ministries in later chapters.

Reformed Experiential Witness

What is your personal confession and witness? This question requires attention before we go deeper into our study of mission. It is here

that our study becomes personal, as the contemplation of God's word always should be. Witness is not simply a topic for academic study; it is a calling for every true believer. As Paul wrote to Timothy shortly before his death: "Therefore do not be ashamed of the [witness] about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God, who saved us and called us to a holy calling . . ." (2 Tim. 1:8–9). Or as a long-forgotten missionary in southern Africa wrote: "We must remember that it was not by interceding for the world in glory that Jesus saved it. He gave himself. Our prayers for the evangelization of the world are but a bitter irony so long as we only give of our superfluity, and draw back before the sacrifice of ourselves."²⁵ So we conclude this chapter with a brief review of the church's confessions and our own spirituality, both of which are undergirding themes essential for all faithful witnesses of Christ.

First, the true church since Pentecost has always confessed the importance of gospel witness. We will review some of this rich history in part 2. For now, consider briefly how the historic confessional statements promote the church's witness.²⁶ For example, mission is implicitly described as Christ gathering his church "out of the entire human race" by means of his word and Spirit.²⁷ The Canons of Dort, which some have unfairly said is opposed to mission, makes a very strong statement

25 Written by François Coillard who served as a missionary in southern Africa under the Paris Evangelical Mission for almost fifty years. Quoted by Amy Carmichael, *Things as They Are* (London: Morgan and Scott, 1903), 41.

26 See Samuel H. Larsen, "Global Kingdom Vision and the Westminster Confession of Faith" in *The Hope Fulfilled: Essays in Honor of O. Palmer Robertson* (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 317–24; and Wes Bredenhof, *To Win Our Neighbors for Christ: The Missiology of the Three Forms of Unity* (Grand Rapids, MI: RHB, 2015).

27 Heidelberg Catechism, q. 54. See also the Westminster Confession of Faith, 25.3, and the Belgic Confession of Faith, art. 27: "And so this holy church is not confined, bound, or limited to a certain place or to certain persons. But it is spread and dispersed throughout the entire world, though still joined and united in heart and will, in one and the same Spirit, by the power of faith," in *Creeds, Confessions, and Catechisms: A Reader's Edition*, ed. Chad Van Dixhoorn (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 101 (hereafter cited as CCC).

for gospel proclamation to all nations without reserve.²⁸ Several confessions also link mission to the second petition of the Lord's Prayer.²⁹

More recently, the doctrine of Christian witness has been given more explicit attention in the official statements of various groups. For example, many modern confessions echo similar biblical truths.³⁰ Other related statements include the Lausanne Covenant and the Southgate Fellowship.³¹ Further reflection on and affirmation of the church's public witness is still needed, especially due to the rapidly shifting ideologies at present in the postmodern world.

Second, bearing witness to Christ in the world is very personal for every true believer. If God has mercifully chosen us, if Christ has graciously atoned for our sins, if the Holy Spirit now graces us and empowers us to be witnesses in our world, then how can we not be passionate about this task? So let me conclude this introduction by briefly noting the importance for witness of missionary doxology and biography, and by leaving you with a few personal questions for reflection.

Christian witness is not simply a doctrinal theme in our church's confession, expressed either implicitly or explicitly. Witness is a central part of our personal confession, our personal doxology (Pss. 67:3; 107:2). The

28 Canons of Dort, head 2, art. 5: "The promise of the gospel . . . together with the command to repent and believe, ought to be announced and declared without differentiation or discrimination to all nations and people, to whom God in his good pleasure sends the gospel" (CCC 150).

29 See the Heidelberg Catechism, q. 123, and the Westminster Larger Catechism, q. 53 and 191.

30 The Baptist Faith and Message (2000), art. 11, states, "It is the duty and privilege of every follower of Christ and of every church of the Lord Jesus Christ to endeavor to make disciples of all nations. The new birth of man's spirit by God's Holy Spirit means the birth of love for others. Missionary effort on the part of all rests thus upon a spiritual necessity of the regenerate life, and is expressly and repeatedly commanded in the teachings of Christ. The Lord Jesus Christ has commanded the preaching of the gospel to all nations. It is the duty of every child of God to seek constantly to win the lost to Christ by verbal witness undergirded by a Christian lifestyle, and by other methods in harmony with the gospel of Christ." "The Baptist Faith and Message 2000," <https://bfm.sbc.net/bfm2000/>. Accessed January 8, 2024.

31 The Lausanne Covenant (1974) and the subsequent Manila Manifesto (1989) give considerable attention to Christian witness, though with a more inclusive theological scope; see <https://lausanne.org/content/covenant/lausanne-covenant>. The Southgate Fellowship is much more precise and intentionally grounded in Reformed theology; see "Affirmations and Denials Concerning World Mission," *Themelios* 45, no.1 (2020): 108–35.

Psalms celebrate God's mission and anticipate what God will do on earth for the glory of his name. Many Christian hymns do the same, rejoicing in the triumph of the gospel of Christ among the nations. Indeed, these praise songs often become the songs of our own soul as we learn to think God's thoughts after him and to boast of his gracious deeds in all the earth (Jer. 9:23–24; 2 Cor. 10:13–18). Missionary doxology has always had an important place in the spiritual life of God's people.

Witness is also a central part of our corporate confession, the church's public worship. Worship is both the ultimate goal of God's mission and a vital activity of the church's witness to accomplish this glorious end. In fact, as we will consider in chapters 7 and 10, the church's presence in society—particularly evidenced in its public display of faithful worship and good works—is itself the most powerful witness to Christ. The church's doxological witness in biblical worship continues to serve a vital role in the history of God's mission.

Furthermore, we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses (Heb. 12:1), not only in Scripture but also in the centuries since Pentecost. These witnesses must not be ignored. Indeed, reading missionary biographies is an excellent way to stir up within us a biblical passion and zeal for Christian witness. This book, however, is not a missionary biography or doxology; it is a systematic summary of the theology of witness. Yet while we stay focused on this task, the experiential dimension of this study must not be minimized or excluded from our applications in each chapter.

We will return to this theme of Reformed experiential witness in the conclusion. For now, we conclude this introduction with a series of personal reflections to highlight the experiential element of our study. I leave you with these questions for your prayerful contemplation:

- Have you experienced the saving truth and power of Jesus Christ yourself? If you don't know Jesus yourself, how can you tell other people about him?

- What is the purpose of learning about Christian witness if you do not want to do it? If you are not following Christ now, why should other people listen to your words?
- Have there been times in your life when the Holy Spirit has stirred up your heart with conviction to witness of Christ in your family or to declare God's glory among the nations?
- Do you weep with Christ as you experience the stubborn unbelief of dying sinners? Is your heart troubled like Paul's when you see your city that is full of idolatry?
- Do you cry out, with the voice of true wisdom, to the masses of humanity who are living in reckless pursuit of vanity while they blindly follow false teachers into eternal hell?
- Do you long to see Christ's will done in all the earth, to see Christ's kingdom come among all nations, and to see Christ's name glorified by the peoples in every land?
- Have you, with Isaiah, seen a vision of God's glory, and is his Spirit stirring up within you a passionate hope to see his glory fill the earth as the waters cover the sea (Isa. 6:8; 11:9)?

Discussion Questions

1. Read again Genesis 3:1–21 and Acts 1:1–11. Make a list of five essential truths about God's mission and Christian witness from these two passages.
2. What has the triune God already done to restore fellowship between himself and sinners? What is God still doing in the world today to restore this fellowship?
3. Compare and contrast God's mission and the witness of the church.
4. Make a list of all the ways in which your church bears witness to Christ in the world. Are any of these endeavors apparently fruitless? Could

your efforts be better focused into some other activity? Could you, in the light of biblical prudence and your limited time and resources, be doing more?

5. Why do you personally feel the desire to learn more about Christian witness? Why is it important for all church leaders to understand the biblical theology of God's mission?

PART 1

THE BIBLICAL STORY
OF GOD'S MISSION

Mission in the Old Testament

THE OLD TESTAMENT is usually not studied as a textbook for Christian witness. We read accounts of the destruction of Canaanite culture and harsh judgments carried out upon the nations surrounding Israel. These topics can be shocking, especially in contemporary culture, and they may seem to stand in opposition to the Great Commission in the New Testament. We also learn about the failure of God's covenant people, who chose the worship of false gods instead of declaring God's glory among the nations, and whose disobedience ended in devastation and dispersion among the nations. Additionally, divergent theories about the Old Testament Scriptures and its relation to the New Testament have limited the attention given by Bible scholars to the foundational themes of Old Testament mission.

But digging deeper, past the many divergent theories and what appears to be a harsh crusty surface, we gain a respectful appreciation for the importance of Old Testament themes in a biblical theology of mission.¹ More recently, a number of Bible scholars have helped us

¹ J. H. Bavinck writes, "Yet, if we investigate the Old Testament more thoroughly, it becomes clear that the future of the nations is a point of the greatest concern. . . . from the first page to the last the Bible has the whole world in view. . . ." Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1960), 11; cf. 11–24. Richard R. DeRidder states,

discover the rich concepts lying just below the Old Testament's surface.² In fact, further Old Testament study is yielding beautiful truths and foundational themes for a comprehensive biblical theology of God's mission and the witness of God's people within it.

We must not overlook the value of the Old Testament for Christian witness today. The Old Testament was the textbook for Paul's mission theology (Rom. 15:8–12). It was also prominent in Jesus's instructions about mission (Luke 24:27, 44–49).³ Mission themes in the Old Testament were significant for James (Acts 15:16–18, quoting Amos 9:11–12 and Isa. 45:21) and Peter (1 Pet. 1:10–12; 2:9–12). Furthermore, Luke's second book draws clear parallels between Old Testament themes of witness and New Testament witness in practice.⁴ We should, therefore, carefully study the Old Testament to uncover its themes of mission and witness, and with the New Testament leaders we must ensure that our theology of Christian witness is firmly grounded upon these foundational truths.

Before we begin our study, however, consider this overarching distinction: the biblical theology of mission in the Old Testament is best understood in view of two interrelated motifs. First, the Old Testament is an introduction to the universal story of God's mission. It announces God's purpose for all nations and reveals how God was preparing for the coming of his Son to fulfill Old Testament promises and to inaugurate a mission to all nations. Second, the Old Testament is also an account of the witness of God's people in the world. It is a colorful history of

"No student of missions can long escape the necessity of examining the Old Testament antecedents to the Christian mission." DeRidder, *Discipling the Nations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1975), 2.

2 For example, Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Mission in the Old Testament: Israel as a Light to the Nations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000); and Christopher J. H. Wright, "Old Testament Theology of Mission," in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), 706–9.

3 Wright notes Jesus's dual Christological (Luke 24:27) and missiological (24:44ff) readings of the Old Testament. See Christopher J. H. Wright, "Old Testament Perspectives on Mission," in *Dictionary of Mission Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007), 269–73.

4 Compare Acts 2:17–21 with Joel 2:28–32; Acts 3:25 with Genesis 12:3; Acts 4:24–31 with Psalm 2; Acts 13:34 with Isaiah 55:3–5; Acts 13:47 with Isaiah 49:6; and so on.

the successes and failures of witness in the generations before Christ. So with this dual focus on the distinct motifs of God's mission and the church's witness, let's study the Old Testament to discover its many interrelated themes.

The Gospel Preached in Advance

The opening passage for Old Testament mission is God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:2-3: "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. . . . and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." As we considered in the introduction, mission had already started in Genesis 3 when God himself came to evangelize the first sinners. But Genesis 12 is the start for a theology of mission; here God begins to reveal his gospel plan for all nations.

Much has been said about this passage in relation to mission. We limit ourselves here to four aspects: God's action, God's world, God's purpose, and God's commentary.

God's action in this passage is his gracious selection of a particular people.⁵ He began to reveal his plan for mission by calling Abraham out from the idolatrous nations and establishing with him a special covenant relationship.⁶ We will give further attention to this special relationship in the next section. For now, we note that the opening action of God's mission is particular and focused narrowly on Abraham and

5 I have intentionally used the word *selection* here instead of the word *election* in order to avoid confusing God's selection of Israel as a particular covenant people with the doctrine of God's election and predestination (Eph. 1:4; Rom. 8:28-30, 9:6ff). While closely related, the selection of a corporate community for a privileged responsibility and the election of individual sinners unto salvation in Christ are different biblical truths. With this distinction in view, there are a number of helpful discussions about Israel's selection for mission; for example, see Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 67-77; and Christopher Wright, *The Mission of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 191-221.

6 The Old Testament often draws attention to the separateness and uniqueness of this special relationship, also making clear that this privileged place was a gracious calling and not due to any merit or superiority (Deut. 7:6-8; Amos 3:2).

his descendants, the people of Israel. God choose one particular family, blessing them in special ways as the possessors of his covenant promises, even while preparing, through them, to bless all families of the earth.

The context of this passage introduces the tale of two globalisms in *God's world*. The first globalism is humanity's ambitious plan at Babel to be mighty and make a name for themselves (Gen. 11:4; cf. 10:8–10). These sinful ambitions are described as defiance against God's repeated command to fill the earth (Gen. 1:28; 8:17; 9:1). This humanistic globalism is still alive and well in the world today, often promoting unity in rebellion against God's truth (Ps. 2:2; Acts 4:27).

It is important to see how God's action in Genesis 12 is intentionally revealed against the background of the Table of Nations (Gen. 10) and the Tower of Babel account (Gen. 11:1–9). Humanistic globalism is the background context for the unfolding story of God's bigger and better plan for all families of the earth. The story of the second globalism—God's overarching universal plan of redemption—is the history of how God makes a name for himself by forming one nation in order to bless all nations (2 Sam. 7:23); it is a story that will culminate in the global dominance of his Son (Phil. 2:9–11) and a perfected, multiethnic community of worship (Rev. 7:9–10).

God's purpose in Genesis 12:1–3 is universal in scope. The covenant promise was not only for the blessing of a particular people but also and especially for the blessing of all nations. God's blessing of Abraham had a much wider focus: in this way, he was preparing to bless all families of the earth. Though God did promise to graciously bless Abraham individually, the grander promise in this passage is not for Abraham only, but also for everyone “who shares the faith of Abraham” (Rom. 4:16).

God's commentary about this passage has already helped us understand his opening act of Old Testament mission: God himself was preaching the gospel in advance (Gal. 3:8), not only to Abraham but especially to all the spiritual children of Abraham who would by faith become keepers of this precious gospel promise. In this way, God makes a name

for himself by selecting a particular nation, through whom he prepared to bless all nations.

Thus the basic contour of God's mission is clearly evident in Genesis 12. God himself takes action in the opening story of his bigger plan. In fact, two complementary truths are revealed in this passage: God's purpose and God's means.⁷ God's universal purpose is his global plan for the redemption of sinners from all nations. God's particular means is his particular selection of the Old Testament church—the graciously selected covenant family—as his instrument through whom and by which he will bless all peoples.

These complementary truths are interrelated throughout the entire Old Testament narrative. We usually see God's particular people on the foreground: the storyline of Abraham's ethnic descendants and the sociopolitical nation of Israel. Yet, often in the background, we see glimpses of God's grander purpose. For example, when Israel's repeated sins in the wilderness have again brought God's judgment upon them, God, as it were, opens the curtains briefly to show a glimpse of what is happening backstage: "But truly, as I live, and as all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the LORD, none of the men who have seen my glory . . . and yet have put me to the test these ten times . . . shall see the land that I swore to give to their fathers" (Num. 14:21–23; cf. Hab. 2:14; Isa. 56:7; Mal. 1:11).

In addition to the motif of God's mission, the witness of God's people is also clearly evident in Genesis 12. From the opening story, God's plan to display his grace and glory before all nations is achieved,

7 It is important to see these truths as complementary aspects of God's mission rather than as competing aspects in the Old Testament Scriptures. We give considerable attention in this study to the universal aspect of God's purpose and the continuity of God's church across all of redemptive history in order to draw applications for Christian witness from God's people in the Old Testament. Yet we must not overlook God's particular means in each stage of redemptive history and the progressive development of the people of God concept in Scripture. See Johannes Blauw, *The Missionary Nature of the Church* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1962), 24; Kaiser, *Mission in the Old Testament*, 28; and David Filbeck, *Yes, God of the Gentiles, Too: The Missionary Message of the Old Testament* (Wheaton, IL: Billy Graham Center, 1994).

in part, by means of the public witness of his covenant people. Though not to the same extent as in the New Testament, God's Old Testament people were selected to participate in his mission as his witnesses in at least three ways: as a showcase community, by loving confrontation, and in expectant worship.

Witness as Showcase Community

God's Old Testament people participated in God's mission by living among the nations as a showcase community. They were called to be a living, public display of God's grace and glory among the nations. God introduced this special calling at Mount Sinai when he constituted the nation: "You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore . . . you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:4–6).

As God's covenant people, they were set apart from the nations as his treasured possession, his trophy of grace (1 Pet. 2:9; cf. Eph. 1:14; Titus 2:14). God had redeemed them from slavery, displaying his power over the gods of Egypt. At Mount Sinai, he consecrated them as a priestly kingdom and holy nation. They were called to live in this special relationship, holy and separate from the nations as God's redeemed people.⁸

Their covenant relationship, however, did not contradict their calling to participate as witnesses in God's mission. On the contrary, their witness to the nations depended on and was reinforced by their covenant separateness from the nations.⁹ This holy nation was set apart as

8 The showcase community concept is parallel to the concept of church as God's temple; see G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 402.

9 J. H. Bavinck writes, "The work of missions is possible only within the concept a covenant." Bavinck, *Introduction*, 14. Regarding the importance of the covenant for mission, see also D. T. Niles, *Upon the Earth: The Mission of God and the Missionary Enterprise of the Churches* (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 1962), 250; and Paul Wells, Peter A. Lillback, and Henk Stoker, *A Covenantal Vision for Global Mission* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2020).

God's "treasured possession" to give evidence "among all peoples" of his special grace (Ex. 19:5; cf. Deut. 26:18–19).

God intentionally put his trophy of grace on display in the sight of all nations. The Old Testament church was a special showcase community, an assembly called out of the world and into covenant fellowship with God in order to proclaim his praise globally (Deut. 4:5–8; cf. 1 Pet. 2:9–12). He set them apart as an international exhibition of his power over all so-called gods and as a public demonstration of his redeeming grace. Furthermore, as a continuation of his covenant promises to Abraham, God selected and consecrated this kingdom of priests to be the particular means by which he would make known his plans for the salvation of all nations.

God's showcase community was called to live as a light among the nations. Their witness, however, was not predominantly about them going out to the nations. It is true that God's Old Testament people functioned as witnesses to prove that he is the only true God (Isa. 43:8–12), as we will consider in the next section. It is also true that Isaiah anticipated the mission of the Lord's Servant (Isa. 42:6; 49:6; Luke 2:32) and the Gentile mission in the New Testament (Acts 13:47), as we will study in later chapters. But the witness of God's Old Testament people was predominantly as a living display of God's grace and the ethical implications of keeping God's covenant. Their very existence was a witness to the surrounding nations of God's mighty power and great goodness (Deut. 3:24; 2 Sam. 7:22–23). Their faithful worship included the declaration of God's glory among the nations (Ps. 96:3).

As God's showcase community, God's Old Testament people were called to participate in God's mission by living according to his law in the sight of the nations. Their holiness was of utmost importance: God commanded them to "obey [his] voice and keep [his] covenant" as a holy nation which was consecrated for priestly service (Ex. 19:4–6). The apostle Peter, quoting these words, draws the same conclusion for the New Testament church: God's people have an ethical responsibility

in the world to abstain from sin and to keep their conduct honorable among the nations (1 Pet. 2:9–12).

When God's people worshiped him only, living according to his law and remaining separate from idolatry, they were strong witnesses of God's promise and grace. But their witness was hindered—even inverted—when they failed to keep God's covenant and worshiped gods of the surrounding nations. God's name was profaned by his people's unfaithful witness (Ezek. 20), so that God had to act in order to vindicate his own name (Isa. 48:9–11; Ezek. 36:22–24). Thus we need to distinguish between God's intentions for his showcase community and the actual practice of Old Testament witness.

God's Old Testament people often failed to live holy lives among the nations. We must not overlook the high points that reveal Israel's awareness of and faithfulness in their witness among the nations. For example, read Solomon's temple dedication prayer (1 Kings 8:41–43) or recall the Israelite slave girl who witnessed about the powerful God in Israel (2 Kings 5). But most of the Old Testament narrative is about Israel's repeated apostasy from God's law, accommodation of sinful cultures, and spiritual adultery with other gods. Israel's unfaithfulness and disobedience brought God's just judgments upon his own people (Ezek. 5:5–8; Amos 3:2). Many of the later prophets lamented how Israel had become an object of international derision and that God's judgment would soon lead to dispersion among the nations. Indeed, Old Testament history is largely an account of the Old Testament church's failure to participate faithfully in God's mission (Acts 7:1–53).

We must not judge God's Old Testament people by New Testament obligations. They were not guilty of disobeying the Great Commission, because Christ's mission was not yet fulfilled and the Gentile mission had not yet been inaugurated. Yet God's Old Testament people often failed to live as a holy showcase community. The sad commentary of 2 Kings 17:7–23 proves this point implicitly. Here Israel's failures are outlined succinctly at the fall of Samaria when the ten tribes were

scattered in exile. Instead of being a showcase community, they feared other gods and followed the customs of the rebellious nations. God's prophets needed to confront his own people for their stubborn refusal to live according to his teaching that kept them from being a light to the nations. Instead of declaring God's glory among the nations, the people provoked God to jealousy by selling themselves to do evil. Thus Israel failed to live as God's faithful witnesses among the nations.

Yet God's mission was not derailed by the failure of God's Old Testament people. God's grander plan cannot be thwarted by his people's unbelief (Rom. 9:6; cf. Heb. 3–4). Though many died in unbelief, God continued to preserve a faithful Old Testament remnant (Mal. 3:17). Despite his people's weakness and failure, God still used their witness, and he was glorified in the process. Many of the prophets called the people back to covenant faithfulness and encouraged them with promises of the better day that was coming when the good news would be fully revealed to all nations.

Witness as Loving Confrontation

What do the Old Testament prophets teach about God's mission and Christian witness? At first, we may be tempted to page quickly through the Prophetic Literature, assuming its message for mission is very limited. Should we copy Elijah's methods on Mount Carmel when he killed the 450 false prophets in one day? Or are the Minor Prophets' harsh pronouncements against ancient nations an example for Christian witness today?

Many studies have looked to Jonah for principles of mission.¹⁰ Certainly this book does teach about God's gracious forbearing mercy and his desire to bless all nations. But the prophet Jonah is not a role model for missionaries! On the contrary, he is a better example of what

¹⁰ See Johannes Verkuyl, *Contemporary Missiology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), 96–100; and Daniel C. Timmer, *A Gracious and Compassionate God: Mission, Salvation and Spirituality in the Book of Jonah* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016).

a missionary must not be since his heart was filled with ethnic superiority, selfish nationalism, and anger against God for being too gracious.

Yet while Jonah the person failed, the book of Jonah gives us a hint about the role of prophets and their message for mission.¹¹ It presents a lesson of God's mercy toward all nations despite the myopic selfishness of his disobedient prophet, the one who was called to be the official voice of God's showcase community. From the Prophets we learn another Old Testament method for Christian witness: in addition to living as God's showcase community, God's people also participated in God's mission as his advocates and witnesses within his international courtroom. Reflecting on the Prophets' role in God's mission gives us foundational insights for the church's witness among the nations today.

First, as already considered, God's plan from the beginning *included all the nations*. It is no surprise, therefore, that the Prophetic Literature consists of many oracles for the nations or that Jeremiah was called to be a "prophet to the nations" (Jer. 1:5).¹²

Second, the prophets speak into the *global scene of international rebellion* against God. The nations are raging against God; they refuse to recognize his sovereign authority (Ps. 2:1–3). These nations, enslaved by their own idolatries, must be rebuked by the prophets for their false beliefs and unethical practices. God's moral order still stands despite the fact it has been rejected internationally and replaced with many deviant religions and syncretistic traditions.

The prophets often speak into this scene of opposition, presenting it in starkly contrasting terms: the rebellious nations versus God's redeemed people, those deceived by Satan's lie versus those keeping God's covenant, and the gods of the nations versus the incomparability of the

11 See Kaiser, *Mission in the Old Testament*, 69–71; and Andreas J. Köstenberger and Peter T. O'Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 44–45.

12 We must keep in mind, however, that God's people were the primary audience of the oracles since the Gentile mission had not yet been inaugurated. The nations are not judged for general sin but specifically for their attacks on God's people (Ezek. 28:24–26). In this way, God also affirms the other part of the Abrahamic blessing: "Him who dishonors you I will curse" (Gen. 12:3).

Lord. The prophets announce God's impending judgment upon the sinful nations (Isa. 13–23) and also a coming salvation from judgment offered to all nations (Isa. 45:22–23).

Third, we see occasional glimpses in the Old Testament of the *cosmic contest between God and the so-called gods* (Job 1:6; Ps. 82; Zech. 3:1).¹³ The rebellious nations worship their own gods in place of the only true God. In reality, these gods are not real deities; they are only projections of human idolatries that have been deified by sinners in their devious religiosity and rebellion against God (2 Kings 19:22; Isa. 37:19; 41:21–24, 29). These idols are empty and useless, leading only to confusion and shame (Isa. 44:6–20; Jer. 10:2–11; cf. Ps. 115:4–8). But these metaphysical realities must be confronted, since the devil stands behind them to give them a life of their own (Deut. 32:16–17; Ps. 106:37; Isa. 26:14; cf. 1 Cor. 10:20; Rev. 13:2).¹⁴

The prophets proclaim the exclusive truth of God's incomparability over against the so-called gods of the surrounding nations.¹⁵ There is only one God, the sovereign Creator and Judge of the nations (Isa. 40:18–26). God has undisputed authority to summon the surrounding nations to his courtroom for a public trial (Isa. 41:21; Jer. 25:31). He will pronounce judgment upon them, regardless of whether or not these sinful nations heed his solemn warnings (Isa. 43:8–12; Joel 3:2;

¹³ See Richard R. DeRidder, "God and the Gods: Reviewing the Biblical Roots," *Missiology* 6 (1978): 11–28.

¹⁴ For example, the history of 2 Kings 17–19 highlights Hezekiah's exclusive trust in the Lord, the one true God (2 Kings 19:15–19), in contrast to the religious pluralism and syncretism of the surrounding nations. In response to Hezekiah's prayer, God reveals his supreme power over the gods of the other nations, including powerful Assyria that had overpowered all other nations (2 Kings 18:33–35). This story is not only about Hezekiah's faith when confronted by the boasts of a powerful foreign messenger. More importantly, the bigger story is about God's supreme power as proclaimed by his faithful messenger, the prophet Isaiah, and believed by his humble servant, King Hezekiah. Isaiah's message to Hezekiah about the demise of the Assyrian king (2 Kings 19:21–28)—and most of Isaiah's prophecy—must be understood within this context of international rebellion and a cosmic power encounter between God and the so-called gods.

¹⁵ See Casper J. Labuschagne, *The Incomparability of Yahweh in the Old Testament* (Leiden, NL: Brill, 1966).

cf. Ps. 2:4–6). God is making a name for himself: what God has already done over the gods of Egypt is a harbinger of his future total triumph (Ex. 9:16; 15:11; Num. 33:4; Zeph. 2:11).

Fourth, the task of the prophets included loving confrontation: *exposing and rebuking sin*. The prophets spoke on God's behalf in his international courtroom. They were not speaking on Israel's behalf against her enemies, as if the sovereign Lord were like one of the many gods who fought on behalf of the nation that worshiped them. Rather, the Lord's prophets exposed the sin of both Israel and the nations since both had disregarded his holy character of righteousness, justice, and compassion.

The prophets rebuked God's people for their covenant unfaithfulness. When God's people failed to live as a holy witness, God sent his prophets to expose their sin and call them back to true worship. The prophets especially confronted the immorality and injustice of the leaders. Through the prophets, God also pronounced judgment on his own people for their covenant unfaithfulness despite his gracious deliverance and forbearance.

God's prophets also implicitly rebuked the international community with various oracles against the nations (Isa. 17:13; 34:1–2, 8; 66:15–16). As God's advocates, they spoke on God's behalf, publicly declaring God's controversy with the nations and summoning the nations to stand trial in order to prove his preeminence. Through the prophets, God announced impending judgment upon all rebellious nations, especially for their opposition against his people and plan.

Fifth, God's Old Testament people are *his witnesses within this international scene*. The prophet Isaiah describes their place in God's international courtroom:

Bring out the people who are blind, yet have eyes,
 who are deaf, yet have ears!
 All the nations gather together,
 and the peoples assemble.

Who among them can declare this,
 and show us the former things?
 Let them bring their witnesses to prove them right,
 and let them hear and say, It is true. . . .
 “I, I am the LORD,
 and besides me there is no savior.
 I declared and saved and proclaimed,
 when there was no strange god among you;
 and you are my witnesses,” declares the LORD, “and I am God.”
 (Isa. 43:8–12)

The supreme God has summoned all nations to his courtroom. In response to their idolatrous deception and global rebellion, he challenges them to dispute the fact that he is the exclusive and incomparable God. He then presents his own people as his witnesses who declare this truth. Though often blinded by unbelief, God’s redeemed people still function as his witnesses within the context of the nations. They give evidence to the fact that he is the only God and Savior (Isa. 44:6–9; 45:20–23).

We know that God’s people in the Old Testament often failed to live as faithful witnesses to this truth. But this is not the end of the story. Isaiah and the other Old Testament prophets announced the coming of the Messiah, God’s chosen servant (Isa. 43:10). The Messiah would succeed where God’s people had failed; he is the faithful witness (Isa. 55:4; Rev. 1:5) and he is the triumphant victor in the cosmic contest (Col. 2:15; Eph. 4:8; Heb. 2:14), as we will consider in the next chapter.

The Old Testament prophets, therefore, have an important place in a biblical theology of mission. They are God’s spokesmen, teaching his people by repeating the history of God’s deliverances, discipling them in the way of wisdom, and calling them back to true worship. They are God’s advocates on the international scene, vindicating God’s truth and righteousness, similar to the Holy Spirit’s work of rebuking sin

(John 16:8) and New Testament witness as gospel defense. They also proclaim a message of judgment and mercy, sin and salvation: all people—including God's own people—will soon be punished, but mercy will be shown to all who repent and trust in God alone (Isa. 45:20–23).

Witness as Expectant Worship

In addition to their witness as a showcase community and by loving confrontation, God's Old Testament people also participated in his mission through the witness of their expectant worship. The Old Testament writings, especially the book of Psalms, give us important lessons for Christian witness.¹⁶

The Psalter has always been central in the praise of God's people, throughout all ages and across all lands. As inspired liturgy for God's people to use in worship, the Psalms are poetic expressions of Scripture's foundational themes. It is no surprise, therefore, that the themes of God's mission and our participation in it reverberate throughout the entire collection.

The Psalms proclaim *God's supreme being*. Monotheism is never questioned; it is always assumed and celebrated publicly. There is no contest between our God and other so-called gods: the Lord is incomparable, unsurpassed, and matchless (Pss. 89:7; 95:3; 135:5; 145:3). For example, Psalm 96 invites all "families of the peoples" to worship the Lord alone:

Declare his glory among the nations,
his marvelous works among all the peoples!
For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised;
he is to be feared above all gods.

¹⁶ George W. Peters writes, "The Psalter is one of the greatest missionary books in the world." Peters, *A Biblical Theology of Missions* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), 116. John Piper has wonderfully expressed the same truth in *Let the Nations be Glad: The Supremacy of God in Missions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1993). See also Geerhardus Vos, "The Eschatology of the Psalter," *Princeton Theological Review* 18/1 (January 1920): 1–43.

For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols,
 but the LORD made the heavens. (Ps. 96:3–5; cf. 1 Chron.
 16:24–26; Isa. 66:19)

The Psalms celebrate *God's global purpose*. More than any other Old Testament book, the Psalms proclaim God's universal plan for all nations. Likewise, the apostle Paul turns to the Psalter to celebrate the global scope of the gospel as the outcome of Christ's mission (Rom. 15:9–11).

All the ends of the earth shall remember
 and turn to the LORD,
 and all the families of the nations
 shall worship before you. (Ps. 22:27)

Let the peoples praise you, O God;
 let all the peoples praise you! (Ps. 67:3)

All the nations you have made shall come
 and worship before you, O Lord,
 and shall glorify your name. (Ps. 86:9)

The LORD has made known his salvation;
 he has revealed his righteousness in the sight of the nations.
 (Ps. 98:2)

Praise the LORD, all nations!
 Extol him, all peoples! (Ps. 117:1)

The Psalms recount *God's gracious dealings* with his particular people. They explain how God's people enjoy a privileged place among all the families of the earth (Pss. 33:12; 105:6; 106:5; 135:4; 144:15). For example, Psalm 105 narrates God's special blessings and wondrous works for his

covenant people, while Psalm 106 recounts God's repeated deliverance despite his people's repeated disobedience, ending with a prayer that God will again show mercy to gather his dispersed people from among the nations.

The scope of worship in the Psalms is both exclusive and inclusive. God's Old Testament people were instructed by their liturgy to worship the only true God exclusively and to ascribe to him absolute allegiance. They were also trained by their liturgy to reject tendencies of myopic pride often caused by a misapplication of covenantal privileges. Thus their focus was continually redirected in worship to see God's global plan that intentionally included all nations, not merely their own tribe or people: "May God be gracious to us and bless us . . . that your way may be known on earth, your saving power among all nations" (Ps. 67:1–2; cf. 22:27–28; 47:9; 98:3; 105:1).

The religious pluralism within the sociocultural context of the surrounding nations, therefore, is countered by a refreshing balance in the Psalms that is both an exclusive confession of God's supremacy and also an inclusive message of hope for the nations. This balance is reaffirmed in the New Testament (Rom. 10:9–13; 1 Tim. 2:1–8; Titus 2:11).

Furthermore, the Psalms declare *God's international power* as the sovereign Judge. Psalm 2 introduces this theme, which is common throughout the Old Testament and also foundational for New Testament mission and eschatology (Acts 1:8; 4:24–26; 13:32–33; Heb. 1:5; Rev. 2:27; 12:5; 19:15). Despite international opposition, God holds unshakable global authority, and he will soon come to judge all nations (Pss. 9:8; 59:5, 8; 98:9; cf. Acts 17:31).

God has taken his place in the divine council;
 in the midst of the gods he holds judgment:
 "How long will you judge unjustly
 and show partiality to the wicked?" . . .
 Arise, O God, judge the earth;
 for you shall inherit all the nations! (Ps. 82:1–2, 8)

Say among the nations, "The LORD reigns!
 Yes, the world is established; it shall never be moved;
 he will judge the peoples with equity." . . .
 Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy
 before the LORD, for he comes,
 for he comes to judge the earth.
 He will judge the world in righteousness,
 and the peoples in his faithfulness. (Ps. 96:10–13)

Like the apostle Paul, many of the psalms are not ashamed of the righteousness of God that is revealed through his just judgments upon the wicked (Pss. 11:4–7; 58:1–11; 110:5–6; cf. Rom. 1:16–17).

Finally, the Psalms anticipate *God's future kingdom*. Many of these inspired songs are glimpses of a glorious time when God's mission will advance and be fully accomplished (Pss. 68:18; 85:9–13; 145:10–13). Psalm 72 is the classic expression of this anticipation:

Give the king your justice, O God,
 and your righteousness to the royal son! . . .
 May he have dominion from sea to sea,
 and from the River to the ends of the earth!
 May desert tribes bow down before him,
 and his enemies lick the dust!
 May the kings of Tarshish and of the coastlands
 render him tribute;
 may the kings of Sheba and Seba
 bring gifts!
 May all kings fall down before him,
 all nations serve him! . . .
 May his name endure forever,
 his fame continue as long as the sun!

May people be blessed in him,
 all nations call him blessed!
 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! (Ps. 72:1, 8–11,
 17–19)

The Psalter contains many similar celebrations of the royal Son's future kingdom (Pss. 2:8; 22:27–31; 47:1–9; 110:1–3). This future kingdom is also anticipated by the Old Testament prophets: for example, Isaiah and Micah describe visions of a centripetal ingathering of the nations that would take place in the latter days (Isa. 2:2–5; 24:14–16; 60:3–7; Mic. 4:1–5).¹⁷ God's Old Testament people learned by faith to sing with expectation of what God would soon accomplish.

The book of Psalms, therefore, records these significant themes related to God's mission. It also teaches us how God's Old Testament people participated in his mission by means of their expectant worship. By faith, they publicly confessed their devotion to this one true God within the international context of religious pluralism. They celebrated the mighty acts of God and his wonderful deeds in the world, and at times declared the good news of God's global purpose for all nations. Even in exile, God's people witnessed to the world

17 Some have described mission in the Old Testament as a centripetal *coming in* force while mission in the New Testament was a centrifugal *going out* force. This distinction is an unhelpful bifurcation because it describes the Old Testament period by what the Old Testament itself says will characterize the New Testament period. That is, the Old Testament visions of centripetal ingathering (Ps. 72; Isa. 2:2–4) do not describe the occasional historical inclusion of foreigners in the covenant community; rather they describe future times of revival among the nations that will occur in the latter days of the New Testament. The centripetal/centrifugal bifurcation should be replaced with an understanding of God's unfolding vision for mission, still incomplete in the Old Testament that anticipates its fulfillment through Christ and the Gentile mission he inaugurates (Acts 3:25–26; Rom. 15:8–12; Gal. 3:8; 1 Pet. 1:10–12). The centripetal/centrifugal distinction comes from Bengt Sundkler, *The World of Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965).

with a confession of faith and hope while singing the Lord's song in a foreign land (Ps. 137:4) In hope, God's church in the Old Testament anticipated the coming of the Messiah's future kingdom and the time when God would judge all nations with righteousness and rule a restored creation in equity.

Mission and Witness Before Christ

A short study can never capture all the interwoven themes and inter-related concepts of God's word. This chapter has highlighted the main themes of God's mission while also describing three central methods of witness in the Old Testament.

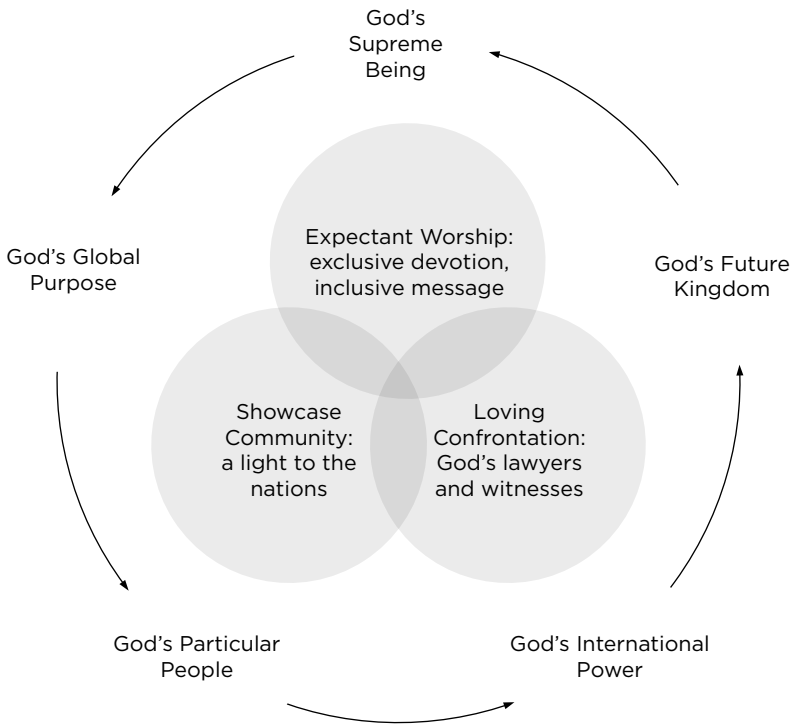


Figure 3. Mission and witness in the Old Testament.

We started this chapter with a dual focus on God's mission and the church's witness. We considered three methods by which God's people were his witnesses in the world, and we reflected on five themes that are central to the Old Testament metanarrative of God's mission (fig. 3). The Old Testament church's witness is, as it were, braided together within the bigger background reality of God the Father's plan for all nations.

The story of Old Testament mission must be told with these themes and methods in view. In conclusion, let's briefly note the seven major movements of God's mission in the Old Testament.

1. God begins his global mission, after the fall in Genesis 3, by coming to his world to evangelize the first sinners with the first message of hope.
2. God selects one family and nation, redeeming them and establishing them among the nations as his showcase community that was called to display his grace and glory.
3. God makes a name for himself among the gods of the nations by triumphing over the Pharaoh of Egypt and all metaphysical forces of evil, thus preparing to bless all nations.
4. God preaches the gospel to his special covenant people, progressively revealing through their history his plan of redemption for all nations (Gal. 3:8, 14; Eph. 3:3–11).
5. God pronounces judgments on the rebellious nations, calling all peoples to repentance, while proclaiming by his prophets a message of mercy in view of impending judgment.
6. God judges his own unfaithful people for their failure to remain holy and separate from the nations by dispersing them when disobedient and restoring them again after exile.
7. God foretells the mission of his servant, the Messiah, who would fulfill God's promises and perfectly perform what God's Old Testament people had failed to be.

The Old Testament is a textbook for mission. Yet it does not give us a full theology of mission or a comprehensive set of biblical methods for Christian witness. Rather, it carefully lays the foundation for what follows. It tells the story of what God the Father was already doing in preparation for the mission work that would soon be accomplished by Christ, and for the mission work that would then be inaugurated by Christ and empowered by his Spirit. The Old Testament also teaches us, with living examples, several essential principles for Christian witness that remain foundational today.

Discussion Questions

1. The Hebrew Bible can be divided into three sections: the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings (including the Psalms and other Wisdom Literature). What do we learn about Christian witness from each of these sections of the Old Testament?
2. How did our Sovereign God providentially use the weaknesses and failures of his people's witness in the Old Testament to advance the cause of his mission during this period and to prepare for what was coming in the New Testament?
3. Discuss how three different church leaders in the New Testament each applied lessons from the Old Testament for Christian witness.
4. Reflect on Hezekiah's prayer in 2 Kings 19:15–19 in the context of 2 Kings 17:6–19:37 and Isaiah's prophecy. How did God's faithful people in Hezekiah's day try to obey the three central themes of Christian witness outlined in this chapter: showcase community, loving confrontation, and expectant worship? Where does this same historical narrative also clearly highlight the five themes of God's mission?

