

Protestants following the Reformed tradition historically split into three tribes: the confessionalists, emphasizing doctrinal rigor; the pietists, emphasizing personal devotion, and the Kuyperians, emphasizing cultural engagement. This book marvelously blends all three perspectives by asking and answering a pivotal question: what sort of robust Christian piety and doctrine lead to balanced and bold Great Commission obedience in all of life? For those frustrated by the soft legalism of much of missions-focused literature and the narrow ecclesiocentrism of pietist thought, you'll find *Seeds and Stars* to be a refreshing restatement of timeless gospel truths and an engaging unfolding of some implications few usually ponder.

Alex Kocman
Director of Communications and Media, ABWE

E.D. Burns knows from his own years of labor on the mission field that the soil from which ministry fruit grows is the heart of a minister. Unless you are trusting in the Lord, you are bound to be discouraged and quit or resort to underhanded means which the Lord abhors. Thus he writes this doctrinally rich book from his heart to ours so that we can learn to cast our bread upon the waters and rest while the Lord in His time brings forth fruit. This is a book that will make your spirit buoyant again if you are sinking under the weight of ministerial discouragement. Add it to your go-to books. You will need it!

Conrad Mbewe
*Pastor of Kabwata Baptist Church
Founding Chancellor of the African Christian University in Lusaka, Zambia*

Once again, Burns has stepped into the role of older brother to bring clarity and conviction to the subject of mission theology. *Seeds and Stars* moves personally and passionately in the often-ignored direction of "Great Commission spirituality." This book is the ready antidote for missionaries on the verge of burnout and for students young and old who want to connect doctrine and devotion more directly for the cause of Christ across the world. Read *Seeds and Stars* in colleges, seminaries, Bible studies, church equipping classes, and wherever your Great Commission fervor is waning and you need a fresh vision of God's sovereign grace in your life and service.

Chris Burnett
Associate Director of Academics, The Master's Academy International

Any orthodox work on missiology has to find its way through a number of potholes—not the least of which are a tragic trend of shortsightedness and an overemphasis on the emboldened individual rather than the church. Burns has led us as readers safely through these potholes. What Burns has done in this work is twofold: he has helped the church understand how authentic missions is to be conducted, and he has reminded the church of the message that is to be proclaimed. He reminds the missiologically inclined reader that the Great Commission is the task of the church, not of an army of passionate individuals. And Burns doesn't let a strategy or tactic entice him away from the very center of missions work—the message that is preached when you get there. Burns explains that fidelity to the gospel message of justification by faith alone is the heartbeat of missions, and faithfulness on an individual level is guarded by a connection to the local church. If one of my theological students expressed an interest in the mission field, this is the book I would recommend.

*Peter Sammons
Director of Academic Publications & Assistant Faculty in Theology
The Master's Seminary*

Just as you cannot teach reading without knowing the alphabet, you cannot be an effective herald of the gospel without knowing certain fundamental truths of orthodox Christianity. Like the creeds and confessions of old, this book is a timely collection of those core Christian truths that in today's relativistic age are being abandoned by church leaders and missionaries alike in exchange for error, sentimentality, and subjectivism. Dr. Burns effectively reminds us that the key to a Christ-honoring ministry is not its clever approach to cultural issues, but rather rests in its ability to clearly and persuasively articulate and teach the ABCs of Christianity.

*John A. Tucker
Pastor of Community Bible Church, Beloit, Ohio*

Burns brings a unique blend of theological acumen, exegetical precision, and pastoral comfort to encourage the battle-weary gospel servant. Each chapter explains the implications of one of the five *Solas* of the Reformation. Burns applies these to the mission, worldview, and gospel service of Great Commission servants. He has spent enough time on mission fields around the world to know both the acute pain of suffering loss for the sake of Christ and the joys of triumph in ministry. He speaks candidly about the mystical, gnostic, and quasi-Christian movements and ideologies that litter the field of foreign and domestic missions and undermine the effectiveness and longevity of gospel servants. Burns is not afraid of attacking the sacred cows of modern evangelicalism, the false doctrines and man-centered disciplines that keep well-intentioned and highly motivated gospel servants shackled to the treadmill of achievement-oriented effort in Christian service. This book confronts and corrects the bad theology that infects Great Commission service. It comforts those discouraged in their efforts toward gospel advancement. The grand and glorious truths at the heart of the Reformed Protestant faith are as necessary today for the church's mission as they were five hundred years ago when their proclamation and defense sparked that greatest revival of truth the world has ever seen. I cannot recommend this book highly enough!

Jim Osman

Pastor of Kootenai Community Church

In contemporary evangelicalism, the authority and sufficiency of Scripture, biblical theology, and orthodox doctrine are out. Social activism, pietistic mysticism, and naked pragmatism are in. Consequently, much thinking about spirituality and missions seeks relevancy in “what works,” or better, “what works for me.”

Thanks be to God, Burns responds. Page after page of *Seeds and Stars* calls for a Great Commission spirituality that decidedly does not devolve from the present spirit of *Sola experientia*. Instead, Burns challenges the church to return to the great doctrines of the Reformation: *Sola Scriptura*, *Sola Fide*, *Sola Gratia*, *Solus Christus*, and *Soli Deo Gloria*.

Burns cuts to the heart, distinguishing law and gospel, exposing empty slogans, and proclaiming biblical truth. The Word of God indeed sets free those missionaries who have exhausted

themselves in believing or striving harder for unrealized spiritual breakthroughs, but whose real need is to return to the joy of life enslaved to Christ. Into the dry and weary land of missiology, where theologically questionable messages and methods abound, *Seeds and Stars* falls like a longed-for and refreshing rain. What a blessing!

Scott N. Callahan

Dean and Professor, The Institute of Public Theology

SEEDS
AND
STARS

SEEDS AND STARS

*Resting in Christ for
Great Commission Service*

E.D. Burns



Seeds and Stars:
Resting in Christ for Great Commission Service
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To:

Kristie,
a missionary wife
of whom the world was not worthy.
Hers was a devout life
of resting in Christ's righteousness,
hoping in God's promises,
and serving in obscurity.
Finally home.

Garret,
a man of valor,
like one of David's mighty men.
A lionhearted friend
who stood beside me at my darkest hour.

*His authority on earth allows us to dare to go to all the nations.
His authority in heaven gives us our only hope of success.
And His presence with us leaves us no other choice.*

—John Stott

FOREWORD

Throughout church history, countless examples can be offered of authentic biblical spirituality producing zeal and service in the life of a Christian. Not the spirituality found in exacting resolutions or rigorous disciplines, but the bedrock of all Christian spirituality—Jesus Christ.

To be more precise, Christ fuels all spirituality within believers through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit residing within a regenerate heart. The motivation to follow Christ, be obedient to His words, and be conformed to His image is a gift from Christ Himself. This biblically robust spirituality fuels our call to fulfill the Great Commission.

It is a privilege to recommend and encourage you on your journey in *Seeds and Stars*. E.D. Burns sets Christian spirituality within a context of a biblical, theological, and historical framework as the spark that should awaken all missionary efforts. Cross-cultural missions must rest solely in the glory of God revealed in Christ.

David Brainerd (1718–1747) is one such example of missionary zeal advancing from a life of intense and exacting spirituality. Born in New England in 1718 and reared in a godly home of Puritan lineage, Brainerd began his early missionary career working among the vast Indian tribes in New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey. While living in the untamed frontier of the new world, Brainerd put pen to paper filling his diary with soul-stirring accounts of his relationship with Christ, contemplation of Scripture, and his deep longing for personal holiness. In later years, in the hands of New England pastor

Jonathan Edwards, Brainerd's diaries would be published and become one of the most influential missionary biographies in the history of American evangelicalism.

In 1749, Edwards published *An Account of the Life of the Late Reverend Mr. David Brainerd*, viewing Brainerd as an exemplar of the kind of spirituality he saw revealed in Scripture. Edwards begins the "Author's Preface" to *The Life* with this statement: "There are two ways of representing and recommending true religion and virtue to the world; the one, by doctrine and precept; the other, by instance and example. . ."¹ The latter is Edwards's focus in his biographical account of Brainerd, tracing his Christian piety through four areas of thought: (1) evangelical humiliation, (2) a change of nature, (3) sensitivity toward sin, and finally, (4) holiness of life. In each of these areas, Edwards seeks to demonstrate how Brainerd's spirituality and experience are an example to emulate and the inducement to all missionary endeavors.

Brainerd was committed to rational theology as well as to its everyday practice in his life. In other words, his theological contemplations were not separated from his pursuit of godliness. Theology and spirituality were two parts of one whole—the Christian life. Longing for spiritual maturity, Brainerd writes:

One day I remember in particular (I think it was in June, 1740) I walked to a considerable distance from the college [Yale College], in the fields alone at noon, and in prayer found such unspeakable sweetness and delight in God, that I thought, if I must continue still in this evil world, I wanted always to be there, to behold God's glory: My soul dearly loved all mankind and longed exceedingly that they should enjoy what I enjoyed. It seemed to be a little resemblance of heaven.²

Brainerd's love for "all mankind" proceeds from his enjoyment of beholding God's glory. An intense spiritual longing for God

1 Jonathan Edwards, "The Life and Diary of David Brainerd," *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1997), 313.

2 Jonathan Edwards, 320.

and His glory was the flint that ignited Brainerd to obey the Great Commission. For Brainerd, right belief always brings about a corresponding right action facilitated by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The final entry in Brainerd's diary was made on Friday, October 2, 1747:

My soul was this day, at turns, sweetly set on God: I longed to be with Him, that I might behold His glory. I felt sweetly disposed to commit all to Him, even my dearest friends, my dearest flock, my absent brother, and all my concerns for time and eternity. Oh that His kingdom might come in the world; that they might all love and glorify Him, for what He is in Himself; and that the blessed Redeemer might "see of the travail of His soul, and be satisfied!" "Oh come, Lord Jesus, come quickly! Amen."³

Even in the final days of his life, Brainerd delighted in the comforting words of Scripture, the beauty with which he viewed God, and the joys he continually experienced in Christ. His love for his Indian congregations and ardent zeal for the gospel of Christ to be spread worldwide was seamlessly fueled by his relationship with Christ.

Spirituality is the seedbed that produces a passion and zeal for the nations to be reached with the saving message of the gospel of Jesus Christ. If our spirituality does not produce such zeal for the mission of Christ, it is good for nothing.

Dustin Benge, PhD
Associate Professor of Biblical Spirituality and Historical Theology
Vice President of Communications
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3 Edwards, "Life of David Brainerd", 2:385.

PREFACE

First Things: Terms and Vocabulary

This book is not only for traditional missionaries. Any Christian could benefit from it. Though I wrote it as someone who has been a missionary for decades, I sought to apply it to all Christians. Instead of using the term “missionary” exclusively, I will frequently use the terms “Great Commission servant,” “gospel worker,” “gospel servant,” and other synonymous terms to incorporate anyone seeking to play an active role in Great Commission service. Sometimes, to emphasize the unique cross-cultural challenges that *missionaries* face, I might use a term like “cross-cultural servant,” etc. Such Great Commission Christians typically fall under the categories of missionary, minister, cross-cultural worker, evangelist, church-planter, disciple-maker, etc.

To be clear, the Great Commission is the mission of the church in general, not the mission of individuals specifically. But in obedience to the Great Commission, churches set apart, send, and support individual servants for more vocational, intentional, and specialized service in the Great Commission—some serve in more deacon-like roles, while others serve in more elder-like roles. Again, the spirituality and missions-oriented principles of this book are for all Christians, but my point of reference and illustrations come from decades of labor in bicultural, foreign-language, least-reached contexts.

In terms of language and style, I use the general “he,” though I am aware of and thankful for the many sisters in Christ who play indispensable roles alongside their brothers in the Great Commission. In most places in the world, female missionaries are essential for reaching women and children. Since the Great Commission necessitates and prioritizes churchly work (planting churches, training pastors, translating Scripture, defending doctrine, etc.), it assumes elder-qualified servants. And so I am writing to encourage brothers and sisters in general, but especially brothers who lead as churchmen in the teaching and proclamation of the Word.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank my late wife, Kristie, for her genuine kindness and encouragement for this project. I am amazed at how God held her fast through the sufferings and struggles of service in the Great Commission. She went home to be with the Lord during this book's final editing stages. Her hopeful endurance and missionary devotion influenced this book more than any other. I had written this book for her, but though she won't be able to read it, I trust that she will see its fruit in heaven. And to my sons, Elijah and Isaiah, their unbreakable spirit and resolute trust in God's sovereign promises are simply otherworldly. To my mother, father, Mike, Mindy, Emily, Claire, and Gracie, I am amazed by their unending and lavish support and kindness. They have been a rock to me all my life. To Garret and Ben, two friends of courage and honor who are more faithful than brothers to me. To Nate and Joe, two friends who show me undeserved kindness and gracious encouragement. You are God's gifts to me.

Thanks to John Tucker for reading the first draft of this manuscript and providing pastoral feedback. And to my colleagues, friends, fellow missionaries, coworkers, students, pastors, and supporting churches, may the contents of this book build you up as you struggle on in Christ's service. Never forget that, in the Lord, your labor is never in vain. He who called you is faithful.

*E.D. Burns
Alaska
June 2022*

PROLOGUE

CASTING SEEDS, COUNTING STARS

He will fulfill the promises that He hath made unto Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. His promises are with us, as well as with them. And He is present with us, as well as He was with them. Christ is with us until the world's end. Let His little flock be bold therefore.

-William Tyndale-

Sarah snickered. Her laughter skipped through the stiff evening air. Yahweh had just assured Abraham and Sarah that they would have a son, even at their old age. The impossible of impossibilities came in the form of a cryptic promise from an unseen God. They had no Scriptures to remind them of God's truthfulness and trustworthiness. Not only would the Lord provide a son to the elderly couple, but through this son's Seed, Yahweh would bless the nations. Abraham's descendants would be as numerous as the stars. The promise seemed too good to be true. In fact, it seemed like the beginning of a cosmic comedy, a foolhardy fairytale. Was this God a dark-humored comedian, a tall-tale teller? If Abraham and Sarah were to take this God at His word, they would certainly go down as dupes of a great tragedy. But something gripped them about this God—

the words He spoke, the care He conveyed, the hopefulness of His pledge, the assurance of His covenant, and the immensity of its implications.

Abraham and Sarah knew they would never be the same. They could trust this God; indeed, they *must* trust this God, living as nomads in the land of promise and waiting for God to build His kingdom for them. Every clear night, as Abraham lay with his flocks in the fields, he would count the stars, “being fully assured that what God had promised, He was able also to perform” (Romans 4:21 NASB95). The One who breathed out the stars and breathed life into Adam, that same One had breathed faith into Abraham’s heart to rest in the promises of this future Seed and His global kingdom. In hope of that Messiah, Abraham and all his children by faith would rest, though they would sojourn in obscurity.

While the generations of Abraham’s children generously cast gospel seeds upon the earth, these Great Commission servants rest under the stars. The white seeds that fall upon the dark earth remind them of the bright stars that fill the black sky. They trust that the life is in the seeds, not their service. They sleep like God is sovereign. He alone will see to it that the seeds and the soils bear much fruit. As the starry night bears witness to the future harvest of the promised Seed, Abraham’s children through faith would shine like the stars. They are glimmers of hope in every dark and perverse generation. From the Seed would emerge redwoods of righteousness in the garden of God. They are servants of the promise, pilgrims of providence. As the coming kingdom’s ambassadors, they bear witness to the Savior-King who will redeem and rule the nations.

They count the stars and rest in God’s promise. They cast the seeds and rest in God’s providence.

The spirituality of those who serve in light of the coming King and His kingdom is worthy of our consideration. This is more than a contemplative, mystical spirituality. This is biblical spirituality with an evangelical stamp. This is a missionary spirituality applicable to all of God’s gospel servants. This is Great Commission spirituality for the whole church.

Defining Great Commission Spirituality

Here's the main idea: Great Commission spirituality must first emerge from a hearty trust in the triune God, and then it should grow out of and bear fruit from the power of the Word of Christ. It should result in a restful, glad-hearted contentment in God. It therefore labors freely and gratefully to the glory of God and the salvation of the nations.

Great Commission spirituality is a subset of classical evangelical spirituality. It actively trusts God's promises to gather worshipers from every people. It heartily rests in Christ's atonement and righteousness. And it seeks to sacrificially serve with a strength that can only come from the Holy Spirit. Throughout the history of the church, such a devotion to Christ's gospel has propelled God's servants to proclaim the Word of Christ and establish disciples in contexts with no Bible or Christian witness. These servants willingly deny themselves worldly comforts and contentedly endure a lifetime of hardship that can only be explained by a durable hope in the resurrection promises of Scripture. All this to the praise of the glory of God's sovereign grace in Jesus Christ. Whether helping in a local church or serving abroad where there is no church, Great Commission spirituality considers all things loss to gain one thing—Christ and His renown.

The famous Bebbington Quadrilateral, of historian David Bebbington, highlights evangelicalism's historic features of spirituality in modern Britain. Bebbington observed that crucicentrism, biblicism, conversionism, and activism dominated evangelical spirituality during Britain's eighteenth through twentieth centuries. As helpful as this historical analysis is, the aim of this book is to go back to some foundational evangelical doctrines recovered by the Protestant Reformation and to discuss how they support, strengthen, and direct evangelical-minded Christians in their gospel service. Consequently, this book proposes no innovative or original brand of spirituality. I am merely unearthing ancient gospel pillars of the confessing church and demonstrating their durability for Great Commission spirituality and service. And I am consciously focusing on

spirituality that grows out of evangelical doctrine and devotion, not the practical methods so often associated with literature about spirituality and even missions-oriented themes.

Words have meaning and ideas have consequences. More than that, theological words have transcendent meanings and theological ideas have eternal consequences. Missiology (i.e., mission theory and praxis) grows out of theology. But as theology drives mission practice, spirituality is the often-overlooked, cohesive binding of theology and missiology. Great Commission spirituality is the forge in which the Spirit takes the steel of theology and crafts the tool of missiology. To use another imperfect analogy: theology is the root, missiology is the fruit, and spirituality is the sap.

Why this Book?

Most literature on Christian spirituality tends to revisit the writings of mystics and monastics. When Christians read contemporary spirituality resources, they commonly pick up books on developing holy habits, prayer practices, contemplative methods, and creative spiritual disciplines. Yet this is only one variety of historical Christian spirituality. A vast divide separates the two legacies of mystical spirituality and Reformational/evangelical spirituality. When many Christians think of the contributions of Great Commission servants, usually they think of biographical literature, which seems to tell stories of super saints. Indeed, many biographies retell legendary accomplishments of sacrificial missionaries of generations past. However, more than learning from what they famously achieved, we must look deeper at what they believed. We would do well to consider how certain beliefs are especially applicable for gospel service of all kinds, and how fruitfulness and faithfulness emerge from resting in and acting upon the promises of God. Because Great Commission servants willingly place themselves and their families in vulnerable and hazardous fields, they live where they must trust God in everything, for everything. The promises and doctrines they stand upon are so much more powerful than their intriguing stories we love to tell. The reason their stories are so

compelling is because their Rock is so durable and enduring. We all can learn to rest in the God who sustains His gospel servants. There is no Rock like our God.

God certainly did and does amazing things through weak gospel servants. And that is just the point: the triune God does it. And He seems to delight in using frail, ordinary servants who are willing to risk everything to abide in His Word, cling to His grace, and hope in His promises. On the one hand, mystic and monastic spirituality withdraws from the darkness of the world in order to grow closer to Christ and achieve subjective union with Him. On the other hand, the spirituality of gospel laborers, in its purest form, penetrates the darkest parts of the world. With objective union with Christ as its ground and not its goal, this Great Commission spirituality abides in Christ, receives sustaining strength from Christ, and becomes more like Christ.

All Christians can certainly learn from the truths, heart, and active faith of Great Commission spirituality, just as the whole church can learn from the spirituality of the persecuted, martyred, and those faith-filled saints mentioned in Hebrews 11. Just as most Christians who read about theology are not trained theologians and most Christians who read about ministry are not trained ministers, so we can learn from the doctrinal legacy of Great Commission servants and their grace-fueled lives and grace-filled beliefs. Beyond what they experience and accomplish, their transgenerational and transcultural biblical spirituality and theological truths hold a treasury of spiritual gold for any Christian. Great Commission servants have no special knowledge of God or access to extra-special grace. Yet the perspective of Great Commission spirituality is unique in that the contexts and occasions for spiritual life and practice are uncommon to most Christians whom God never sends into such service.

Duplex Gratia, Mortification, and Vivification

This book draws from decades of teaching in numerous missions contexts, from the Natives in bush Alaska to doctoral students in

urban America, from remote villages in Africa to underground churches in Asia. In the years of teaching biblical spirituality to the global church, I describe the general process of holy living as: (1) trusting in and keeping the Christ-centered Word, (2) under the lordship of Christ, (3) by the Spirit of God, (4) to the glory of God's sovereign grace. And in relation to that, some main marks of progress in Christian spirituality would be: (1) resting more assuredly in Christ, (2) growing closer to Christ, and (3) conforming more to Christlikeness. These general descriptions of spirituality are Trinitarian, Christ-centered, and Bible-centered. Though these *descriptions* all imply our participation, my ground *definition* of biblical sanctification follows the simple answer from the Westminster Shorter Catechism, question 35, which emphasizes God's sovereign agency. He alone is the sanctifier: "Sanctification is the work of God's free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness." And here is one passage that determinatively underscores God's sovereign working in our spiritual growth: "Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it" (1 Thessalonians 5:23–24). Notice how it is God not only working *for* us but also working utterly *in* us. This is what theologians have historically called *duplex gratia*—"double grace." God in Christ through the Spirit works for us (justification) and in us (sanctification). God Himself grants us pardon and power. In our union with Christ, we receive the initial forensic blessings of justification through faith alone (pardon), and we equally receive the progressive filial blessings of sanctification through faith alone (power). God alone transfers us to the kingdom of His Son, and likewise transforms us into the image of His Son. We must regularly hear of God's free grace in Christ for our sanctification from Adam's corruption just as we need to hear of God's free grace in Christ for our justification from Adam's condemnation.

Indeed, we must pursue holy living, but such efforts (i.e., spiritual disciplines, practices, exercises, prayers, obedience,

etc.) are not “sanctification.” God alone sanctifies. Our responsibility is to respond through mortification (e.g., fleeing sin, putting off the old man) and vivification (e.g., pursuing righteousness, putting on the new man). A holy life is the fruitful evidence of God’s sovereign work in sanctification.

This Book’s Organizing Principle and Audience

This book reflects on and applies grace-filled doctrines for Great Commission spirituality and service. It highlights commonly accepted Protestant doctrines that are fundamental for hopeful endurance in a life poured out in Great Commission obedience. These are not impractical doctrines of archaic traditions. Rather, they are the lifeblood of theologically minded servants who remain devoted for life and bear gospel fruit.

In Part 1 (“Grace-Filled Doctrines”), each of the first five chapters applies one of the five *Solas* of the Reformation and shows how it strengthens and stabilizes Great Commission service. As the chapters advance, they build upon each other, progressively integrating related themes. Chapter 5 ties together the major themes and concludes Part 1. Part 2 (“Grace-Fueled Disciplines”) completes the book with two chapters focused on devotion. These chapters reflect and apply the five *Solas* and their implications as highlighted in Part 1. I intentionally emphasized gospel doctrines over spiritual disciplines because this reflects the commensurate burden of the Bible for Christian formation.

Why Not a Focus on Prayer and Biblical Disciplines?

As much as I wanted to write about the disciplines of prayer and biblical meditation, I decided to focus primarily on doctrine and devotion, or devotional doctrine (i.e., “light and heat,” “logic on fire”). Though spirituality and Great Commission service grow out of a rich historical legacy of uniting doctrine and devotion, in much popular literature doctrine and devotion do not seem to be natural companions. In historical spirituality, devotional doctrine dominates Great Commission spirituality for Great Commission service.

Building upon foundational Protestant doctrines, I have focused on the mindset disciplines of hope and endurance over against practical principles of prayer, Bible intake, and other beneficial disciplines. Considering how much I would love to say about prayer, communion with God, and biblical meditation, all those topics would be more than sufficient to comprise a separate book. I had planned an additional five chapters about more practical spirituality topics, but for the sake of length and accessibility, I decided to not include those, but make them into a future book. So even though I am writing about spirituality, don't think it strange that I do not highlight the popular spirituality practices and even basic biblical practices associated with it.

For the Polycentric Global Church

Today's complexities of international living and the diminishing security of the traditional missionary have created unique challenges for long-term service. Hostile governments with digital surveillance and excessive cost of living have complicated what many missionaries have taken for granted for decades. So not all gospel servants serving the unreached and undisciplined fit neatly into a traditional missionary framework. Many must establish creative platforms for visas, some must develop self-sustaining businesses in order to serve bivocationally, and others now find themselves serving cross-culturally in gateway megacities in their own passport countries. Though some bivocational Christians living cross-culturally might not identify as traditional church-sent missionaries, many are doing the work of missionaries alongside local indigenous Christians or in cooperation with traditional missions teams. Some are college students, some are teachers, some are diplomats, and others are in business. Keeping in mind these complicated and creative factors, though I write from the perspective of a traditional missionary, I have chosen to write for the polycentric Great Commission-minded global church—everyone to everywhere.

Because this book is not exclusively for missionaries, as I stated in the preface, I use the term "Great Commission servant" and other synonymous terms in place of the very specialized term "missionary." Are all gospel servants missionaries, then?

No. Are all gospel servants pastors? No. And are they all elder-qualified? No. But all Christians can aspire to serve as evangelists and disciple-makers in light of the Great Commission through their local churches, vocations, and various life contexts. The truths reflected upon in this book have sustained and stabilized countless gospel servants for generations. My prayer is that you will be revived and refreshed to rest in Christ and plod on quietly in the Lord's vineyard, knowing that your labor in the Lord is never in vain.

The Heart of the Book

I am writing to encourage fellow strugglers, not to motivate and catalyze more laborers for the harvest. If some read this book and sense an urgency to reach the unreached, then praise the Lord. But I am not intending to provoke or motivate. I'm not burdened to inspire radical sacrifice. My aim is to look honestly at the humanly impossible task of the Great Commission and ask questions about our assumptions, motives, and strategies. I aim to highlight timeless evangelical doctrines that serve as a stabilizing force to resist every wind of doctrine and every latest ministry philosophy and methodology that, like a siren call, woo us away from the simplicity of the gospel message and its necessary proclamation.

This is not a polemical or apologetic book. In fact, this is not even an academic book. I have tried not to quote or footnote anything unless it seemed critical or unique for illustrating a point. For instance, I occasionally quote the philosopher C. S. Lewis (1898–1963), but not my favorite theologians, because Lewis had an inimitable knack for crafting analogies and stories that could strike at the heart. However, I can convey theological convictions (which are not original to me) in my own words as though I were discussing them in class. I want this book to read as though I were sitting down in a grad school seminar or a church gathering with like-minded Great Commission workers and lecturing naturally about how these gospel doctrines contribute to our staying power in Christ's service. My approach in this book reflects many of my class

lectures. I will speak frankly about some controversial issues, and I don't pretend to tiptoe around proverbial sacred cows. I will be candid about my own failures, mistakes, and struggles—I have had many to be sure. And I hope to speak the truth openly, graciously, and unambiguously: “But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God” (2 Corinthians 4:2). Some might find the doctrinal applications of these chapters to be disagreeable, and maybe even too difficult to swallow. Some might wonder why no one has ever said these things to them before. And others might weep with joy, resting assured that they cannot frustrate God's providence and that they cannot miss out on “God's best” for them.

Below is the spirit in which I wish the convictions and reflections of these pages to be heard. About exhorting a fellow believer with whom we might have differences, the British pastor, abolitionist, and hymn writer, John Newton (1725–1807), advised this:

As to your opponent, I wish that before you set pen to paper against him, and during the whole time you are preparing your answer, you may commend him by earnest prayer to the Lord's teaching and blessing. This practice will have a direct tendency to conciliate your heart to love and pity him; and such a disposition will have a good influence upon every page you write. If you account him a believer, though greatly mistaken in the subject of debate between you, the words of David to Joab concerning Absalom, are very applicable: “Deal gently with him for my sake.” The Lord loves him and bears with him; therefore you must not despise him, or treat him harshly. The Lord bears with you likewise, and expects that you should show tenderness to others, from a sense of the much forgiveness you need yourself. In a little while you will meet in heaven; he will then be dearer to you than the nearest friend you have upon earth is to you now. Anticipate that period in your thoughts; and though you may find it necessary to oppose his errors,

view him personally as a kindred soul, with whom you are to be happy in Christ forever.¹

I desire to be straightforward like a brother and as someone who has learned from many mistakes and still has hope that God uses weak and foolish people for great and wonderful things. More than feeling challenged, I pray that you will trust God's promises more deeply and rest in Christ as your righteousness more consciously. I hope that when you finish this book, you truly rest and rejoice in the truth of God's infinite, immutable, and eternal love for you in Christ—that your sacrifices and service cannot improve His love for you, and that your shortcomings and sins cannot diminish His love for you. So, out of gratitude for God's amazing love in Christ for you, go spend and be spent for His glory. But don't go with a debtor's ethic. Don't serve as though you need to pay Him back, and don't serve Him as though He needed anything from you. Serve the triune God in the Great Commission with a glad-hearted contentment that says, "Though He slay me, I will hope in Him." (Job 13:15).

Final Note

Dear missionary, evangelist, church planter, disciple maker, apologist, translator, missions-minded pastor, supportive volunteer, third-culture kid, Christian brother or sister, and fellow struggler, you and I have probably never met. We might never meet till we stand glorified in the presence of the Lamb. The Great Commission life is a road less traveled. Though it is a rough and inglorious path, those who endeavor it are just simple travelers. We're nothing special. We're not heaven's special forces. We're not radical. We're merely ordinary sinners, justified through faith alone, to whom God has entrusted an extraordinary task. We follow the Lamb wherever He goes. And the Lion of Judah treads through the hostile nations of this world and sets free worshipers for Himself. We have the indescribable

1 John Newton, "Letter XIX: On Controversy," *The Works of the Rev. John Newton*, vol. 1 (New Haven, CT: Nathan Whiting, 1824), 153.

privilege of abandoning worldly security, status, and health to be His ambassadors, suffering for His name, and imploring the nations: “Be reconciled to God.” With glad-hearted contentment and fire in our bones, we should declare with the apostle Paul, “But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God” (Acts 20:24).