

Regardless of where you live or what culture you're from, everyone is a theologian. Therefore, it is vital that theology informed by Scripture is not divorced from missions but is the fuel that drives all missionary gospel endeavors. In *Missions by the Book*, Alex Kocman and Chad Vegas weave together a thoroughly biblical argument for why all missionary efforts and practice must have a comprehensive theology at their core. Missionaries, students, and pastors alike will benefit from this clarion call to restore theology to its rightful place.

Dustin Bengé | Associate Professor of
Biblical Spirituality and Historical Theology,
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY.

Some books lay out the foundational biblical teachings that must guide our missionary labors. Some books bring the sharp edge of God's Word to contemporary controversies in missions. Remarkably, this book does both! Highly recommended for missionaries, pastors, and all who care about fulfilling Christ's Great Commission.

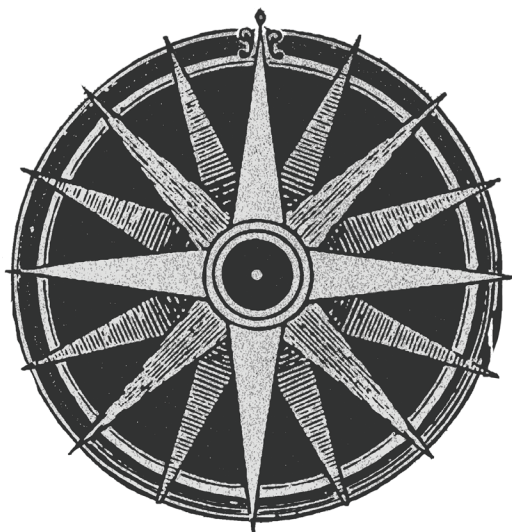
Dr. Joel R. Beeke | President,
Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary,
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Missions by the Book may well become the standard text on God-honouring, Bible-shaped gospel mission to the thousands of unreached people groups scattered throughout the world. Kocman and Vegas challenge the methodology of many mission groups that downplays Scripture as regulating how we are to take the gospel of the God of grace to all the nations. Without denying the powerful, present ministry of the Holy Spirit, *Missions by the Book* seeks to take seriously the transgenerational wisdom of God's Word in understanding how the church today is to seek to reach and win the lost in every age. The addition after each chapter of a series of questions makes the book an ideal resource for churches as well as individuals to study this most vital of gospel imperatives. I commend this work without reservation.

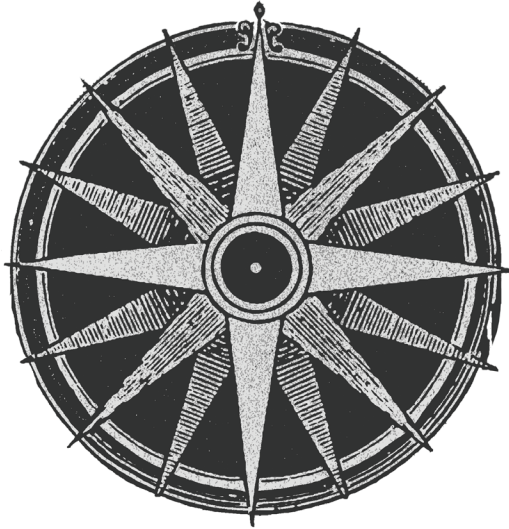
Ian Hamilton | President,
Westminster Presbyterian Theological Seminary,
Newcastle, England

Missions and good theology began as good friends but have gone through a rocky period the last sixty or so years. All manner of lone-ranger missionaries, speed-based methodologies, and bad hermeneutics have found great traction in the present missions world. Vegas and Kocman have brought back a refreshingly clear and biblical understanding of our Triune God's desire and plan for all nations. It is my fervent hope and prayer that it is embraced widely by pastors, Christian leaders, and those who will take the gospel of our Lord to the ends of the earth.

Brooks Buser | President, Radius International



MISSIONS BY THE BOOK



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HOW THEOLOGY AND MISSIONS WALK TOGETHER

CHAD VEGAS AND ALEX KOCMAN



FOUNDERS

MINISTRIES

CAPE CORAL, FLORIDA

Missions by the Book

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FOREWORD

Missionaries live in the cross-pressured environment where the doctrinal nature of Christianity, with its claims to truths that transcend specific times and places, meets the evangelistic nature of Christianity, where the need to communicate the faith to those outside the church is paramount. And tying those two things together is not, and never has been, easy. How do we confront the cultural status quo in a manner that makes the offense of preaching that of the gospel and not simply that of the missionary's own cultural tastes and preference? And how do we communicate the gospel in a way comprehensible to those being evangelized without reducing the gospel simply to their own cultural tastes? That is the challenge of Christian missions.

This is one reason why Christian missions has at certain points in history been the dynamic for the subversion of the faith. In the early twentieth century, J. Gresham Machen correctly identified the Presbyterian missions as the epicenter of practical theological downgrade, epitomized by the work of Pearl S. Buck. And what Machen identified then as a problem has only grown in significance since. As the wider culture of America has moved further and further away from anything resembling the moral imagination of generic Christianity, we are all, so to speak, on the mission field now. We all wrestle with the cross pressures that were once the preserve of those our churches sent to far-off lands. The problem of the practical connection of doctrine and life, of theology and proclamation, of conviction and strategy, are pressing issues for every congregation and every believer.

In this context, this book is helpful on two fronts. It works beautifully in terms of its stated objective, that of reflecting on missions in light of the above tensions. But it also works as a fine reflection on all our lives as Christians in a cultural environment that is increasingly alien to our view of the world.

The basic question is this: Does theology drive practice, or does practice drive theology? That is a missions question with implications well beyond the mission field. It connects to how we address homosexuality and sexual mores, for example. It connects to how we assess the usefulness of non-biblical approaches to the world around us. It connects to how we think about the gospel in a post-Christendom age. For these reasons and more, this is a significant book to read and consider. Simply written yet profound in the thoughts and discussions it will no doubt stimulate, it is something for us all to ponder, and having pondered, to apply.

Carl R. Trueman
Grove City College
July 2021

INTRODUCTION

When was the last time you wept over a theological document?

After nearly a quarter-century in the corporate world, Alan¹ and his wife existed in luxury and ease and attended a casual, entertainment-driven church—living out their American dream. But when they encountered the biblical doctrines of grace—grasping that “by grace you have been saved through faith . . . [a]nd this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God” (Eph 2:8)—they realized that their lives were not their own. At the same time that they stumbled upon the theology of the Reformation, they also recognized their missionary call. They put themselves under biblical teaching and were sent to Africa to reach Muslims with the gospel in an international city. As they deepened in their understanding of Scripture, they became convinced that it was the task of missionaries to patiently establish healthy, organized, doctrinally rich churches. This led many of Alan’s more pragmatic colleagues to dissociate from them, convinced Alan and his wife had become imbalanced fundamentalists unwilling to properly adapt their church traditions to the local culture. Discouraged yet undaunted, Alan continued to build inroads into his community and began discipling a former Muslim—now a Christian—in leading his church plant.

In a series of meetings with the up-and-coming pastor, Alan decided to teach through a historic confession of faith. As the missionary expounded an Arabic translation of the confession, the African pastor was brought to tears. “The first missionary who disciplined me over twenty years ago taught me all these truths,” he explained. “Then, for

1 Pseudonym used to protect this missionary’s identity.

the past twenty-plus years, numerous missionaries have told me these doctrines were not true. I don't know what to believe!" he lamented. During another study session, the pastor lay facedown on the floor and cried out to the Lord for clarity in front of Alan. Many previous missionaries had failed to instruct the man in sound doctrine, teaching only a series of Bible stories and life lessons, robbing the new pastor of the richness of Christian tradition. Yet through Alan's ministry, this began to change.

Have we, like Alan, allowed our theology to overwhelm us with a sense of our indebtedness to the lost and unreached? Or, like Alan's colleagues, have we seen the plight of the lost and opted for quick fixes, reserving the best biblical teaching and theological resources for ourselves?

There is a crisis in evangelical missions. A great gulf is fixed between the realm of theology and the world of missions. On one side of the rift, those who most love theology fall prey far too easily to pharisaism, intellectualism, and apathy, keeping them from the front lines of missions. Young men pursue theological degrees, compete for a small handful of available ministry jobs to pay off their school debts and support their young families, settle into routines, and wake up decades later inside the evangelical cultural ghetto. On the other side of the rift, many of the most adventurous, risk-taking mission workers are trained to check their theology at the door of their sending organization and learn a host of man-centered ministry tactics that stem from cultural relativism. These missionaries are told that the same gospel-centered, doctrine-rich teaching that builds faithful churches in the West won't work elsewhere in the world and that some new and different insight from sociology is needed in non-Western cultures.

When we fail to savor and apply our theology, a lack of zeal for missions is never far off. Simultaneously, those most zealous for missions often look on historical theological tradition with suspicion. In short, bad theology leads to bad missions, and bad missions spreads more bad theology.

We, the authors of this book, were not immune from this unbiblical way of thinking. In college and early in ministry, we both came from the “theologian” side of the gulf. We were both well-read enough in the Bible to craft spiritual-sounding excuses to ignore missions but not steeped enough in Scripture to feel the weight of Christ’s call to the nations. We both had a litany of reasons why we weren’t called, gifted, or required to serve the nations in some way—reasons we found persuasive at the time. We were painfully awakened in our twenties to our own apathy and the ordinary Christian’s obligation to the cause of the gospel across the globe. We became haunted by the roughly two billion image-bearers of God careening toward hell without any access to the gospel. Later, we were called into youth pastor positions in our respective churches and eventually found ourselves involved in missions, not primarily as goers but as senders: Chad through founding Radius International with Brad Buser and Alex through becoming director of missionary mobilization and communications for the Association of Baptists for World Evangelism (ABWE).

Through these parallel journeys, we both became aware of the great need for missionaries—and of a temptation plaguing the missions community. We, like many, feel the pull of sacrificing truth on the altar of expediency. Yet in much of modern missions, theology and practice are readily and unbiblically divorced from one another. We often hear that Scripture does not necessitate any one particular method in ministry, that matters of methodology are neutral. If the method “works”—by bringing about conversions or at least interested seekers who consider themselves obedient followers—then the method is considered to be ordained by God. These “new measures” are christened a fresh wind of the Holy Spirit, even if their practice lacks biblical support.²

But does such thinking really affect ministry on the ground? Indeed, it does. To pick an example close to home, we ourselves see the fruits

² “New measures” is a reference to the new methods that Charles Finney employed in the Second Great Awakening, which he claimed were more effective than the more traditional—and biblical—means employed by the church. For more on this, see the helpful book, Iain H. Murray, *Revival and Revivalism* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1994).

of such pragmatism in the North American church growth movement. Sadly, generations of church leaders have built organizational empires by promoting a theologically shallow, entertainment-driven model of worship. Then, when the attendees of such churches are revealed as false converts years later, few make the logical connection necessary to call into question the initial methods used to build such ministries. We, too, feel the pull of evangelistic urgency that often drives the seeker-driven or “attractional” church. Yet time has shown that shallow outreach produces shallow Christians.

Astute observers often recognize the dangers of pragmatism in a domestic ministry context, yet those same observers miss it entirely when it manifests on the mission field. For a variety of reasons, we seem to believe that overseas missions, particularly in difficult places, is so mysterious and extraordinary that its methods thereby fall outside our ability to critique. This is often driven by genuine humility and deference to self-sacrificing missionaries who seem to know better, and such humility is often commendable. But it is simply untrue that the average believer or church leader, Bible in hand, is unequipped to exercise discernment in matters of cross-cultural missions. The biblical methods of Christian ministry are the same anywhere in the world, from the U.S. to the jungles of Papua New Guinea. No matter where one goes in the world, the Bible is the word of God, and the God of the Bible is God. Every people group on the earth is made up of those who are sons of Adam, no more or less guilty and corrupt in sin than we are. In every corner of the earth, Jesus still occupies his throne, his atoning work avails to forgive sin, and his sole mediation brings man to God. Regardless of the language, culture, worldview, or skin pigmentation of a people group, the Holy Spirit works in them in the same way. He applies the work of Christ through the ordinary declaration of the Word to every tribe, tongue, and nation.

It is true that cross-cultural ministry is unique. Missionaries must become adept in language learning, cultural adaptation, translation, literacy, church planting, and business-as-mission in closed countries. They will face trials such as culture shock, marital conflict, and

child-rearing stress and may encounter disease, infestation, inferior medicine, governmental challenges, and even persecution. Missionaries may be marginalized, threatened, ejected from a country, imprisoned, beaten, harassed, shamed, or legally suppressed. These harsh realities *rightly* make us slow to judge our missionaries, who pay so high a price and should be honored. But none of these realities alters the foundational principles of gospel ministry. And to hold forth these principles, the church is responsible to ask hard questions of those we send.

The central contention of this book is that Christian doctrine and missions methodology must *walk together*, hand-in-hand. Our ministry tactics always derive from what we really believe. Hence, methods are not a matter of liberty but fall under the express prescriptions of Scripture.

At root, this thesis is simply an application of what theologians have named the *regulative principle* to the church's missionary task. In the context of public worship, the regulative principle is that Scripture's teachings, explicit and implicit, *regulate* church practice. Thus, worship should involve such things as congregational singing, prayer, reading and explanation of Scripture, preaching, confession of sin, fellowship, and observance of the sacraments, as these elements are explicitly put forth in biblical teaching. This differs from the *normative principle* some hold, which maintains that Scripture merely *norms* Christian worship in the sense that what is not explicitly forbidden may be practiced. In this model, impressionistic painting or dance performance could be included in the church's public worship since they are not explicitly prohibited. But we hold, as a rule, that Scripture is to regulate (not merely norm) the practice of the church and that this rule applies to missions as much as it does to worship. Within this, we also recognize that Scripture gives the people of God enormous liberty in every area of life, including both worship and missions practice. We savor this freedom in Christ! Yet our aim is not merely to find the outlines of biblical missiology so we may freely color within; rather, this book is meant to draw out what Scripture clearly prescribes for missionary activity and build on this foundation.

By treating missions in this way, we believe we are putting the power to “do” missions back where it belongs: in the hands of ordinary missionaries, churches, pastors, and believers. Anthropology and sociology have valid insights to offer. But if missions leaders lean on these disciplines such that ordinary believers see the missionary task as lofty and inaccessible, we have not honored our Lord. Instead, we believe that because the Word of God regulates and prescribes the missionary task, everyday believers (like us!) can be a part of God’s exhilarating work in drawing the nations to himself.

We also intentionally selected the phrase “walk together” with respect to theology and missions methods to reflect the work of the Dutch Reformed theologian Petrus van Mastricht (1630–1706), who penned the following words:

Theology must be taught according to a certain method, and it must be the kind of method in which theory and practice always walk in step together. In fact, they must walk together in such a way that theory precedes and practice follows in every one of theology’s articles. . . . By this method, I say again, practice should be joined to theory, not only in the whole corpus of theology, in such a way that the first place is especially reserved for the things that must be believed and the second for the things that must be done, but also that in each member of theology, practice should walk in step with theory in a continuous agreement.³

We all agree that faith and life are inseparable. So are theology and missiology. Apart from sound doctrine, one cannot have healthy missiology. Doctrine determines practice, and practice always betrays doctrine. The New Testament bears this out. The apostle Paul believed and argued this very thing. He was pressed by the Corinthian church to engage in the superior methods of the so-called super apostles who were drawing large crowds. He rejected their worldly methodologies with extreme prejudice (1 Cor 1:17; 2:1–5; 2 Cor 2:17; 4:1–2; 11:12–15). The ensuing chapters will seek to follow the pattern of Paul as we ground our missiology on the truth of biblical doctrine.

3 Petrus van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology, Volume 1: Prolegomena* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2018), 67–69.

We have framed this work as an address to missionaries, present and future, and to the churches, leaders, and laymen who sustain them with their gifts and prayers, to the end that they would all behold and cherish the gospel truths that drive our mission. We feel the pull, like many, to rush off into activity without immersing ourselves in biblical teaching. We also personally feel the danger of not allowing these teachings to reshape our affections. So, we write not merely to fill the head but to fill the heart to overflow in word and deed.

To that end, we are also writing for men like the African pastor, starved of the richness of Christian heritage. We are writing for the countless national preachers, teachers, missionaries, and ordinary believers laboring to know deeply a Christ previously foreign to them. We are writing for the persecuted church leaders of Asia leveraging the web for biblical resources to supplement training of underground seminaries. We are writing for the faithful women who minister in Islamic lands where sexes segregate and Christian women are left alone to answer the most challenging apologetics questions posed by Muslim women. We are writing for the generation of children who, to our shame, have read few missionary biographies. And we are writing for the ordinary believers at home, faithfully giving and praying yet unsure of which workers to support, why, and how. In all these cases, it is our prayerful expectation that simple delight in divine truth will thrust our readers out on mission with boldness.

Our prayer is that this book would serve as a trusted resource for your ministry, whether you are one who goes to the field or one who sends. You don't need a degree in missiology to faithfully invest your life overseas or discern what you see happening abroad. The Word of God, alone and in its entirety, is sufficient to equip goers and senders for the entire missionary endeavor (2 Tim 3:16–17). We must simply let our faith and our practice walk together.



THE WORD OF GOD AS THE SUFFICIENT AUTHORITY FOR MISSIONS

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.
2 Timothy 3:16–17

“You have so much in English; we have so little in Bengali.”

It was 1968. These heavy words, spoken by a Bangladeshi woman named Basanti Das to an American missionary lying ill with a mysterious virus, hung in the thick, humid South Asian air. The Baptist mission worker, Jeannie Lockerbie, had no more than arrived when she fell ill, along with all but five of her teammates. Some were bedridden and quarantined for as long as eleven months. Basanti, a schoolteacher and translator, had come to visit Lockerbie and was eyeing her impressive bookshelf.¹

Basanti’s lament haunted the missionary. William Carey, known as the father of the modern missions movement, had built his ministry in the Asian subcontinent around Scripture translation and the establishment of a printing press. Yet 175 years after Carey’s landfall,

1 For the full story, see Loren Skinker, “All Things for Good,” ABWE, published July 13, 2020, <https://www.abwe.org/blog/all-things-good>.

Bengali believers still faced a biblical and theological famine. Once she recovered, Lockerbie began a literature ministry, and the team committed to translate the New Testament into the language of the nearby Tripura tribesmen. When the translation was finished, the tribal chief told the missionaries, “Now that we can understand the Bible, we have no excuse not to obey.”

God does his saving work in his world through his written Word. The accomplishment of God’s mission depends on Scripture being read, understood, and proclaimed in the heart languages of peoples from all the nations. This is what the framers of the Westminster Confession of Faith meant in 1647 when they noted that the Bible is “to be translated into the vulgar [that is, common] language of every nation unto which they come, that, the Word of God dwelling plentifully in all, they may worship him in an acceptable manner; and, through patience and comfort of the Scriptures, may have hope.”²

Yet in our era, even Christians are tempted to question the centrality of Scripture. In the United States, a prominent evangelical multisite church pastor, whose weekly attendees total more than forty thousand people, preached in 2018 that we must “unhitch” ourselves from the Old Testament and argued that the maxim “for the Bible tells me so’. . . is where our trouble began.”³ Similar problems plague the mission field. Translations of the New Testament only outnumber translations of the whole Bible (both testaments) by about 2.6 to 1.⁴ Worse, a growing number of Muslim Idiom Bible translations (MITs) intentionally remove or redefine terms like “Son of God” in an effort to encourage Muslims to “convert” to Christ without transgressing the formal boundaries of Islamic religious identity.⁵ Wherever we turn, the

2 Westminster Confession of Faith (henceforth WCF) 1.8.

3 Andy Stanley, “Aftermath, Part 3: Not Difficult // Andy Stanley,” YouTube, 39:44, April 30, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pShxFTNRCWI>.

4 United Bible Societies, “About Us: Incredible Growth in Scripture Translation,” UBS Translations, United Bible Societies, accessed July 25, 2020, http://www.ubs-translations.org/about_us.

5 One example is the “translation” titled *The True Meaning of the Gospel and Acts in Arabic*, ed. Mazhar Mallouhi (Beirut, Lebanon: Dar Al Farabi, 2008). This translation, for instance, butchers Matthew 28:19’s injunction to “[baptize] in the name

Bible is under attack—even from within the ranks of Christian workers. Yet we cannot even begin to approach the missionary task without a rich understanding of and reverent awe for the written Word of God.

THE CENTRALITY OF SCRIPTURE

For much of church history, from the early centuries of the church through the medieval period, Scripture was largely inaccessible. With the exception of the Vulgate, Jerome's Latin translation of the Bible from the fourth century, the Word of God was only readily accessible by an elite, educated few. But the dam began to break through the sacrificial efforts of proto-Reformers like William Tyndale, John Wycliffe, and their spiritual heirs, the Reformers. They were convinced that for the kingdom of Christ to spread salvation to every nation, tribe, and tongue, as promised in Revelation 5:9 and 7:9, the written Word of God needed to be available in the primary language of the average man. Tyndale wrote, "It was impossible to establish the lay people in any truth, except the Scripture were laid before their eyes in their mother tongue."⁶

The invention of the movable-type press and the value the Protestant Reformation placed on God's Word marked a turning point in the availability of Scripture, and the modern missionary movement starting in the eighteenth century opened the floodgates of global Bible translation as never before. At the onset of the nineteenth century, Scriptures were available in just 68 languages; now, Scriptures are available in at least 2,479 languages, with 451 languages possessing entire Bible translations—a 3,546 percent increase.⁷ It is no wonder that Christianity has grown explosively throughout the Global South in

of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" into "cleanse them with water in the name of God and His Messiah and His Holy Spirit." See David Harriman, "Epilogue: Force Majeure: Ethics and Encounters in an Era of Extreme Contextualization," in *Muslim Conversions to Christ*, eds. Ayman Ibrahim and Ant Greenham (New York: Peter Lang, 2018), 491.

6 William Tyndale, *The Works of William Tyndale* (1848; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2010), 1:394.

7 United Bible Societies, "About Us."

the last several decades.⁸ God’s work in the world is inseparable from his Word. After all, “faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Rom 10:17).

God has spoken—decisively, infallibly, to all peoples, nations, and tongues in the written Word of Scripture, which contains both the message and model of ministry. The missionary task is impossible apart from a consuming passion for the Word of God and submission to its authority. But before we can explain the missiological implications of this, we must understand what the Bible *is*.

TWO KINDS OF REVELATION

The Westminster Confession (1647) and the Second London Confession of Faith (1689) both begin their systematic outline of Christian teaching not, as one might think, with the existence of God but with their doctrine of Scripture. The latter confession, to which the authors of this book subscribe, reads:

The Holy Scripture is the only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule of all saving knowledge, faith, and obedience, although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men inexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God and his will which is necessary unto salvation. Therefore it pleased the Lord at sundry times and in divers manners to reveal himself, and to declare that his will unto his church; and afterward for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan, and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing; which maketh the Holy Scriptures to be most necessary, those former ways of God’s revealing his will unto his people being now ceased.⁹

8 Sun Young Chung and Todd M. Johnson, “Tracking Global Christianity’s Statistical Centre of Gravity, AD 33–AD 2100,” *International Review of Mission* 95 (2004): 167; cited in John Morgan, “World Christianity Is Undergoing a Seismic Shift,” *ABWE Blog*, ABWE International, June 27, 2019, <https://www.abwe.org/blog/world-christianity-undergoing-seismic-shift>.

9 Second London Confession of Faith (henceforth 2LCF) 1.1.

These statements serve as the foundation for the rest of the confession. We have a *revelational epistemology*—that is, we know what we know because God has revealed it. In an era of subjectivity in which “truth” is relative, shaped by one’s cultural perspective or group identity, we can have unshakable certainty—not merely because of reason or sense perception but because the Author of truth has broken in from the outside and spoken an objective, understandable word. The Particular Baptists in London and the Westminster divines knew that apart from establishing the centrality of revelation, the task of theology is impossible. So, too, is the task of missions.

To this end, God has given us not just one “book” but two: creation and Scripture. The created order is God’s *natural* or *general revelation* to us. The framers of the Second London Confession refer to “the light of nature” because they recognized that the truth, beauty, and goodness of the cosmos scream of the reality of the glory of God. David testifies in Psalm 19:1, “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.” The apostle Paul tells us that God’s “invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made” (Rom 1:20). This general revelation extends from the cosmos all the way down to the individual human conscience, as every human made in the image of God possesses God’s unchanging moral law stamped on their hearts (Rom 2:14–15).

Often, when the importance of foreign missions is debated, the question is posed: “What about the man who lives alone on a remote island who has never read the Bible or heard the name ‘Jesus’—will he be saved?” This question assumes that either man is only accountable to God if he has been first evangelized or that natural revelation itself contains all the knowledge necessary for salvation. Both assumptions are false. With regard to the second assumption, we should note that the problem with natural revelation is not a problem with the information God reveals but with us, its recipients. In creation, we receive enough knowledge of God to condemn us but not enough to save us. We see the majesty, holiness, and power of God and recognize our guilt

and insufficiency, but by stargazing we can learn nothing of Christ, his cross, or his kingdom.

Because we cannot be saved through what we know of God in creation, God has also given us *special revelation*—his spoken, written, intelligible word. Throughout human history, this has consisted of prophetic speech and inspired writings, which have now been finalized with the coming of Jesus Christ, the ultimate Prophet (Heb 1:1–2). Penned by about forty authors over some 1,500 years in three languages and on three continents, the Bible does not represent a single culture’s narrow perspective on religion but a concrete testimony from God delivered consistently throughout history to all nations and peoples. The purpose of this special revelation is to reveal Christ (John 5:39; 1 Pet 1:10–12), conform us to Christ (2 Pet 1:3–4), and make us “wise for salvation” (2 Tim 3:15). Scripture, written by holy men carried by the Holy Spirit (2 Pet 1:21), is thus our sole and infallible rule of faith and practice. It is no wonder that David exults, “The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple” (Ps 19:7).

The missionary imperative is a direct result of the fact that God has spoken decisively to all peoples, cultures, and times. The transcendent God has made himself known in the Bible. We believe; therefore, we speak (2 Cor 4:13). The question is, how do we speak? Are we free to retool and contextualize our message using any means, assuming those means are not sinful? Or are there also *particular* methods prescribed for us in that very Word?

BEYOND INSPIRATION

Many of us are familiar with the apostle Paul’s statement to Timothy that all Scripture is *inspired* or “breathed out by God” (2 Tim 3:16). Note that it is Scripture (*graphē*) itself, the end product of revelation, and not its authors that is referred to literally as “God-breathed” (*theopneustos*). It is not the case that Scripture is merely inspired in the aesthetic sense, just as we might describe an oration or concerto as

inspired. Neither is divine inspiration located merely in the redemptive events that Scripture describes, as though the authors of Scripture, weighed down by their cultural and historical baggage, had merely left us an imperfect recording of inspired events and truths we must mine for contemporary application. Rather, the very words they wrote—even down to the grammar and syntax—were the result of the Holy Spirit’s superintendence.¹⁰ And because the Spirit does not fail in this regard, Scripture is not only (1) inspired but (2) *infallible*, or incapable of affirming anything untrue. God cannot lie (Num 23:19; Titus 1:2). Further, he is able to communicate above and beyond the initial intention and intellect of Scripture’s human authors (1 Pet 1:10–12). This means that the sixty-six canonical books of Scripture are also inerrant—that is, they do not err. Building on this foundation, Paul reminds Timothy that all of God’s Word—without exception—is “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim 3:16).

But Paul is not just concerned with abstract arguments about the origins of our Bibles. He is zealous for the missionary task, and his instructions to his protégé concern his methods of ministry. So, in verse 17, Paul continues by explaining that Scripture is inspired “*that* the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (emphasis added). Have you ever sensed your own inadequacy in ministry, whether you were sharing the gospel, preaching a sermon, or counseling a fellow church member over coffee? Paul here reminds us that Scripture itself contains all that the “man of God” (a callback to an Old Testament euphemism for “prophet”) needs in order to discharge his mission. Peter makes a similar statement, telling us that “all things that pertain to life and godliness” are available to the believer through the knowledge of Christ (2 Pet 1:3), which comes to us through the text

10 This is what theologians refer to as *verbal, plenary inspiration*. Our recognition that the original autographs of Scripture contained the exact words purposefully inspired by God is one good reason to reject such hyper-contextualized renderings of Scripture as the MITs addressed earlier in this chapter. Since God spoke the actual words of the text of Scripture, then faithful translation must stay as close to original wordings and meanings as possible.

of Scripture (vv. 19–21). The Spirit uses his Word to cut to the heart, revealing motives and laying consciences bare before God (Heb 4:12; Eph 6:17). Scripture is not only (1) inspired and (2) infallible but also (3) *sufficient* to equip God’s people for his mission.

To say that Scripture is sufficient is not to say that frontlines gospel workers should not learn language, culture, professional skills, or other key strategies for surviving missionary life. The Bible gives us “all things necessary for [God’s] own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life.”¹¹ It does not tell us how to speak Swahili, change a flat tire while stranded on a dirt road, or balance a checkbook. Such practical knowledge comes to us as God also blesses his people with insight through the realm of common grace. Yet the Holy Spirit has given us his Word as a sufficient resource to enable us to fulfill the Great Commission by his power, disciple the nations through the spread of the gospel, and teach total obedience to the lordship of Christ. We do not gain the necessary edge in ministry by availing ourselves of the latest trends or self-help techniques or theories from psychology or sociology. We do not gain an advantage by playing fast and loose in our translations of the Bible for new languages or audiences, tiptoeing around unpopular words and ideas. With the Word of God in hand, men and women of God are sufficiently armed for every good work.

A fourth characteristic of Scripture must be addressed. The written Word of God is not only (1) inspired by the Spirit of God, (2) infallible, and (3) sufficient but as a result is also (4) necessarily *authoritative*. The problem in contemporary missions is not that evangelical missions thinkers and workers do not affirm the life-changing power of the Bible’s message or the importance of translating that message into the heart language of every people group. The problem is that we have not submitted to the Word ourselves.

11 2LCF 1.6.

SUFFICIENCY MEANS AUTHORITY

“Marry the mission; date the model.”

I (Alex) still remember my reaction when I first heard this maxim uttered by one of the leaders of our large, multisite church, where I served in student ministry. I chuckled, noting the double entendre, but inwardly I hesitated. Our mission, so the thinking went, was to spread the gospel message by any and all means apart from sin; the “how” was negotiable. The logic was appealing. But if this counsel would fail in marital affairs, how could it apply to the bride of Christ?

This pragmatism is rampant within evangelicalism in the West and in the U.S. in particular. The problem is our failure to recognize that God has given us both his *message* and his *means* in his Word. The Word of God not only contains the content of our message to the nations but is our infallible authority regarding the methods we are to use. Paul Washer, president of HeartCry Missionary Society, made this observation at a 2019 conference on missions:

We cannot have confidence in any ministry unless it is specifically, . . . prescribed by the Scriptures, no matter how noble that ministry may be; if it's not prescribed by the Scriptures, we're in trouble. . . . Throughout biblical history and church history, if there is one thing that God's people, as a whole and individuals, are prone to do, it is this: “And everyone did what was right in their own eyes.” In the absence of inspired, inerrant, infallible authority, man will invent. . . . The state of modern missions proves that our great need is to return to the Scriptures. Contemporary mission work is afloat in a labyrinth of contradictory opinions regarding the nature of the Great Commission, the definition and duty of a missionary, and the methods or strategies that are employed. Never in the history of the church have there been so many widely divergent views and such radically incompatible strategies. Such confusion is irrefutable evidence that we are once again guilty of doing what is right in our own eyes.¹²

12 Paul Washer, “2019 G3 Conference — Paul Washer — Session 12,” YouTube, 1:11:23, February 18, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fJq1xxk1Go0>.

Missions strategy, unmoored from Scripture's explicit instructions and example as to the means of ministry, is presently awash in a sea of methodologies drawn not from divine revelation but from such spheres as the social sciences and the business world. We are not free to experiment. We are bound to the Word.

APPLICATION

So, if Scripture is to be our authority, how does it tell us to go about our task? We will return to this foundational question throughout this book, but note these initial observations regarding the role of Scripture in our mission:

1. The Word of God is *supreme*. The Lord Jesus regarded the historic Scriptures as *God's direct speech* to his contemporaries, challenging the Jews, "Have you not read what was said to you by God?" (Matt 22:31). After the resurrection, Jesus sought not only to persuade his followers by presenting the proof of his physical body but also exegeted the Scriptures for them, to open their minds (Luke 24:17, 45–47). The apostle Paul followed in turn, warning the church in Galatia to weigh even the words of apostles and angels against the biblical teaching they had received: "But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed" (Gal 1:8). We must conclude that the Protestant emphasis on *sola Scriptura*—Scripture alone as the highest authority—is not the mere by-product of early modern European cultural controversies but is the clear example of Christ and his apostles.
2. The Word of God is *effectual*. The Spirit of God works through the Scriptures to perfectly accomplish whatever he intends to accomplish in the heart of the reader or listener (Isa 55:11), to open or harden the heart (1 Cor 1:18; 2 Cor 2:14). The Word of God, thus superintended by the illuminating, regenerating, and convicting work of the Holy Spirit,

is powerful and potent as a two-edged sword (Heb 4:12; Eph 6:17), and by it we are born again (1 Pet 1:23; Jas 1:18) and continue to receive our nourishment in the faith (1 Pet 2:2; 1 Tim 4:13). The Spirit's work is so inextricable from the written Word of God that the English Puritan theologian John Owen commented, "He that would utterly separate the Spirit from the word had as good burn his Bible."¹³ There is therefore no replacement for reading and understanding the Bible personally for oneself in one's own tongue.

Since God has spoken in Scripture, his Word must be treated as our ultimate, sufficient authority in the way we go about our mission. And if we care about God's heart for the world, we will care that the world has access to his Word. While Scriptures exist in languages spoken by 90 percent of the world's population, more than half the planet's languages and dialects are still without the Bible.¹⁴ Critical work must be done to take the whole counsel of divine revelation to unreached people groups who do not have access to God's Word in their heart language.

As we continue our study of the core doctrines of the faith and their bearing on the missionary task, if we do not first understand the supremacy and power of the Word of God, we will falter right out of the gate. We can only dare to proclaim God's way of salvation in Christ to the nations, at risk to ourselves, because God has cut through the subjectivity of human opinion and philosophy and spoken finally and decisively in a book. Our call to the missionary endeavor begins not with wanderlust or a private experience of calling but with a humble recognition that we hold in our fragile hands the searing words of the eternal God, and he intends for that Word to be read, understood, translated, preached, interpreted, and obeyed. Pick it up and read it!

13 John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William Henry Goold (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965) 3:192.

14 United Bible Societies, "About Us."

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What does it mean to say that God's revelation in the natural realm and in Scripture is the foundation of true knowledge? What are some other sources of knowledge believers tend to rely on instead?
2. What are the two types of divine revelation? What must an individual receive and believe to be saved?
3. What is meant by the terms "inspiration," "infallibility," "inerrancy," "sufficiency," and "authority" in the context of the Bible? In your experience, do evangelical Christians tend to forget any of these doctrines?
4. How should Christians use the Word of God as the final standard for determining issues of methodology? Can you think of particular passages in Scripture relevant to the way we go about ministry?
5. The Westminster and Second London Confessions both state that Scripture must be translated into the common languages of all the nations among whom the people of God find themselves. Why is this? What do you think missiologists mean when they speak of a person's "heart language"?
6. Advocates of the Muslim insider movement methodology promote Bible translations that leave out phrases like "Son of God" so as not to offend or confuse Muslim readers. Why is this problematic?
7. Reflect on your own spiritual journey. How has the Bible affected your walk with the Lord? What would your spiritual story look like if you had no access to the Bible?
8. How does God work in the world through his Word? What can Christians do to help more people have access to God's Word?