

PLANTING,
WATERING,
GROWING

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Planting Confessionally Reformed
Churches in the 21st Century

edited by Daniel R. Hyde
and Shane Lems



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Planting, Watering, Growing

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To the councils of the

**Escondido United Reformed Church
and Grace United Reformed Church,**

who heard the Lord's call to
plant the churches we now serve.

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Abbreviations

BC Belgic Confession

Calvin, *Institutes*—John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, The Library of Christian Classics, vol. 20 (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960).

CD Canons of Dort

HC Heidelberg Catechism

POPC *Planting an Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (Willow Grove, Pa.: The Committee on Home Missions and Church Extension of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2002).

WCF Westminster Confession of Faith

WLC Westminster Larger Catechism

WSC Westminster Shorter Catechism

Foreword: Was the Reformation Missions-Minded?

Michael S. Horton

“Martin Luther was so certain of the imminent return of Christ that he overlooked the necessity of foreign missions.... Calvinists generally used the same line of reasoning, adding the doctrine of election that made missions appear extraneous if God had already chosen those he would save.” So writes Dr. Ruth Tucker, professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and author of *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya: A Biographical History of Christian Missions*.¹

Well-meaning but ill-informed accounts such as these have been repeated so frequently that they have become clichés in discussions of missions. Tucker repeats the caricature: the Reformers were not terribly interested in evangelism and missions; it was the Anabaptists and Pietists who gave birth to the modern missionary movement.² While I am not a missiologist, I do have an interest in this subject, and if the Reformation had negative effects on the advance of the Great Commission, we ought to be the first to point it out. The facts, however, point in quite a different direction.

First is the nature of the Reformation itself. Throughout the late Middle Ages, there was something of a lull in Roman Catholic missions. That is not to say that they did not exist, but it was nothing like the evangelization of the Roman Empire or of the pagan European tribes that preceded it or like the missions of the Jesuits and other Counter-Reformation groups that followed it. It was, in fact, the Reformation itself, combined with other factors (such as exploration and the rise of colonialism), that

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1. Ruth Tucker, *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya: A Biographical History of Christian Missions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 67.

2. *Ibid.*, 24.

not only gave birth to Protestant missions but revitalized Roman Catholic missions by reaction.

But what was the Reformation? One's answer to this question will determine one's appraisal of its missiological significance. If the Reformation was simply a period of internecine squabbling that interrupted the more important activity of the church, then it was indeed an appalling distraction. But if it was the greatest recovery of the biblical faith since the first century, the Reformation constitutes the most remarkable missionary movement in post-apostolic church history. If we agree with the Reformers that the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone because of Christ alone is "the article by which the church stands or falls" and that the gospel is "the power of God unto salvation," we can interpret the Reformation as the re-evangelization of Europe. Is this not the point of the Great Commission? The Jews to whom the gospel first came were certainly aware of the prophecies concerning the Messiah, but they did not properly understand them as referring to Christ. The Reformers believed that those who confused the law and the gospel, merit and grace, judgment and justification, were in precisely the same category as the unconverted, even if they were part of Christendom.

This is why, as we read Luther, Calvin, and the other Reformers, we cannot help but come away with a deep sense of admiration for the pastoral, missionary, and evangelistic heart of this movement. Designating themselves the "evangelicals" because they were recovering the gospel (evangel), these Protestants so indefatigably preached the gospel through print, pulpit, and in everyday conversations that the good news spread quickly throughout the Holy Roman Empire. Had the same movement occurred on another continent with the same extensive effects, the Reformation would be considered the most significant missionary enterprise since the apostles. Therefore, the starting point is essential. Those who cannot see the Reformation as anything more than an in-house dispute over less than ultimate issues will not regard this as the re-evangelization of Christendom.

Second, there is the matter of categorization. For instance, in Ruth Tucker's volume, such distinguished Calvinistic missionaries as John Eliot, David Brainerd, Eleazar Wheelock, Isaac McCoy, William Carey, the Judsons and Boardmans, David Livingstone, and many others are treated as products of pietism, when these men and women had their roots in the Reformation-Puritan tradition. In fact, the most prominent

names of the modern missionary movement were Calvinists! So much for Tucker's caricature that the "doctrine of election...made missions appear extraneous if God had already chosen those he would save." This is merely an inference of Tucker rather than an effect of this doctrine on the minds and hearts of those great missionary heroes who embraced it. They saw their theology as the engine behind their efforts, not as an embarrassing obstacle.

Besides Carey, Eliot, Brainerd, and Livingstone, there were evangelists such as Whitefield, Edwards, the Tennents, Spurgeon—and on we could go. All of these disciples of the Great Commission credited their theological convictions with their energy and motivation, knowing that it was God alone who saves sinners whenever and wherever He will. While we carry the good news to the poor, only God can grant repentance and faith, and this relieved missionaries and evangelists of either despair on the one hand or proud triumphalism on the other.

At last, however, we return to the Reformers themselves. While their followers may have been great evangelists and missionaries, were men such as Luther, Calvin, Bucer, Knox, and Melancthon interested in such things?

Interestingly, Tucker makes an observation in the same paragraph as her previously cited remark that appears to be contradictory: "Calvin himself, however, was at least outwardly the most missionary-minded of all the Reformers. He not only sent dozens of evangelists back into his homeland of France, but also commissioned four missionaries, along with a number of French Huguenots, to establish a colony and evangelize the Indians of Brazil."³

These missionaries were killed by Jesuits, but another group was sent from Geneva. Not only were the New England Puritans busy building Harvard; they were simultaneously evangelizing the Native Americans (the first Bible published in the New World was in Algonquin by John Eliot in 1663). In fact, the Reformed missionary enterprise was integrating the proclamation of the gospel with the interests of justice and cultural betterment long before it became popular. One thinks of David Livingstone (1813–1873), the Scottish missionary who was also an explorer and, in the words of one historian, "exercised a greater influence on the history of central Africa than any other person, Christian or non-Christian, in the nineteenth century."⁴

3. *Ibid.*, 67.

4. *Great Leaders of the Christian Church*, ed. John D. Woodbridge (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988), 329

But history records Livingstone as more than a missionary and explorer; he was an indefatigable opponent of the slave trade. Livingstone knew that the same God who cared for the salvation of the lost also abhorred the bondage of injustice, and sin had not only personal but institutional aspects. He sought to interrupt the slave trade by building East African commercial trade, and he pursued some extraordinarily brilliant ideas, but the British government ended his expedition in 1863. And yet, Brian Stanley concludes, "The Protestant churches of sub-Saharan Africa, many of them born in the aftermath of Livingstone's explorations, are today among the strongest in the world."⁵

American Presbyterian missionary and educator Samuel M. Zwemer (1867–1952) is another example of this integration of preaching grace and doing justice. As a missionary in the Middle East, he earned the title "Apostle to Islam," and he opened up doors to missions throughout the region, especially by building hospitals and schools—a traditional approach to pre-evangelism taken by Reformed and Lutheran missionaries alike. Because these institutions are still among the most important to the locals, these missionaries and their spiritual descendents are among the only trusted Westerners. Zwemer argued that Calvinism could conquer the Muslim world because it was a system, and the Muslims thought very systematically; they would not be won by mere pietistic sentimentality. Various cultural institutions bear his name in Cairo and in other cities in the Middle East.

Far East missions were also led by Reformed Christians. The Scot Robert Morrison, who was the first Protestant missionary to go to China, comes to mind. Confident in God's sovereignty, he prayed for God to place him in a part of the world "where the difficulties are the greatest, and to all human appearance the most insurmountable."⁶ Like Zwemer, who saw only a few converts in the entire tenure of his missionary enterprise, Morrison saw fewer than a dozen converts, and, as Tucker informs us, "At the time of his death there were only three known native Christians in the entire Chinese empire."⁷ Nevertheless, both missionaries translated the Scriptures for the first time into the native languages and left these few converts to plant the seeds that would eventually produce a harvest of new believers. They did not despair, in spite of few "results,"

5. *Ibid.*, 333.

6. As quoted in Tucker, *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya*, 167.

7. *Ibid.*

because all results are God's results, and He will see to the success of His own mission. The story of Korean missions is full of amazing twists and turns, and figuring prominently throughout it all is the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC). By American standards a small but faithful church, the OPC had an inordinately large hand in the evangelization of the region before and after the division of North and South.

The greatest tragedy in modern missions, from this writer's point of view at least, is the sad reality that although Reformation Christians launched modern missions, the "pentecostalization" of the missionary movement has devastated almost overnight the regions where missionaries labored carefully for decades. Huge crusades with spectacular sideshows have replaced the careful exposition of Scripture in large parts of the world. The Two-Thirds World, where the earliest missions produced deep conversions and strong churches, is now dominated by successive waves of Pentecostal phenomena. The results are evident everywhere on the mission field (even more so than in America): hysteria and numerical growth, leading almost as quickly to despair and disillusionment, until the cycle repeats itself.

Just as British missions reflected worldwide missionary activity in the nineteenth century, American leadership in the twenty-first is obvious. "Evangelicalism" around the world is equivalent to American evangelicalism, and with the influence of such institutions as the Fuller School of World Missions, along with the leading trends evident in *Christianity Today*, leading evangelical seminaries and popular movements rather quickly overpower indigenous distinctives, many of the latter derived from the period of earlier missionary activity. Like so many other trap-pings of American popular commercial culture, when something gets started on the American evangelical scene, it eventually makes its way into the remotest regions.

Speaking for my own tradition, while many Reformed Christians are interested in restoring a sense of vocation and calling, including the vision of transforming culture as salt and light, there does not seem to be a parallel interest in spreading the gospel, either in terms of local evangelism or missions. This is not to say that Reformed churches, whether local or at the denominational level, are not interested in missions: many of them have proportionately large mission budgets. But it is to say that at least this writer is unaware of much thoughtful discussion of what a second Reformation might look like in, for example, Thailand or Tanzania. If we

truly believe that many of the crowds turning out for a healing crusade in Uganda or Tulsa are filled with people who have an erroneous understanding of the gospel, we are in precisely the same position as the first Reformers, where “missions” and “evangelism” mean first recovering the biblical gospel. It is not enough for Reformed and Lutheran evangelicals to work side by side with mainstream evangelicals and attempt to influence them. The evangelicals are not simply “off a little” on this or that emphasis; there is quite often these days a fundamentally different message, leading to methods and a general agenda that is at cross-purposes with biblical, historic Christianity. There must be a distinctive Reformational agenda—one that neither attempts to recreate a sixteenth-century European movement in Bombay, nor one that capitulates to American evangelical tendencies on the other.

May God set our hearts and minds to this urgent task, and then may He prepare our feet to bring good news to the captives, whether down the street or around the world.

—Michael S. Horton

Introduction

Daniel R. Hyde and Shane Lems

Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one? I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase.

—1 Corinthians 3:5–7

Church planting is a hot topic on the American religious landscape. With the mainline denominations in decline, with the fundamentalist sense that America is losing its Christian heritage, and with the constant feeling that our nation is becoming increasingly secular under the influence of “postmodernism,” the necessity for church planting is greater than ever. Yet many remedies for this diagnosis fall short. There are websites on which you can get church-plant training in three days or a church-planting degree in six months; you can even find websites where you can choose a place where you want to plant a church and go from there. A person can plant an emergent/emerging church, a cowboy church, a biker church, a typical seeker-sensitive church—and the list goes on. As with much of American Christianity, often church planting is all about the consumer: your way, right away—or your money back.

The experience of the authors of this book will testify, though, that many people are burned out by the church’s adaptation of pop culture with bar stools instead of pews, Bluetooth-style microphones that look hip, and “latte-and-a-band” styles of worship. There are many people in America who live in a city in which they cannot find a church that does what the apostle Paul describes in the passage above: plant, water, grow through the “outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicates to his church the benefits of his mediation...especially the Word, sacraments, and prayer” (WLC, Q&A 154).

Therein lies the true remedy for church planting in our time. Churches are needed that simply spread the seed of the Word through preaching, seek to water those seeds by means of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, and humbly pray for the Lord to grant growth. If this is your desire as a Christian, as a potential church planter, or as a congregation, there is some good news for you: Reformed and Presbyterian churches are being planted across the United States that adhere to the "old paths" of the Word of God (Jer. 6:16). Within these churches and denominations there has been some good discussion over the years concerning faithful church planting. The contributors to this book believe the time is ripe for a book that deals exclusively with the many facets of planting Reformed churches that uphold the Word of God and confess the ancient creeds and confessions of the church.

In this book, we have compiled essays on Reformed church planting. We begin with the biblical foundations for church planting and evangelism. Since we recognize the limitations of one book and realize that many other excellent books have been written, we refer you to other books for more details in this area.¹ We have also included a few chapters discussing the theological and Reformational foundation for planting churches. In a word, the great sixteenth- and seventeenth-century documents—the Westminster Standards (Westminster Confession of Faith, Larger Catechism, and Shorter Catechism) and the Three Forms of Unity (Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, and Canons of Dort)—are "pro-church-planting" confessions.

We also cover the methods for planting churches. The chapters in this section include topics such as methodological examples from the book of Acts, planning a church plant, oversight of church planting, and many others. The final section is a bit more detailed. Here, the authors cover such topics as the church planter, the church plant's core group, the cultural context of planting churches, and preaching in a church plant, among other topics. In summary, the three sections go from biblical/theological foundations, to the outworking of methodology (ways to plant churches), ending with specific application and details of planting churches. All of the chapters must be read in light of the first: church

1. E.g., Roger Greenway, *Go and Make Disciples* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 1999); Roger Greenway and Timothy Monsma, *Cities: Missions' New Frontier* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000); J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2009); Will Metzger, *Tell the Truth* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2002); John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003).

planting is the fruit of the preaching of the gospel of God's free and amazing grace.

We would also like to affirm at the outset of this book that we greatly appreciate the Orthodox Presbyterian Church's (OPC) manual for church planting entitled *Planting an Orthodox Presbyterian Church*.² We have cross-referenced many chapters of our book to this OPC manual for ease of comparison and study.

We do not suggest that this book will be *the* definitive church-plant guide. We simply could not turn over every church-plant stone out there. However, it is our hope that the readers would use this information as a general guide to help turn over other stones. By giving many general principles as well as specific applications, we hope that other areas we have not covered will be more approachable.

We also highly recommend that the reader, whether a church planter or a church-planting core group member, consult other traditions when undertaking the great task of planting a church. For example, a church plant among the churches in which we minister, the United Reformed Churches in North America (URCNA), can learn much from the OPC and Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) forms of government and methods of church planting. The same can be said of all faithful Reformed and Presbyterian churches with the North America Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC). Since many of these materials are accessible online, it would be foolish to neglect the wisdom in all of these sources.³

In the end, our prayerful goal is that this book might itself be a seed that motivates and assists confessionally Reformed seminary students, ministers, consistories/sessions, seminaries, and churches to continue to plant solid churches in North America and beyond. We pray that as we seek to plant and labor to water these confessionally Reformed churches in the twenty-first century, our Lord Himself, the great Lord of the harvest, will bring tremendous growth, "exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think" (Eph. 3:20).

2. This volume can be accessed free of charge on www.opc.org, and is well worth studying. The OPC *Book of Church Order*, which includes the Form of Government, can also be found online.

3. OPC: www.opc.org; PCA: www.pcanet.org; and URCNA: www.urchna.org

PART ONE



The Foundations of Planting Churches

CHAPTER ONE



The Fruitful Grain of Wheat

Brian Vos

*Pity the nations, O our God,
Constrain the earth to come;
Send Thy victorious Word abroad,
And bring the strangers home.*

—Isaac Watts, “How Sweet and
Awesome Is the Place”

As servants of the Lord Jesus Christ living on this side of the cross, we labor with joy in the dawn of the new creation—praying for God’s mercy upon the nations, that He would constrain the earth to come, and that He would send forth His Word and bring the strangers home. We pray these things with confidence and boldness, based on the finished work of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, for it is His finished work that compels us to plant churches. Many themes, texts, and teachings of Scripture, of which the reader is quite likely aware, demonstrate the need for church planting. For our purposes, however, we will consider this theme in John’s gospel, specifically in 12:20–26, where we see the biblical foundation for church planting in Jesus, the fruitful grain of wheat, who died in order to produce much fruit—the salvation of men and women from every nation, tribe, people, and tongue.

When Jesus began His earthly ministry, John the Baptist proclaimed Him as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). Following Jesus’ meeting with the woman at the well, the Samaritans confessed, “This is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world” (John 4:42). After Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, Caiaphas, the high priest, prophesied that Jesus would die not only for the Jewish nation, “but also that He would gather together in one the children of God who were scattered abroad” (John 11:51–52). After Jesus’ triumphal entry, the Pharisees—His mortal enemies—were compelled to say, “The world has

gone after Him!" (John 12:19). Jesus' ministry and work are for people of all nations, tribes, and tongues. John the Baptist proclaimed it. The Samaritans recognized it. Caiaphas prophesied of it. Even the Pharisees confessed it. Jesus did not make all of these statements, however; others did. It is not until John 12:20–26 that Jesus Himself declares such things. In this pivotal passage, Jesus connects the work He is about to accomplish on the cross with the gathering in of the nations, describing Himself as the fruitful grain of wheat.

The Time of Harvest Has Come

John begins this text in a most arresting fashion, fixing our eyes on the Gentiles: "Now there were certain Greeks among those who came up to worship at the feast" (12:20). The Jews had once complained among themselves: "Does He intend to go to the Dispersion among the Greeks and teach the Greeks?" (John 7:35). Their complaint reveals their blindness, for even now Jesus is beginning to draw all peoples to Himself. The Greeks come to Jesus.

John does not want us to miss the irony here. These "certain Greeks" were "among those who came up to worship at the feast" (12:20). The feast to which John is referring is the great feast of the Jews, the Passover, which celebrated the deliverance of the infant Jewish nation from the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage. Not only did this feast look back on the great redemptive act of the Old Testament, but it also looked forward in hope to the nation's future redemption.¹ It was a thoroughly nationalistic feast that commemorated God's separation of the Jews not only from the Egyptians but also from all the other peoples of the earth. The means by which God separated the Jews from all others was the blood of the lamb. Meredith Kline writes:

The picture in Exodus 12 is...one of God's...coming to them and abiding with them through the dark night of judgment on Egypt. Like a hovering bird spreading its protective wings over its young, the Lord covered the Israelite houses, keeping watch over them. He was their gatekeeper, their guardian against the entrance of the angel of death.... The Lord shielded his people from his own wrath by himself intercepting the death angel's thrust as he stood guard at the door of their dwellings.... The lamb's blood on these sanctuary

1. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Passover."

tombs presaged their becoming empty tombs in the morning. Their blood-covered doors would be opened and their redeemed occupants would emerge as the children of the resurrection day.²

The annual celebration of the Passover should have reminded the Jews of their unique status as those who lived in the freedom of a new day.

Though we do not know what these Greeks were doing at this Jewish feast, we do know they wanted to see Jesus and perhaps begin to enjoy the freedom of a new day themselves: "Then they came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida of Galilee, and asked him, saying, 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus'" (12:21). The Greeks came to Philip, most likely because Philip was one of only two disciples with a Greek name.³ The point, however, is not that they came to Philip. The point is their request: "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." The implication is that these Greeks were not satisfied with the Jewish feast. The Jewish feast left them empty, unfulfilled, and in the shadows. These Greeks were hungry and longed to be filled; they sought the Light of the World. They wanted to see Jesus.

Here, John gives us a hint of the history of redemption as he takes us from the Old Testament shadows of a Jewish feast to the New Testament reality of Jesus. John is signaling to us that in Jesus the dawn of the new age has arrived—an age in which men and women of every nation, tribe, tongue, and people will be counted among the children of the resurrection day. Though the new age is already intruding in history here in John 12, it has not fully arrived. Notice that the Greeks do not yet come to Jesus; they come to Philip. Nevertheless, they do come to *see* Jesus.⁴ Remarkably, the Greeks understand, though only in part, that this Jewish feast is but a shadow. Jesus is the reality. Thus, the Greeks understand—and appear ready to accept—what the Jews do not: Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.

Philip receives the request of the Greeks, proceeds to tell Andrew, and in turn Andrew and Philip tell Jesus (12:22). Thus, John does something remarkable in this text: he fixes our eyes on the Gentiles in order to fix our eyes on Jesus. John's only purpose in introducing other charac-

2. Meredith Kline, "The Feast of Cover-Over," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 37, 4 (December 1994): 497–510.

3. The other disciple with a Greek name was Andrew, the one to whom Philip went in verse 22 (William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of John* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1954], 194).

4. This is likely a pregnant term in John's gospel, indicating far more than a desire to see Jesus physically. Implied here is a desire to follow Jesus as disciples (cf. John 1:39, 46, 50, 51) (James T. Dennison, "Come and See," *Kerux* 9, 2 [September 1994]: 23–29).

ters in his gospel is to point us to Jesus, that we might behold His glory. Raymond Brown comments, “The coming of the Gentiles is so theologically important that the writer never tells us if they got to see Jesus, and indeed they disappear from the scene.”⁵ The Greeks disappear from the scene so that we might see Jesus. He is, after all, the Great Harvester who draws all peoples to Himself. Now we see Jesus.

The Great Harvester

Jesus receives the report from Andrew and Philip that the Greeks have come with a request to see Him. Remarkably, Jesus does not address the Greeks. Instead, He simply says, “The hour has come that the Son of Man should be glorified” (12:23). Jesus interprets the coming of the Greeks as the arrival of His hour.

Everything in John’s gospel has been pressing toward this hour. At the wedding feast of Cana in Galilee, Jesus says to His mother, “My hour has not yet come” (John 2:4). John tells us later that no one could lay a hand upon Jesus “because His hour had not yet come” (7:30). We find the same thing in 8:20. In the opening half of John’s gospel, Jesus’ hour has not yet come. But now, with the Gentiles drawing near to Him, Jesus says, “the hour has come.”

The hour to which Jesus is referring, of course, is the hour of His death. We learn that from John 13:1, where “His hour” is defined in terms of Jesus’ departure from this world. We see it again in John 17:1 as Jesus begins His High Priestly Prayer with those words anticipating His death: “Father, the hour has come. Glorify Your Son, that Your Son also may glorify You.” The hour of which Jesus is speaking—the hour that has now come—is the hour of Jesus’ death, and it is the drawing near of the Gentiles that signals its arrival. Thus, the inclusion of the Gentiles is brought about through the Jewish rejection of Jesus. The Greeks wish to see Jesus, and the Jews wish to see Jesus no more. Jesus’ hour—the hour of His death—has come.

The connection Jesus draws between the coming of the Gentiles and the arrival of the hour of His death on the cross is vital to church planting. Prior to Jesus’ work on the cross, the message of the gospel was proclaimed almost exclusively to the Jews. From henceforth, however, it goes forth to

5. Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I–XII* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 470.

Jew and Gentile alike—to men and women from every nation, tribe, tongue, and people. The gospel is to be “declared and published to all nations, and to all persons promiscuously and without distinction” (CD, 2.5).

This leads us to one of the most profound ironies of John’s gospel: the hour of Jesus’ death is the hour of Jesus’ glory. In John’s gospel, Jesus is not merely glorified after His death on the cross but *in* His death on the cross. John wants us to fix our eyes upon Jesus, hanging on the cross, and to see there His glory!⁶

Jesus refers to the hour of His death as the hour “that the Son of Man should be glorified” (12:23). Picture the scene of Jesus’ crucifixion. The place itself conjures up the most disturbing images; it is called “the Place of a Skull,” in Hebrew, “Golgotha” (John 19:17). Here the soldiers pierced Jesus’ hands, nailing them to the horizontal bar. They pierced His feet, fastening them to the vertical bar. They lifted Him up on the cross between two thieves. Above Him they fastened the title “JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS” (19:19). The soldiers stripped Him of His garments and cast lots for His clothing. Where is the glory in all of this?

How can the hour of Jesus’ death be the hour that the Son of Man is glorified? Jesus tells us in John 12:24: “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain.” The hour of Jesus’ death is the hour of His glory, because at the cross, Jesus actually saves His people, securing their redemption for time and eternity.⁷ He dies in order to produce much fruit, and the fruit of His death is the salvation of men and women from every nation, tribe, people, and tongue. Jesus explains, “And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself” (John 12:32).

In John 12:24, Jesus indicates the absolute necessity of His death if there is to be a church. “*Unless* a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, *it remains alone*” (emphasis added). The implication is clear. If Jesus does not die, there will be no church; but He does die, and so He brings forth His church, in which He reveals His glory. In fact, as Raymond Brown has pointed out, “The parable is concerned not with the fate of the grain

6. It is noteworthy that in John’s record of the crucifixion there is no reference to the three hours of darkness. This is remarkable, for of all the gospel writers, John develops the imagery of light and darkness most fully. Perhaps John doesn’t record the three hours of darkness at Golgotha, however, because he wants us to focus only on the glory of Christ, the Light of the World.

7. For a recent, helpful discussion on definite atonement, see Joel Beeke, *Living for God’s Glory* (Orlando: Reformation Trust, 2008), 74–100.

but with its productivity.”⁸ Such is the love and compassion of Christ for His church, that His glory is bound up with His fruit—that is, with the church. Though He is all-glorious in and of Himself, His glory is revealed and demonstrated most powerfully in the salvation of His church.

By His death, Jesus produces much fruit. In His being lifted up, He draws all peoples to Himself. This season of harvest was anticipated from the beginning of the world and will not cease until the world’s end. The Belgic Confession states, “This church has existed from the beginning of the world and will last until the end, as appears from the fact that Christ is an eternal King who cannot be without subjects” (BC, art. 27). The Confession goes on to state, “This holy church is not confined, bound, or limited to a certain place or 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” (BC, art. 27). The Heidelberg Catechism echoes the Confession when it states, “The Son of God through his Spirit and Word, out of the entire human race, from the beginning of the world to its end, gathers, protects, and preserves for himself a community chosen for eternal life and united in true faith” (HC, Q&A 54). The Westminster Standards (WCF 25, WLC, Q&A 61–64) use similar language, stating that the “universal Church” consists “of the whole number of the elect...from all places in the world.”

This, then, is the purpose for which Jesus came and died: to produce a great harvest, His church. Francis Turretin observed, “He came into the world and performed the mediatorial office for no other reason than to acquire a church for himself and call it (when acquired) into a participation of grace and glory.”⁹ The growth of the church from a small band of disciples in Acts 1 to the ends of the earth in Acts 28 is proof, as Johannes VanderKemp puts it, that “the satisfaction of the Son cannot be frustrated.”¹⁰ Our Lord Jesus Christ is a most successful harvester. He calls the church into existence by His messianic acts.¹¹ This is the point Jesus is making when He compares Himself to a grain of wheat that falls to the ground and dies, and by that death produces much fruit. By His suffering and death Jesus produces the church and now calls her to be fruitful.

8. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, 472.

9. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 1997), 3:1.

10. Johannes VanderKemp, *The Christian Entirely the Property of Christ, in Life and Death: Exhibited in Fifty-three Sermons on the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. John M. Harlingen (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 1997), 1:427.

11. Geerhardus Vos, *The Kingdom and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 78.

The Fruit of His Labor

The fruit that Jesus produces by His death resembles Him. An apple seed produces apples. A pear seed produces pears. A grain of wheat that falls to the ground and dies produces grain. In other words, Jesus' church is conformed to Him. Listen to the words with which Jesus concludes our text: "He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also. If anyone serves Me, him My Father will honor" (12:25–26).

Here Jesus speaks of conformity to His image. He produces His image in His people—and His people are made like Him. The true church of Jesus Christ resembles Him. This means that as He died to self in order to produce much fruit, so His church, in conformity to Him, dies to self in order to produce much fruit for His glory. The pattern that we observe in Jesus—dying that others may live—He now reproduces in His church. In Him His church lives and moves and has her being. Sometimes it is said that couples who have been married for a long time come to resemble each other. So also here, the bride resembles her Bridegroom; the church resembles Christ. And the church counts this her joy, delighting to live as "children of the resurrection day." As the Heidelberg Catechism puts it, "By His power we too are already now resurrected to a new life" (HC, Q&A 45).

Thus, the principle of "death to self / life in Christ" articulated by Jesus in John 12:25–26 is the paradigm not only for the life of Christian discipleship but also for the life of the church. Though this pattern is found in every facet of the church's life, perhaps it is most profoundly seen in the work of the church planter and in the corporate life of the church plant.

Not only the church planter, but the church body as a whole, must die to self. Luther once stated, "The Church is misery on earth."¹² He also stated that the church "is like unto her bridegroom, Christ Jesus, torn, spit on, derided, and crucified."¹³ Indeed, this is the way it must be so that we do not depend upon ourselves, but always upon Christ—that the glory may never be ours, but that it may always be His. Luther went on to say, "We tell our Lord God plainly, that if He will have His Church, He must maintain and defend it; for we can neither uphold nor protect it. If we could, indeed, we should become the proudest asses under heaven.

12. Martin Luther, *Table Talk* (Gainesville, Fla.: Bridge-Logos, 2004), 255.

13. *Ibid.*, 253.

But God says: I say it, I do it."¹⁴ Calvin also recognized the need for the church to be conformed to the image of her Savior: "The Church, so long as she is a pilgrim in this world, is subjected to the cross, that she may be humble, and may be conformed to her Head.... Her highest ornament and luster is modesty."¹⁵ The church's greatest glory is to be found in her conformity to Christ, and that means death to self and life in Him.

How does the church planter die to self? He dies to self each time he gives up another evening of precious time he would otherwise spend with his wife and children to encourage struggling members of the church. He accepts a much smaller salary than he would receive in a larger church. He refuses to build the church upon his personality, choosing instead to decrease that Christ may increase. He gladly spends and is spent for the life of the congregation. He imparts to the congregation not only the gospel but also his life.

How does the church plant die to self? The church plant dies to self by refusing to be discouraged by small numbers. It refuses to give up when the funds are low and instead seeks help from sister churches that are more established. It foregoes its desire for a nice, large building, choosing instead to meet in less-than-ideal quarters, even though each time it gathers the members have to set up chairs for the worship service again. The church plant dies to self as it refuses to promote itself, choosing instead to proclaim Christ to a lost and dying world.

Edmund Clowney reminds us that this is precisely the work to which the servants of Christ Jesus are called: "Jesus came to gather, and to call gatherers, disciples who would gather with him, seeking the poor and helpless from city streets and country roads.... Mission is not an optional activity for Christ's disciples. If they are not gatherers, they are scatterers."¹⁶ Conformity to Christ means the difficult work of missions and evangelism and church planting. Christ came to seek and to save the lost—not the righteous, but the unrighteous—and that work cost Him His life. Even as Christ came to serve sinners, so in Him we are called to serve sinners (John 13:14–17). Clowney goes on to state the great danger for those churches that fail to conform to Christ in terms of seeking the lost: "The congregation that ignores mission will atrophy and soon find itself shattered by internal dissension. It will inevitably begin to lose its

14. Ibid.

15. As quoted in Graham Miller, *Calvin's Wisdom* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1992), 52.

16. Edmund Clowney, *The Church* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1995), 159.

own young people, disillusioned by hearing the gospel trumpet sounded every Sunday for those who never march.”¹⁷ A church that does not die to self in service to Christ will necessarily turn inward and thereby lose her life. The work of missions, evangelism, and church planting is vital to the life of the church—through it she dies to self and lives to Christ.

As the church dies to self, she begins to experience the transforming power of the gospel, for in dying to self she lives to Christ—better yet, Christ lives in her. She becomes an instrument in the Redeemer’s hands as He works in her and through her.¹⁸ In his letter to the Colossians Paul says, “To this end I also labor, striving according to His working which works in me mightily” (1:29). It is no coincidence that Paul, who was the great church planter of the New Testament, writes of these themes of death to self and life to Christ often. In his second letter to the Corinthians, for example, he writes,

In all things we commend ourselves as ministers of God: in much patience, in tribulations, in needs, in distresses, in stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in fastings; by purity, by knowledge, by longsuffering, by kindness, by the Holy Spirit, by sincere love, by the word of truth, by the power of God, by the armor of righteousness on the right hand and on the left, by honor and dishonor, by evil report and good report; as deceivers, and yet true; as unknown, and yet well known, *as dying, and behold, we live*; as chastened, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things (2 Cor. 6:4–10, emphasis added).

In fact, later in the same letter, Paul defines the marks of a true servant of Christ in these same terms:

Are they ministers of Christ?—I speak as a fool—I am more: in labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often. From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in

17. Ibid., 160.

18. Cf. Paul Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer’s Hand: People in Need of Change Helping People in Need of Change* (Phillipsburg, N. J.: P&R, 2002).

hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness—besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I do not burn with indignation? If I must boast, I will boast in the things which concern my infirmity. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. In Damascus the governor, under Aretas the king, was guarding the city of the Damascenes with a garrison, desiring to arrest me; but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and escaped from his hands (2 Cor. 11:23–33).

The persecutor of the church became persecuted for the church's sake—including churches he had planted. The persecutor of Christ became persecuted for Christ's sake. Yet in this suffering and death, Paul found glory and life. In so doing, he tasted of the power of God, as God's strength was made perfect in weakness. Therefore Paul could most gladly boast in his infirmities, for in these infirmities the power of Christ rested upon him. Therefore he took pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake. For when he was weak, then he was strong (2 Cor. 12:9–10).

This paradigm of death to self and of life in Christ is not unique to the apostle Paul; it characterizes the life of all true servants of Christ. Indeed, it characterizes the life of the church herself. As the church is conformed to Christ, she proclaims Him in Word and deed, and Christ Himself is then at work producing still more fruit. Thus, as a statement from the Mission to North America points out, "From the beginning of the established church, missionaries have started new congregations from which to share the Gospel to a desperate and hurting world."¹⁹

But why should mission work take the form of church planting? The answer is simple: Church planting is essential because the risen Christ has bound Himself to the assembly of His people on the Lord's Day. It is in the assembly that He has promised to work through the preaching of the gospel to create faith in our hearts and through the sacraments to strengthen that faith (HC, Q&A 65–68). Michael Horton writes,

The church is first of all a place where God does certain things.... Christ, both Lord and Savior of his church, appointed an official ministry...so that he could continue to serve his covenant people

19. "Frequently Asked Questions," Mission to North America (PCA), accessed July 2008, www.pca-mna.org/churchplanting/faqs.php.

and extend his kingdom of grace to the ends of the earth by his Spirit. Even in the present—every time we gather—it is God who summons us in judgment and grace. It is not our devotion, praise, piety, or service that comes first, but God's service to us. This is why we must assemble at a place where the gospel is truly preached, the sacraments are administered according to Christ's institution, and there is a visible form of Christ's heavenly reign through officers whom he has called and sent.²⁰

It is through the "ordinary means" of the church's ministry—namely the foolishness of preaching and the weakness of water, bread, and wine—that Christ has promised to work, bringing sinners to salvation in Christ through repentance and faith in Him.

Geerhardus Vos states, "The church actually has within herself the powers of the world to come. She...forms an intermediate link between the present life and the life of eternity.... The consummation of the kingdom in which all is fulfilled began with [Jesus'] resurrection and ascension."²¹ And so, by God's grace, we press on in planting churches, proclaiming Christ, that sinners may be ushered into the life of the world to come. And as they begin to taste the powers of the age to come, they too lay down their lives in service to Christ, knowing that these present sufferings are not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us. As Calvin notes, "The afflictions of the Church are always momentary, when we raise our eyes to its eternal happiness."²² Thus, in all our labor, we echo the words of Paul: "I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me.... For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself" (Phil. 3:12, 20–21).

Conclusion

Jesus Christ is the fruitful grain of wheat who died in order that He might produce much fruit. The church is His fruit, and she exists to bring glory and honor to Him. Thus, the biblical foundation for church planting is the

20. Michael Horton, "No Church, No Problem?" *Modern Reformation* 17, 4 (July/August 2008): 17.

21. Vos, *The Kingdom and the Church*, 84–85.

22. As quoted in Miller, *Calvin's Wisdom*, 61.

glory of Christ Jesus our Lord. Therefore, as Vos comments, “The joy of working in the dawn of the world to come quickens the pulse of all New Testament servants of Christ.”²³ As we long for the fullness of the day when we behold the Sun of Righteousness in all of His glory, let us go forth and plant churches with the words of Isaac Watts’s hymn in our hearts:

We long to see Thy churches full,
That all the chosen race
May, with one voice and heart and soul,
Sing thy redeeming grace.

23. Geerhardus Vos, *Grace and Glory* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1994), 90.