

# Foundations for Fruitful Church Planting



# Foundations for Fruitful Church Planting

Essentials *before* You Launch

KEN L. DAVIS

*Foreword by J. D. Payne*

WIPF & STOCK • Eugene, Oregon

FOUNDATIONS FOR FRUITFUL CHURCH PLANTING  
Essentials *before* You Launch

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**To my wife and best friend Sharon,**  
for her loving support and partnership  
through the years on our  
church planting and coaching journey.

“Many women have done excellently,  
but you surpass them all” (Prov 31:29).



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# Foreword

MY WIFE AND I moved to Indianapolis, Indiana in 1999 where she would begin her residency in internal medicine and pediatrics. Though I was a PhD student and served as a church planting intern with a new church in the city, I was hoping to teach part-time at the collegiate level. Prior to leaving Kentucky, a particular Bible college on the Northeast side of Indianapolis caught my attention. The Baptist Bible College of Indianapolis (later Crossroads Bible College) started in the early 1980s and had the unique vision of “training Christian leaders to reach a multi-ethnic urban world for Christ.” For the next few years, I would have the honor to teach for the school, begin my ministry as a professor, and develop relationships with many wonderful brothers and sisters.

Prior to being hired, I was introduced to Ken Davis. He was a professor, had served as a church planter and, along with a few others, was instrumental in founding the college. Here was a man with evangelism and disciple-making running through his veins. He was kind and an outstanding educator whom all the students loved. He was also an encouragement to this young man starting out in the world of church planting. We had been influenced by many of the same scholars and practitioners. But, I should have spent more time gleaning from his church-planting wisdom than asking how to fix the faculty copier when it jammed. So, years later when I heard Ken and Roger McNamara published the massive *The YBH (Yes, But How?) Handbook of Church Planting*, I quickly ordered a copy.

Since those days of walking the long hallways of the college and the publication of *The YBH Handbook*, a great deal of church planting literature has been produced. While it is hard to imagine a time when church planting books were few, this situation did exist at the turn of the century. But that was then, and this is now. So, *why the need for another church planting book?*

My immediate response is the art and science of church planting have developed a great deal in the past few decades. And a single-volume resource is needed to address both the contemporary developments and publications while keeping the church rooted in a biblical foundation and healthy missiological principles: Thus, the need for *Foundations for Fruitful Church Planting*.

In this work Ken reminds us that though church planting is oriented toward the practical, a whole-Bible theology is needed for such apostolic endeavors. Sadly, the church has observed, over several decades, numerous church-planting ministries which failed to be grounded in biblical theology and wise missiology. Too many church planters forgot the foundations for fruitful ministry. As Ken writes, “Church planting is what God does, while we engage in the Great Commission.” Many planters have been tempted by humanism and pragmatism only to have planted a church—but failed to make disciples.

And Ken continually returns to the emphasis on disciple making. Jesus never told us to plant churches, but it is out of a disciple making movement that churches are birthed. Or, as you will soon discover, church planting is “*evangelism with an ecclesiological intent!*” While a great deal of church planting, particularly in North America, is little more than shuffling of the sheep around in the kingdom to create more churches of different flavors, the book you hold in your hand contains a plea to return to the apostolic imagination that drove the church to labor where no foundation existed.

But before you assume this book is only about church-planting theology and theory, it should be known that Ken trends toward the practical. You will be challenged in a variety of ways to move the lofty concepts and principles from the theoretical to reality. For “biblical theology, rather than being abstract and merely stuffy academics, should guide and direct our church planting strategies and methods.” Orthodoxy leads the church to orthopraxy. And this book is no high-altitude cruiser that keeps readers in the clouds and disconnected from the ground.

The time has arrived for the publication of *Foundations for Fruitful Church Planting*; and I am extremely thankful it has! In addition to drawing from the wealth of literature that now shapes the church-planting corpus, Ken’s years of practical ministry experience in the trenches and educational endeavors in the classrooms have produced an excellent book that will serve the church well. You are learning from one of the best. Do not take this opportunity lightly. Be a wise steward with what you are about to receive.

If only I had this book in 1999!

J. D. Payne

Professor of Christian Ministry, Samford University

Author of *Discovering Church Planting* and *Apostolic Church Planting*

# Acknowledgements

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Dr. William Smallman,  
Mrs. Dorothy Easterly,  
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Dr. Robert Weiss,  
Stephen Poindexter,  
Jennifer McManus,  
and the many church planters with whom I have partnered  
for their encouragement and feedback.



# List of Abbreviations

ASV	American Standard Version
BAM	Business as Mission
EBC	The Expositors Bible Commentary
<i>EDWM</i>	<i>Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions</i>
EFCA	The Evangelical Free Church of America
<i>EMQ</i>	<i>Evangelical Missions Quarterly</i>
EMS	Evangelical Missiological Society
<i>ERT</i>	<i>Evangelical Review of Theology</i>
ESV	English Standard Version
<i>GCRJ</i>	<i>Great Commission Research Journal</i>
GLI	Gateway Leadership Initiative
<i>IBMR</i>	<i>International Bulletin of Missionary Research</i>
<i>IRM</i>	<i>International Review of Missions</i>
<i>JETS</i>	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
<i>JMT</i>	<i>The Journal of Ministry and Theology</i>
NAC	New American Commentary
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NCCS	New Covenant Commentary Series
<i>NDB</i>	<i>The New Dictionary of the Bible</i>
NICNT	New International Commentary of the New Testament
NIV	New International Version

NKJV	New King James Version
NSBT	New Studies in Biblical Theology
NT	New Testament
NTC	New Testament Commentary
OT	Old Testament
PNTC	The Pillar New Testament Commentaries
TNTC	Tyndale New Testament Commentaries.
WCC	World Council of Churches

# Introduction

AFTER GRADUATING FROM UNIVERSITY years ago, I worked for a contractor building houses and apartments. We often had to wait patiently until the concrete foundation was poured before we could begin erecting the walls. Solid foundations are required for an edifice to stand the tests of time. Ask any architect drawing up the blueprint plans for a residential house or commercial building. Talk to any building contractor. Foundations are crucial.

Jesus recognized this truth when he concluded the Sermon on the Mount with a parable of two builders. The two men built on two foundations and saw far different endings/results. Only the house built on the solid rocky foundation stood when the storms came (Matt 7:24–27). The apostle Paul also recognized the importance of strong, sturdy foundations when he wrote about the church, the “household of God,” being built on the firm foundation of the divine revelation given to and authoritatively taught by the apostles and prophets (Eph 2:19–20).

Writing to the Corinthian church which he had planted, Paul uses two metaphors—one from agriculture and the other from construction—to describe his apostolic ministry among them:

I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. . . . For we are God’s fellow workers. You are God’s field, God’s building. According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.  
(1 Cor 3:6, 9–11)

Significantly, Paul speaks of the church he planted at Corinth as both a field and a building—and church planters are described as partners, co-laborers working together with God. Their assignment is to plant the seeds of the

gospel from which new churches can spring up and grow. Their calling and role are also to lay secure foundations on which new churches can be built. Ultimately Jesus Christ and his gospel message are the only foundation, but he uses human instruments—church planters—to build solid foundations so that other gospel workers like Apollos can follow behind to build the superstructure and shepherd healthy churches. These startup church planting builders must recognize that their work is always “according to the grace of God” and for his matchless glory alone.

In this key passage, Paul the planter humbly presents himself as a wise and skillful master builder (3:10, Greek: *architekton*). In New Testament times, the master builder was responsible to oversee the work of the other workers on the job. As we will see, Paul almost always had teammates. Initially, Priscilla and Aquila labored with him at Corinth—but others soon joined them. “Before his helpers Silas and Timothy arrived (see Acts 18:4–5), Paul had worked out a building plan to lay the foundation for the structure. Paul, then, is not only the architect but also the contractor who with his subcontractors builds the edifice.”<sup>1</sup> Paul sees himself as a specialist, as not only the builder but also the designer of spiritual and ecclesiological foundations!

Starting new churches *always* involves laying foundations. Some foundations are hurried and faulty. Others stand the test of time. “The quality of these foundations has profound implications for what can be built on them. Strong and secure foundations provide the basis for healthy churches and effective mission. Weak and inadequate foundations jeopardize these prospects.”<sup>2</sup> Paul desires future church planters to follow his example and ensure a secure substructure is laid so others can build the superstructure and the church will endure and grow. In verse 11, Paul places the word “foundation” first in the Greek sentence. Why? For emphasis. His point: every edifice, every building, every structure needs a solid foundation. “Enthusiasm alone is not enough. Nor is slavish dependence on guidelines in training manuals any guarantee of success. Effective church planting, according to Paul, requires the grace of God, appropriate expertise and considerable care.”<sup>3</sup>

This book is being written by one who deeply cares for church planters. I have been in church planting off and on for about forty-five years—both as a planter and a trainer-coach. My observation is that many church planters, passionate about their calling and anxious to get started and to have something to share with their support partners, rush into their planting project ill-equipped for a long-term ministry and a sustainable new church. Often,

1. Kistemaker and Hendriksen, *Corinthians*, 110.

2. Murray, *Church Planting*, 11.

3. Murray, *Church Planting*, 11.

they begin planting before laying a proper foundation for their work. And this comes back to haunt them and weaken their ministry.

In this book, I endeavor to guide church planters and their leadership teams to establish *six* crucial foundations *before* they ever launch a new church. Two chapters are devoted to each foundational issue. The first two chapters seek to lay a strong *biblical* foundation, to convince leaders that while planting is never directly commanded in Scripture, it is a thoroughly biblical concept and New Testament practice. Eight lines of biblical evidence are explored. Chapters 3 and 4 describe why a robust theology is vital and how a right understanding of the mission of God (*Missio Dei*), kingdom of God, and glory of God provide a theocentric/doxological framework for effective missional ministry. Our objective is to build a strong *theological* foundation for future ministry.

The next two chapters seek to lay an *ecclesiological* foundation. They help planters see the centrality of the church in God's ongoing program, properly define a local church, and clarify what kind of congregation should be established. The "marks" of a true church will be discussed. The seventh and eighth chapters demonstrate why the study of missiology is essential and then propose best practices and principles for effective church planting. For example, the need for cultural exegesis and discerning ministry contextualization are discussed along with other helpful missiological principles. Our objective: to lay a sturdy *missiological* foundation.

Chapters 9 and 10 address foundational *spiritual* issues aspiring church planters must not neglect. They lay out needed character qualifications for planters and why the planter's own "soul care" and spiritual disciplines/formation are so vital. Ministry must be the overflow of a heart devoted to and worshipping Christ. The need for recruiting a committed partner prayer team and gospel coach are discussed.

The final two chapters focus on pertinent *practical* concerns—how the lead planter can prepare himself and his family for the challenges ahead. Pertinent issues such as affirming one's call, the need for being assessed to see if one is wired to be a lead planter, competences needed, boot camp and ongoing training, recruiting a seasoned coach, and raising a support team are all discussed.

As you can see, this book is not a training manual. I have previously co-authored a how-to text with step-by-step recommendations for planting a growing church.<sup>4</sup> This book is particularly intended for four specific groups: those who feel the call to and are preparing for church planting, their teammates, those exploring what church planting is all about, and

4. McNamara and Davis, *Y-B-H (Yes, But How?) Handbook*.

planting coaches. It is written primarily for practitioners and those aspiring to be out in the front lines of ministry. Although I am inviting planters to think seriously about biblical, theological, ecclesiological, missiological, spiritual, and practical preparatory concerns, my intent is to enable church planters to examine their presuppositions and expectations so that they can lay strong foundations for the churches they plant. For this reason, each chapter concludes with recommended reflection questions, proposed follow-through exercises for the planter and his team to work on, and a closing prayer. Each chapter also includes recommended resources for those who desire to dig deeper.

I write from the perspective and conviction of an evangelical Christian, fully submitted to the final authority and full inspiration, inerrancy, and sufficiency of Scripture. The reader will notice lots of scriptural exegesis and allusions to Scripture to validate and elucidate my statements. Having planted and coached primarily in North America, my work naturally reflects that context. But I have endeavored to also include foundational materials for those headed into international missionary work and church planting. I grew up as a teen in what was British Guiana and saw my dad planting churches—and have traveled and coached church planters overseas. Church planting is my passion!

Many of the concepts contained in this book were refined in the crucible of classroom and online course discussions with my students at Baptist Bible Seminary in Pennsylvania over the past twenty years. Others were refined in coaching sessions with planting teams I have been privileged to work with over the years. To them, I am eternally indebted. To them, and others like them committed to plant Christ-honoring, Great Commission-driven, and gospel-focused churches, I dedicate this work, trusting that it will both motivate, instruct, and prepare planters in their grand mission. May your ministries be challenged to labor by the grace of God and for the glory of God alone!

Strong foundations should never be omitted or passed over. Neither should they be laid down too quickly or hurriedly. Solomon cautions us, “Desire without knowledge is not good, and whoever makes haste with his feet misses his way (Prov 19:2; cf. 21:5). In other words, rashness, often the result of ignorance, brings trouble. Building a biblical church is too important for haste and hurry. Let us build deep before we attempt to build high and wide!

# Section 1

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Biblical Foundations



# 1

## Rationale

### *Biblical Reasons for Planting Churches*

LET'S BE HONEST. NOWHERE do the Scriptures directly command us to plant new churches!<sup>1</sup> So why commit your life to pursue this calling and vocation? In this first chapter I aim to persuade you that there is a solid biblical rationale and reason for launching new communities of faith. As we will see, there is ample biblical precedent and instruction to warrant church planting. A clear New Testament pattern of corporate multiplication emerges—as disciples are multiplied, new churches are multiplied.

The establishing of new churches across the globe is not an idea recently concocted by American church growth enthusiasts. Nor is the planting of new churches just the latest fad in gospel ministry. As we will see in this chapter and the next, the church-planting mandate originated in eternity past with God himself and is clearly articulated in his Word. The authority to make the starting of new churches a top priority and focus of the church of Christ comes from Scripture, God's inspired and inerrant revelation to man. As we will see later, there are other theological, ecclesiological, and missiological reasons for new church development. But the biblical imperative alone should be sufficient reason for multiplying new churches. Scripture is clear that the primary mission of the church, and, therefore of every local church, is to be the proclamation of the gospel of Christ, discipling of the nations, and the gathering of believers into local

1. As we will see, the Great Commission commands us to make disciples which *results* in new churches.

churches where they can be built up in their faith and equipped for effective outreach into the world.

The biblical evidence for this mission is based on—and rooted in—eight scriptural themes and lines of thought. In this chapter we will focus on the first four of these and then give attention to the final four in the next chapter. In this first chapter we will see that planting new congregations is demanded by:

- The Metanarrative of Scripture
- The Promise of Jesus
- The Command of Christ
- The Pattern of the Early Church

### **The Metanarrative of Scripture**

Most church planters I have worked with, when asked for biblical support for global missions and church planting, will point to the Great Commission passages in the New Testament. While these passages are vitally important (see third section below), they are not where we should begin our search. I am personally convinced that if our Lord had never given us his post-resurrection mandates, commitment to the global mission of the church would still be required.<sup>2</sup>

It is crucial, if we are to lay a strong biblical foundation, that we delve into the rich kaleidoscope of missions found in Scripture, particularly the Old Testament metanarrative. Though there is much diversity of mission content in the older testament, we will seek to focus on some of the unifying missional themes to see God’s overall missionary purposes for his people. Our goal is to develop a whole-Bible theology of missions that enables us to see God’s intent to bless the nations and thereby receive the glory he deserves.<sup>3</sup> We will show that missions is not an afterthought in the Old Testament but is God’s passion and plan. “The church’s mission does not begin with the Great Commission but is integrally related to the grand storyline of Scripture, and specifically to the hope of the Messiah.”<sup>4</sup>

2. See also Bosch, “Hermeneutical Principles for Mission,” 439.

3. For others who develop a conservative whole-Bible theology of missions, see Payne, *Theology of Mission*; Goheen, *Light to the Nations*; Flemming, *Recovering Full Mission of God*; and Wright, *Mission of God: Unlocking*.

4. Tabb, *After Emmaus*, 19.

This understanding of Scripture is in fact validated by our risen Lord's summary of the Bible's essential message and mission as he walks with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. In Luke 24:44–47, as Jesus explains “the things concerning himself” seen throughout Scripture, “he asserts that his messianic suffering and resurrection *and* mission in his name among the nations fulfills what is ‘written’ in the Old Testament.”<sup>5</sup> Most studies of Old Testament messianic passages focus on the predicted and prefigured death and resurrection of the Messiah—but few seem to acknowledge those that reveal his eternal purpose and passion for redeeming the nations. They present his salvific message, based upon the Messiah's death and resurrection, but neglect the disclosure of the divinely intended *destination* of that message.<sup>6</sup>

The Bible begins its progressive unveiling of this theme of missions in the book of Genesis. At creation, Elohim “blessed” Adam and Eve and commanded them to “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” (Gen 1:22, 28). Some see this as the “first Great Commission” because it reveals God's plan to bless the earth by spreading his glory and saving presence across the earth.<sup>7</sup> After the fall, God declares that he will put “enmity” between the Serpent and the woman, between the Serpent's “seed” and the woman's “seed” (Gen 3:15). With a message of hope, he announces that though the Serpent would bruise the “heel” of one of the woman's descendants, a future male child of Eve's “seed” would strike back by fatally crushing the Serpent's head. This “first gospel” (or *protoevangelium*) prophetically promises a coming Man of Promise who will one day defeat and destroy Satan. This revelation of God's grace is an opening glimpse of his promise-plan for mankind after the mess fallen humanity had made.

This divinely initiated promised remedy for man's sin is later expanded with the promise given to Shem that spiritual blessings (the coming Messiah) would come through his line (Gen 9:27). Genesis 1–11 continues the storyline, revealing a universalistic theme as it ends with a list in Gen 10 of seventy nations that are God's intention to bless. The Table of Nations demonstrates, at the least, God's concern for the nations or “clans/families” (10:32). This promised gospel blessing to all the world then becomes more focused in Gen 12 where the Lord gives another word of grace—this time to the Hebrew Semite Abram.

Abram is promised three personal and national “blessings” (12:1–3a) but most significant is God's international purpose for all this blessing: “so

5. Tabb, *After Emmaus*, 19.

6. For helpful whole-Bible studies showing the OT basis for mission, see Wright, *Mission of God: Unlocking* and Köstenberger and Alexander, *Salvation to the Ends*.

7. See for example, Beale, *Temple and Church's Mission*, 117–18. It is noteworthy that this command to multiply and fill the earth was repeated after the fall in Gen 9:1.

that all the peoples [families] on earth may be blessed through you” (12:3b).<sup>8</sup> The passive form of the Hebrew verb shows that this blessing was to come “from the hand of God” and would “potentially be just as universal and extensive” as the curse of sin on all mankind.<sup>9</sup> This call/promise to Abraham and election of Israel was totally God’s initiative. This bold announcement of God’s blessing makes it clear that this would not come because of an “achievement by means of Abram’s own works” but “as a gift from God’s free grace.”<sup>10</sup> The enduring import of this patriarchal promise to “bless” all the families of the earth is underscored by the fact that it is repeated and reaffirmed four other times in Genesis alone, revealing his descendants would be as numerous as the stars and sand (18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14).<sup>11</sup>

Significantly, the Apostle Paul equates this Abrahamic covenantal promise to his own summary of the “gospel” in Gal 3:8, confirming that the good news to Abraham was to be a message of salvation to all nations. Abram’s spiritual offspring through the gospel would one day be justified by faith just as Abraham was (Rom 4:11–16; Acts 3:25). In summary, in Gen 12, God’s purpose is clear: he will choose and bless one people/nation (Israel) so that all nations may be blessed through them.<sup>12</sup> “Israel was to be his missionaries to the world—and thereby so are all who believe in this same gospel.”<sup>13</sup> Many feel that this unconditional covenant with Abraham is the clearest beginning of global missions in the Old Testament.

In Moses’ encounter with Pharaoh, God’s purpose to exalt his name among the nations is further confirmed. Jehovah states that his dual intent in

8. This is a literal translation from the Hebrew by OT scholar Kaiser, *Mission in the Old Testament*, 18.

9. Kaiser, *Mission in the Old Testament*, 20.

10. Kaiser, *Mission in the Old Testament*, 18.

11. “Families” comes from a Hebrew term *mišpaḥâ* which can carry the idea of nations, tribes, clans, and even households. It is similar to our modern concept of “people groups.” Kaiser points out that the Hebrew phrase used for “all the peoples/nations” in Gen 12:3b (*kol mispehot*) is rendered in the Greek translation of the OT as *pasai hai phulai*, which means “all the tribes.” He thus concludes: “Therefore, the blessing of God given to Abraham was intended to reach smaller people groups as well as the political groupings of nations.” The nearly identical Hebrew phrase in Gen 18:18; 22:18; and 26:3–4 (*goyim*) also translated “all the nations” is significantly translated *panta ta ethnē* or “all the nations” in the Septuagint (cf. Matt 28:19–20) and is another word for gentiles. Kaiser, *Mission in the Old Testament*, 19.

12. Clearly election set Israel apart from the nations so that she might serve God and reveal his glory and lordship to all the other nations. J. D. Payne points out that the nation of Israel (i.e., Abraham) “was chosen to be God’s people for a purpose.” Their national election “was the means by which God would bring the nations to faith.” Their divine election by grace was both a “privilege and a responsibility.” Payne, *Theology of Mission*, 24–25.

13. Payne, *Theology of Mission*, 20.

all the plagues in Egypt was to demonstrate his power “so that you may know that there is none like me in all the earth” and “so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth” (Exod 9:14, 16). Clearly God desired gentile peoples to come to know him as “LORD”—and intended to use Israel’s witness.<sup>14</sup>

Moses’ famous “Eagle’s Wings” speech, following Israel’s exodus deliverance, shows once again that Israel’s election as a nation was for missionary service to the nations (Exod 19:2–6). God specifies three unique ministries for Israel: 1) they are to be his “treasured possession among all peoples,” i.e., his special and moveable treasure; 2) they were to be a “kingdom of priests” to God (or a “royal priesthood”), i.e., serving in a mediatorial role representing God before the nations/peoples; and 3) they were to be a “holy nation” set apart wholly to the Lord for his specialized use, not only in their lives but service among the nations (people groups) of humanity. God was clearly giving Israel a high and holy calling “as the channel through which the grace of God could come to all the nations,” and eventually the Man of Promise and the Seed would come to “bless” the entire world.<sup>15</sup> “The entire nation is sanctified and expected to reflect the glory of God on earth,” publicly displaying the Lord their God to the watching world.<sup>16</sup>

The Mosaic legislation in the Torah reveals God’s loving concern and careful provision for the foreigner/sojourner in their land. These resident immigrants (Hebrew *ger*) were to be treated with respect—not oppressed—loved on, under the same legal system, allowed to celebrate the Passover, and were even to come to worship the Living God at the temple (Exod 12:48–49, 22:21; Lev 19:33–34; 23:22; Num 9:14; 15:14–16; Deut 10:17–19; 14:29; 24:14–22; 27:19). These clear instructions to Israel were designed to enable gentiles “to hear and learn to fear the Lord your God” (Deut 31:12–13). Numerous Torah texts reveal God’s passion for all the peoples of the earth—and his plan to use Israel as his missionary witness to the world.<sup>17</sup>

The covenantal promise to David is another key text reaffirming God’s missionary purposes given earlier to the patriarchs (2 Sam 7:1–16; cf. 1 Chr 17:10–14). Though King David was not permitted to build the temple for

14. See also Exod 7:5, 17; 8:22; 14:4, 18. The fact that a “mixed multitude” (Exod 12:38) accompanied the Hebrews on their exodus seems to indicate that some Egyptians were impacted by what they saw/heard and were convinced that their gods were no match for the living LORD God of the Hebrews.

15. Kaiser, *Mission in the Old Testament*, 22–23.

16. Payne, *Theology of Mission*, 28–29.

17. See Num 14:21–23; Deut 4:1, 6–7; 26:18–19; 28:1, 9–10. The numerous “knowing” texts also reveal Jehovah’s passion to be known and honored by the nations (see Exod 8:22; 9:30, 14–16, etc.). Through word and deed, he was clearly making himself known among the non-Jewish nations!

God, God gave him a compensating fourfold promise: 1) he would make him a “great name”; 2) he would make him a “house” or everlasting royal dynasty; 3) he would raise up from him offspring (“seed”) to bless the nations; and 4) he would also grant David a “throne and a kingdom” that would last forever. We know from other Scripture that it was the coming Messiah, David’s greater Son, who would ultimately establish David’s eternal and glorious kingdom and bring salvation to all the nations.<sup>18</sup> This covenant, like the similar Abrahamic covenant to which it is clearly linked, is irrevocable and unconditional. It is based on God’s sovereign grace and purpose, not man’s obedience; repeatedly in this passage God states, “I will” carry out these promises.<sup>19</sup> King David’s humble prayer of thanksgiving (1 Sam 7:18–29) underscores that he understood that these covenantal promises—and God’s continuing promise-plan—were to “involve the future of all humanity” and the ultimate blessing of all earth’s peoples.<sup>20</sup>

The Psalter contains numerous praise songs and fervent prayers with mission themes. Space does not allow us here to exegete all of them. Suffice it to say that some missiologists claim that the psalms contain “more than 175 references of a universalistic note relating to the nations of the world.”<sup>21</sup> Of particular note, and worth your study, are Pss 2, 33, 66, 67, 72, 96, 98, 99, 100, 117, and 145. This hymnbook of the Old Testament repeatedly exalts Jehovah God as “worthy of the worship of the nations” and exhorts them to “discover his glory and greatness.”<sup>22</sup> Israel is called on to faithfully live up to her calling and declare God’s person, works, glory, and salvation among the nations. Here I will only focus on two of my favorite missionary psalms.

Psalm 67, sometimes called the Old Testament *Pater Noster*, or “Our Father” psalm, reflects the promise made to Abraham that “all the families of the earth” would be blessed in him; it is further informed by the Aaronic benediction of Num 6:24–26.<sup>23</sup> Significantly, this psalm was to be sung at

18. See Ps 89; Isa 9:6–7; Luke 1:32–33; Heb 1:5, 8. Also Luke 1:32b makes it clear that the three terms in 2 Sam 7:16 (house, kingdom, throne) are all fulfilled in Jesus.

19. For the unconditional nature of the Davidic Covenant, see 2 Sam 7:14–16; 1 Chr 17:13–14; for God’s repeated declaration of “I will,” see 2 Sam 7:10, 11, 12, 13, 14.

20. Kaiser, *Mission in the Old Testament*, 26–27. Kaiser points out that the better translation of 2 Sam 7:19 is “charter for humanity”—thus showing that David correctly understood that this covenant was intended not just for Israel but for all the nations of mankind. This is also seen in David’s prayer that God’s name be “magnified” among the nations (1 Chr 17:23–27). All this leads Kaiser to exclaim: “Surely [this] is missions at its highest watermark!” Kaiser, *Mission in the Old Testament*, 27.

21. Peters, *Biblical Theology of Missions*, 115–16.

22. Ott et al., *Encountering Theology of Mission*, 11.

23. Kaiser, *Mission in the Old Testament*, 30. The Aaronic formula calling on Yahweh to graciously bless his people and make his face shine on them appears also in Pss 4:6; 31:16; and 80:3, 7, 19.

the Feast of Pentecost and looked forward to the ingathering of the nations. Israel is reminded that the temporal harvest blessings God showers on them are not to be used for selfish gain but “to point the nations to God.”<sup>24</sup> The psalmist prays that God’s favor upon Israel might result in his “way” becoming “known on earth” and “his saving power among all nations” (67:1–2). He further petitions God that his blessings on the nation might result in universal worship—that “all the peoples” might come to praise him (67:3, 5) and that “all the ends of the earth” might come to “fear” [trust] him (67:7). This psalm is just one of many reminding Israel of their missionary calling to be a witness to the gentile nations that they may be brought to a saving knowledge of the one true God.

Psalm 96 also challenges Israel to live out her calling by not only fervently worshipping God but also actively proclaiming God’s character (“glory”) and “marvelous works” among the nations. Six times in this eleven-verse psalm we see mention of either the “nations” or the “peoples.” Israel is responsible to not only “declare” God’s glory but “tell of [proclaim] his salvation” at every opportunity (“day to day”) to “all” the nations/peoples. The Hebrew verb for “proclaim” carries the same idea as its New Testament equivalent (*euangelizomai*), “to bring good news,” and in this context calls God’s people to announce the good news about the coming Messiah.<sup>25</sup>

All the nations/peoples are instructed to “ascribe to the Lord” the glory he deserves and bring offerings of worship to him. Obviously, this will require Israel’s active witness so that they first come to know the LORD and “tremble before him” (96:9).<sup>26</sup> Thus, this psalm shows that Israel’s witness to the nations was to include both praise and preaching, worship and word. It was to be active and centrifugal (reaching out), not merely passive and centripetal (drawing in).<sup>27</sup>

24. Payne, *Theology of Mission*, 65.

25. Kaiser, *Mission in the Old Testament*, 34.

26. Ps 96 is not merely anticipating the second coming of Christ and future millennial age; see Kaiser, *Mission in the Old Testament*, 34–35.

27. That Israel’s witness was to be active is also seen in Pss 9:1; 57:9; 105:1; 119:46; 126:2–3; 145:11–12, 21. Over and over the psalmists call on all peoples/nations to praise the Lord (47:1; 67:3, 5; 100:1; 117:11) For advocacy of Israel’s obligation to be involved in centrifugal (outward-moving) witness, that she was to go to the nations, see Kaiser, *Mission in the Old Testament*. Other Bible scholars take the position that OT Israel was to attract/draw the nations to herself and her God with a more passive centripetal (inward-moving) witness—whereas NT believers are called to be active witnesses and sent to the nations. The Queen of Sheba (1 Kgs 10:1) and Naaman (2 Kgs 5:1–14) are given as OT examples. However, centrifugal advocates point to at least three examples in the OT: Jonah was sent to Nineveh, Elijah was sent to the widow of Zarephath (1 Kgs 17), and God sends his people to “declare his glory among the nations” (Isa 66:19). To see arguments for the passive witness view, see Ott et al., *Encountering Theology of Mission*, 3–24; Köstenberger and Alexander, *Salvation to the Ends*.

Often Israel forgot or neglected her missional calling. Yet there are examples in the Old Testament of how God used the testimony of obedient pious Hebrews to bring Gentiles to faith in the one True God. Jonah was sent by God to wicked Nineveh to preach a message of repentance—and though he was reluctant and recalcitrant, saw an urban turning to God. Jethro, priest of Median, came to worship the true and living God through the witness of Moses (Exod 18:1–11). Rahab the prostitute came to acknowledge “Yahweh is God” because of the faith of the two spies (Josh 2:9–11; cf. Jas 2:25). The Moabite widow Ruth left her homeland to follow her mother-in-law Naomi, eventually marrying Boaz and taking refuge in Yahweh, even becoming the grandfather of David, and being included in Christ’s genealogy (Ruth 2:12; Matt 15). Naaman, the proud Syrian army commander, was healed and converted through the testimony of an unnamed and pious “young girl from Israel” and the ministry of the prophet Elisha (2 Kgs 5:1–19).<sup>28</sup> The Arabian Queen of Sheba sought out Solomon, hearing about his fame and wisdom; though she acknowledged his God, she evidently never came to confess that Jehovah had become her God exclusively (1 Kgs 10:1–13). From these examples, and there are others, Gentiles were being attracted to Israel and recognized the greatness of her God, often because of the active witness of Israelites.

The major and minor prophets continue this missionary theme that the nation Israel was to be reflecting God’s glory among the nations, both by her life and verbal witness. This is quite evident in the Servant of the Lord passages, primarily in Isa 42:1 and 49:6. There we see Yahweh has “chosen” his Servant to be a “light for the nations [Gentiles].” Though the identity of the “servant” is much-debated, the solution is to be found in recognizing that the term is found in both the singular and the plural—the plural where it is the whole nation in view, and the singular where it is the coming Messiah as an individual in view.<sup>29</sup> When we see how these two Isaiah texts are cited in the New Testament (see Acts 13:47; cf. 26:22; Luke 2:32), it becomes clear that these are missionary texts. We conclude that the Israeli nation was being encouraged to carry on the Abrahamic promise (that all the nations would be blessed spiritually) and live out their

28. For a persuasive argument of why the Gentile Naaman had genuine saving faith rather than merely becoming a monotheist, see Kaiser, *Mission in the Old Testament*, 42–48.

29. See Kaiser, *Mission in the Old Testament*, 55–57 for a list of twelve Isaiah texts where Servant is the whole nation of Israel and other texts where the servant is clearly an individual—and Kaiser’s arguments for the Servant’s dual identity. “Our conclusion is that the ‘Servant’ of the Lord’ is a corporate term that embodies at one and the same time a reference to the One, who is representative of the whole, and the whole group that belongs to that single whole.” Kaiser, *Mission in the Old Testament*, 56.

covenant calling to be a kingdom of priests serving the Gentiles, actively bringing salvation to them.<sup>30</sup>

That Jehovah desires to see all gentile nations come to know and worship him is confirmed by other prophets. Jeremiah foretells a day when “all nations” will assemble in Jerusalem to worship and honor the Lord (3:17; cf. 33:9). Joel speaks of a coming day when God would pour out his Spirit on “all flesh” universally regardless of gender, age, or ethnicity so that “everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved (2:28–32). Amos predicts a time of future national restoration for Israel when “all the nations who are called by my name may seek the Lord” (9:11–12; cf. Acts 15:17–18).<sup>31</sup> Micah describes a future time, when global gospel witness will result in “many nations” and peoples who will “flow” toward “the mountain of the Lord” and be living under his truth (4:1–5). Finally, Zechariah sees a day when “many nations shall join themselves to the Lord” and become his people (2:1; cf. 8:20–23). The fact that some of these prophecies will find ultimate fulfillment in the millennial era, does not change the reality of God’s missionary passion and purpose for the nations.

Our overview of the missionary metanarrative or storyline of the Old Testament confirms that God has a passion, plan, and purpose to bless the nations so that they might come to trust, honor, and worship him. And he elected and called Israel, by her life, worship, and witness, to reflect his glory and proclaim his salvation story so that the nations might be drawn to him. Though Israel often failed in her mission to be a “light to the Gentiles,” God’s purpose for them remained—and awaited full realization with the coming of the promised Messiah, the dawning of the age of the Spirit, and the birth of the new people of God who would carry the gospel globally. The culmination of God’s Big Story, as we will see, finally awaits the future eschatological day when all nations will come and worship.

Thus, when we arrive at the New Testament record, we understand that the unfolding revelation of God’s heart for the nations began long before the Great Commission. It was no add-on or sudden afterthought. We now turn to the New Testament part of the Story to see more direct foundational evidence for God’s heart for reaching the nations—by planting new churches.

30. To understand why Israel’s witnessing task was to be active, not merely passive, in these Isaiah passages, see Kaiser, *Mission in the Old Testament*, 60–63. Significantly, this “light for the nations” missionary role is also declared to be “to the ends of the earth” (Isa 49:6b) in line with Jesus’ command of Acts 1:8.

31. See Kaiser, *Mission in the Old Testament*, 72 for an explanation of this Septuagint rendering and its missional significance. James cites this very passage at the end of the Jerusalem Council dispute to justify Gentile inclusion (Acts 15:13–18).

## The Promise of Jesus

In Matt 16:18–19 our Lord gives us an amazing prediction and a hopeful promise. He both predicts and promises the establishment of his coming church. During his earthly ministry, he prophesies the creation of a yet future entity: “*I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.*” Church planters in every generation and all cultures can find four encouraging principles in this simple statement.

First, the church *belongs to* Jesus Christ: “*I will build my church.*” Clearly Jesus owns the church. He is the One who created it, having given himself in death on the cross that the church might be born (Eph 5:25; John 12:24). He alone purchased the church with his own blood (Acts 20:28). It is he who calls his church out of the world, fitting its members together into one body. It is he who now sanctifies the church in preparation for its final presentation and purpose (Eph 5:26–27). And in the future Christ will be the One who glorifies his church before his Father and the holy angels (1 Thess 4:13–18; Rev 4–6). By calling it “my church” Christ is emphasizing that he alone is its Architect, Builder, Owner, and Lord! Thus, no church planter or pastor can ever lay claim to his ministry. Jesus, not the planter or pastor, is the church’s head.

Matthew is the only Gospel where the term “church” is found (see also 18:17).<sup>32</sup> The Greek term for church is *ekklēsia* and simply means “an assembly” or gathering.<sup>33</sup> In this context it refers to a company of the redeemed,

32. *Ekklēsia* occurs only three times, all in Matthew, and the other two references are both in 18:17. *Ekklēsia* is used 114 times in the NT and in about ninety of these references a local church (assembly) is in view. In this first use of *ekklēsia* Christ probably has in mind the whole church; he’s not just building a local assembly, but a universal church composed of all who make the same confession of faith as Peter (v. 16). Yet he certainly intends that each believer gather with others in a local assembly/congregation to worship/serve, and even conduct church discipline (cf. Matt 18:15–20).

33. *Ekklēsia* seems to have been originally derived from *ekkaleō*, “call out.” It was a common term for a congregation of the *ekkletoi*, those called out or assembled to discuss the affairs of state (Acts 19:39). In the Septuagint it is used to designate the “gathering” of the people of Israel, summoned together for a purpose (Acts 7:38). In the OT these gatherings often involved the Israelites at worship. By NT times the term simply referred to an assembly or the people themselves without reference to a calling out. As used in the NT the term does not, as some conjecture, take on a supposed theological meaning (based on the breakup of the word into its two parts, “called” and “out of”) of a “called out” people. Based purely on its etymology, *ekklēsia* might be more correctly translated “called together.” Thus, in the NT *ekklēsia* denotes the community of the redeemed in a twofold aspect: 1) all who are called by/to Christ in the fellowship of his salvation, that is, the church worldwide of all times, and 2) an individual visible congregation made up of professed believers gathered together in one place. The context always determines which group is in view. Bloomberg (*Matthew*, 252) clarifies

Christ's own. In this age, properly called the "church age," Christ is in the special and continual business of calling and taking out a "people for his name" (Acts 15:14). He is forming his redeemed ones into one body, the church, and then placing them into various local bodies, or local churches.<sup>34</sup> While it is true that God has from the beginning of redemptive history been gathering the redeemed by grace, this unique church he promised to build began at Pentecost with the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1–4; 1 Cor 12:12–13).

Second, the church is *built by* Jesus Christ: "*I will build my church.*"<sup>35</sup> Jesus is saying, "I will—by my supernatural working—build (or multiply) people to form my gathering."<sup>36</sup> Building the church is Christ's major mission on earth today. With secularists of our day suggesting various humanistic social agendas for the church, and liberal theologians proposing the church must lose its identity by blending with society, it is vital that planters clarify the divine purpose for the church. Jesus' words confirm that the heart of his mission in this present age is the planting and growing of his church. And his mission should be ours! The believer's task is to join Christ in fulfilling his agenda—not creating our own agenda! Church planting is what God does, while we engage in the Great Commission.

Does following Christ's church-building agenda mean that we should cast off all social responsibility? Should church planters abandon all social ministries? On the contrary, newly established churches will want to exercise the social responsibility of Christ, reflecting his compassion for society. Need-meeting social ministries may be incorporated into church outreach and inreach ministries, but the highest priority must always be given to gospel proclamation, evangelism, and church planting.

How is our Lord building his beloved church today? By raising up new congregations among every people and in every culture. To build his church and local churches, Christ uses born again people as his building material (1 Pet 2:5). He fits and builds these living stones together to become his edifice

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further: "Jesus, however, implies nothing here of any particular church structure or government; he merely promises that he will establish a gathered community of his followers and help them to grow."

34. According to NT scholar Banks (*Paul's Idea of Community*, 28), the word *ekklēsia* has the idea of "a regular, local gathering before God." The church is to have a "gathered-in-a-locality" nature.

35. The verb "build" (*oikodomeo*) is a compound word stemming from "house" (*oikos*), often referring to literal construction. Jesus is building something solid and stable, an actual house, an enduring family (cf. 2 Sam 7:16 and Luke 1:33).

36. According to Carson (*Matthew*, 369), the Greek word for "build" comes from an OT concept found in Ruth 4:11 which speaks of Rachael and Leah who "built" the house of Israel. What they did was to "multiply" children and produce a nation! The church, then, is to have a spontaneous, reproducing, growing nature!

(1 Cor 3:9), a dwelling of God in the Spirit (Eph 2:21–22). And in his sovereign grace our Lord sees fit to use gifted servants to equip his people to build his church (Eph 4:11–12; 1 Cor 3:12). Thus, the basic task of church planters is simple: we are privileged to join Christ in his unending work and cause! Praise God, he has promised to build his church and he does it *through us!*

Knowing that the church and the work of building it belong to Christ assures us that he is intimately involved in its development and growth. Knowing that Christ ultimately must do the work through us should cause all church planters to confess with Paul in humble gratitude: “*I planted, [others] watered, but God was causing the growth. So then, neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth*” (1 Cor 3:6–7 NASB). We plant the gospel seed—but he makes it grow.

Third, the church will be *triumphant in Christ*: “the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” This promise of ultimate victory should give church planters and builders great hope and tremendous confidence in the Lord! Christ’s final phrase is packed with meaning and should be the basis of overcoming faith for Christ’s soldiers as they labor with him among those far from Jesus. Satan and all his forces will not be able to overcome or prevent the ultimate advance and growth of his church into enemy territory! Because of who Jesus is, we can be sure that he will successfully do what he promised.

In Scripture “*hades*” (or “hell”) is the place of punishment for the spirits of the unsaved dead. Christ’s point is that even death, Satan’s ultimate weapon (Heb 2:12–15), has no power to stop the church in its inexorable advance into enemy-held territory! Church history has, in fact, confirmed that often the blood of the martyrs has sped the growth of the church both in size and spiritual power. “*Gates*” represent in Scripture both authority and power (today we might speak of “city hall”). Thus, the term “gates of hades” would seem to symbolize the organized power of death, Satan, and his spirit forces. Against these powers of evil, the planting and building outreach of Christ’s church will ultimately prevail. He will be victorious! Persecution, poverty, or even evil powers can never stop Christ and his church. Neither can all the assaults of an enemy-inspired world system stop the growth of his church by legal or illegal means, by smothering consumerism or strangling materialism.

The church, from its earliest inception, has faced political, religious, and spiritual “powers that be” opposition, but these can never stop God “on mission” to accomplish his eternal redemptive purposes. The church, Jesus declares, is indestructible and will never be extinguished. The church will prevail through the centuries and will ultimately be victorious, taking out of every people group a people for his glorious name (see Acts 15:14–18; Rev 7:9–10; 5:9–10.)

Too often the people of God have interpreted this verse as saying that Satan and his forces could not in the end overcome us in their attacks if we just stood our ground. Thus, Christians often have hunkered down into a defensive posture. To justify meager results Christian leaders will often make statements such as: “It’s the end times,” or “Evil is increasing all around,” or “The love of many is growing cold,” or “Let’s just be faithful and hold on until he comes.” At times the embattled church almost feels the global forces of evil is winning and we have failed in our mission.

But Christ’s promise assumes that *believers are to be on the offensive*, attacking Satan’s kingdom and strongholds, advancing his church and cause.<sup>37</sup> Elsewhere Scripture assures us Christ has already “stormed the gates” of hell and delivered the captives through his death and resurrection (Heb 2:14–15; 1 Cor 15:50–57) and so he is victorious over death and Satan. Thus, gospel victory is assured for his people who are “on mission” with him. His victory is ours! But we must claim it and count upon it. He intends his church to march victoriously with the gospel into the world of darkness, setting lost people free from Satan’s grip.

Significantly, Jesus makes this promise-prediction in Caesarea Philippi, the “red light” district of Galilee. It was “a locale dedicated to the pagan deity Zeus and situated near the biblical Mount Hermon, associated in Jewish thought with dark spiritual forces that enslaved gentile nations in idolatry.”<sup>38</sup> The headwaters of the Jordan River flowed from Caesarea Philippi; water once flowed directly from a large deep cave nearby. In Jesus’ day, many people believed that this nearby cave was a gate to the underworld, a place where pagan fertility gods lived during the dry seasons. This grotto was known as the “gate of hades” because superstitious people believed their gods used this cave to travel to and from the spirit world. The whole area was strongly identified with numerous false religions. It was a center of Baal worship. Pagans even placed idols in the niches carved near the cave of Caesarea Philippi. The city was filled with all kinds of idols, shrines, and immoral practices. It represented the worst evils of human culture, yet it was in the midst of all this pagan superstition and idolatry that Peter confesses

37. Bloomberg (*Matthew*, 252), however, interprets this as Satan and his forces being the ones on the offense: “Is Jesus saying that Hades . . . cannot conquer the church or that it cannot resist the church’s advances? Is Satan on the defense or offense here? The latter seems more likely. . . . This interpretation fits better into the historical context of the increasing hostility against Jesus and his small band of disciples.” However one interprets this passage, clearly Jesus is encouraging his followers that the church universal will never be extinguished, despite the attacks on it through the centuries. It could also be that both Satan and the church are at times on the offensive, attacking one another!

38. Vegas and Kocman, *Missions by the Book*, 71.

Jesus as the Son of the *living* God—and Jesus promises to advance his church and storm the gates of hell!

One component of the victory Christ gives us is the authority to do ministry in his name. Significantly, Christ tells us that the Enemy's attempt to arrest the growth of his church is thwarted as the church advances on his authority. He gives us the "*keys of the kingdom*" (16:19) to admit entrance into his spiritual kingdom through our faithful proclamation of the gospel.<sup>39</sup> We have divinely granted resources and access to Christ's present kingdom rule—authority which, in this passage, is connected to the local church and its Great Commission outreach ministry. We have his kingdom authority to declare what is "bound" (forgiven) or "loosed" (unforgiven) in heaven (by God). Church planters must go out both *under* his authority and *with* his divinely given authority! It is only as we draw on Jesus' authority that we will see fruitfulness as we take up his mission of making disciples (Matt 28:19–20).

Christ continues today to build his church as an overcoming military force to victoriously storm the gates of hell. How does he do so? He builds his church as we advance on our knees with the gospel, put on the full armor he has provided, and depend upon his leadership and strength for victory (Eph 6:10–18; 2 Cor 2:14). We advance his invisible spiritual kingdom and Great Commission cause now in this age *by building visible churches*.

39. That the "keys of the kingdom of heaven" represent kingdom authority is evident elsewhere in Scripture. Jesus tells us that the scribes and Pharisees shut up the kingdom before people, not entering themselves nor allowing others to enter (Matt 23:13). In Matt 16, the keys were given to Peter—and later by extension to all other believers—to "bind" and "loose." The imagery of keys closing and opening doors, locking and unlocking them, seems apparent (based on Isa 22:22). Bloomberg (*Matthew*, 252) thus feels the keys refer "to Christians' making entrance to God's kingdom available or unavailable to people through their witness, preaching, and ministry." Peter was the first Apostle to do this, proclaiming the good news to the Jews at Pentecost (Acts 2), to the Samaritans (Acts 8), and finally to the Gentiles (Acts 10). Matt 16:19 shows then that Christ has given all his disciples all-authority (keys) to forgive the sins of lost people, based on the principles/instruction of his word (cf. John 20:23). He has also given us authority to "withhold" or "retain" forgiveness, declaring/proclaiming the judgment of God on those refusing to repent and believe (again see John 20:23). This authority is given as well to the church and its leaders to determine whether an unrepentant believer is forgiven or not (Matt 18:15–20). Thus, the apostolic succession Protestants recognize is a *confessional succession* of all true believers rather than a hierarchal succession of supposed church offices. Bloomberg (*Matthew*, 252) affirms: "Peter's primacy is more chronological, in the unfolding events of early Christianity, than hierarchical." Any view of the supposed enduring primacy or infallibility of Peter is dramatically squashed by subsequent Gospel and Acts of the Apostles accounts (cf. Acts 10; Gal 2:11–13). In fact, Acts shows Peter seems to decrease in importance as the church grows. James, not Peter, presided over the first council (Acts 15).

Though we struggle now, someday the church will be completely victorious and complete. Satan will be “crushed under [our] feet” (Rom 16:20).

This analogy of spiritual warfare and soldiering is especially appropriate for church planters (see also 2 Tim 2:3–4; Phil 2:25). The apostolic church planter, Paul, said he had fought and won the good fight for souls (2 Tim 4:7). With this encouraging promise of Christ, so can church planters today.

Fourth, the Church is *built on a solid foundation*: “upon *this rock*.” Much controversy centers on the interpretation of *petra*, the Greek word for rock. Most evangelical scholars have historically interpreted the rock to be Peter’s recently given confession of faith about Christ.<sup>40</sup> Jesus is using a simple play on words here: *petra* means a large rock, a foundation boulder (cf. 7:24–25; 27:60; Mark 15:46) whereas *Petros* (Peter) means a small stone, a detached one that might easily be moved (cf. John 1:42). Thus, Christ is stating that this boulder-like truth (of his own divine and messianic identity, confessed by Peter) came by divine revelation rather than human deduction (v. 17); it came through the mouth of one who was called a mere small stone! The New Testament clearly teaches that Christ alone is both the foundation (Acts 4:11–12; 1 Cor 3:11) and head of the church (Eph 5:23). The evidence that he gave either of these roles to Peter is tenuous.<sup>41</sup>

How does this truth apply to and encourage church planters? However, interpreted, the rock metaphor conveys the importance of a solid foundation. Christ is assuring modern-day planters that new churches, grounded upon his truth will stand the test of time and grow to his glory. How crucial it is that church planters seek to establish their churches upon the solid foundation of sound doctrine, specifically the person and work of Christ!

To summarize, Matt 16:18 teaches that building the church is God’s will and work. Building the church is Jesus’ primary mission on earth today. Clearly the local church is to be God’s instrument to advance Christ’s church-building work.

40. See v. 16, “*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God*.” This is often called the *Great Confession* in contrast to the *Great Commandment* (“love the Lord your God and your neighbor”) and the *Great Commission* (“make disciples of all nations”).

41. There is a sense in which all the apostles played a foundational role in the building of Christ’s church (see Eph 2:20 and 1 Cor 3:11; cf. Rev 21:14), but the primary role is reserved for Christ alone. That it was not assigned to Peter is verified by the apostle’s own explanation of this imagery in his first epistle: the church is built of “living stones” (1 Pet 2:5)—of all who, like Peter, confess Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God; but Christ himself is the “chief cornerstone” (1 Pet 2:6–7). However, other notable scholars, such as Bloomberg (*Matthew*, 252), believe the rock is Peter: “The expression ‘this rock’ almost certainly refers to Peter, following immediately after his name, just as the words following ‘the Christ’ in v. 16 applied to Jesus. The play on words in the Greek between Peter’s name (*Petros*) and the word ‘rock’ (*petra*) makes sense only if Peter is the rock and if Jesus is about to explain the significance of this identification.”