

VOICES from the
MISSIONAL MOVEMENT



VOLUME FOUR

LOVING GOD WITH ALL OUR MINDS



NORTH AMERICAN BAPTIST CONFERENCE

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-VOLUME 4-

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INTRODUCTION – MISSIONAL VOICES

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This e-book is a compilation of articles originally published between 2008 and 2015 in *The Missional Voice*, the journal of Forge Missional Training Network. The articles were written by a variety of authors with a wide variety of academic and practical experience as a way to encourage pastors, church leaders, and thinking Christians everywhere to reflect on the challenges facing the church in North America. Our hope in gathering this collection is that we will once again challenge your thinking and encourage you as you seek to follow the missional God.

LOVING GOD WITH ALL OUR MINDS

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If we are going to love God with our minds, we need clarity in our language and message.

On a recent flight, a young man engaged me in conversation. He had been overseas on a spiritual pilgrimage. He recounted the impact that a particular religious group had as he spent a whole month with them. They had been influential in their neighborhood starting a school for underprivileged kids, a hospital for those without medical coverage, a feeding program, a single mom's program, and more. This sounded familiar. He stated that there were three groups of people in this faith; those who participated out of obligation to the tradition of their parents, those hoping to coerce God by their attendance, and then genuine adherents who organized their lives around their beliefs. He was speaking of a Hindu temple he had visited in India.

A few days ago, I was sitting in a Starbucks next to two men. I couldn't help overhearing the conversation. One was presenting the gospel to the other in an effort to lead the person to a belief in Jesus. I was familiar with this plan of salvation and the words he was using. The recipient, however, didn't seem to know what he was talking about. He tried to understand the propositions being sent his way, but many times needed clarification. When the presentation finished, the man responded positively. By the grace of God, a new person prayed to receive Christ.

But I felt deeply troubled. I have presented much the same many times with others. While the heart of the presenter was good, the approach left me cold. Not once did I hear reference to the reality of the risen Jesus or the way that walking with Christ brings transformation. I wonder whether the recipient was ever introduced to Jesus, because he was largely asked to believe a number of propositions as a way to "go to heaven." It felt like a deal had been made rather than a connection made to a Person.

In reflecting on these stories, it seems as though we are caught on a pendulum, swinging between two inadequate approaches to the Christian life. Some continue to focus on evangelism through proclamation and develop programs to "win" people for Christ. Then, in reaction, the pendulum swings wildly the other way and we applaud those churches and Christians who transform neighborhoods through programs that meet needs or involve social justice. When we are caught on the pendulum, we fail to recognize that participation in the mission of God rejects both approaches on their own. God invites us to participate in His mission through acts of proclamation and neighborhood transformation.

So why do we have difficulty with a both/and approach? Perhaps it is because we are caught on a pendulum when it comes to law and grace as well.

In the name of grace, some make excuses for a more lenient approach to Christian freedom to the extent where they excuse sin. They say, "Didn't Christ come to do away with the law? Aren't we under the New Testament concept of grace?"

And those on the other end of the spectrum insist upon the need to adhere to rigid standards of behavior and build fences around biblical principles. Sounds familiar.

The problem is that we have misunderstood both law and grace. Throughout the Scriptures, the law guides God's people toward a way of living. At Sinai, the law acted like a nanny (see Galatians) to encourage growth in Israel. The law, in itself, is an act of divine grace. Grace, when properly understood, does not do away with the law but rather empowers followers of Christ to be able to live in the right direction (my thanks to Bob Roxburgh for that understanding).

Paul writes that we are not to be conformed to the patterns of this world, but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Romans 12:1-2). Transformation comes through the power of God at work in our lives, recreating His ideal for the life of His people. Yet, He invites us to participate in that transforming work through spiritual practices or disciplines. As Dallas Willard articulates, these practices are not an attempt to earn God's favor (he calls this trying), but rather they train us to participate in the mission of God.

What does this formation look like? It is different in different churches. A few years back, Mike Frost, cofounder of Forge Australia, released an e-book entitled *The 5 Practices of Highly Missional People* that describes the practices that form and train his community. Another set of practices come from the Shema (Heart, Mind, Strength, Neighbour, and One Another). What practices shape the life of your congregation? Which formational practices do you need to consider?

These questions are important, for an intentional approach to spiritual formation and discipleship is essential for us as we move toward mission. In an effort to grow our churches, many have jumped on the missional bandwagon, which reduces "mission" to be only an outward journey to reach neighbours and neighbourhoods. But the gospel invites us into a journey toward transformation in Christ. The inward and outward journeys are essential for any missional movement. Our participation in the mission of God is transformational; we are transformed for the sake of bearing witness to the reality of Christ, who tabernacles in the praises of His people for the sake of the world.

Loving God with our mind means that we keep hold of these tensions together: evangelism and social action, law and grace. In doing this, we can get off the pendulum and better reflect the wholeness and holiness of God's called and sent people.

MISSION AS THE KEY TO UNLOCKING THE GRAND STORY OF THE BIBLE

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Chris Wright employs a marvelous image to speak of the way we must read the biblical story: mission is the key that will unlock the grand story of the Bible.

God's Mission

The Bible tells the story of God's mission to restore the whole world. Against the backdrop of a good creation and sinful humanity's pollution of that world with an act of brazen rebellion, in love God sets out on a long journey to restore the creation to what He intended from the beginning.

This is a story of universal history: The biblical story begins with the origin of all things and moves to the goal of all history. It is nothing less than the true story of the whole world.

It is, moreover, a story that is first and foremost a narrative of God's activity. It tells us what God is doing to heal and liberate His creation, sometimes called God's mission.

The goal of God's activity is the restoration of all of human life in the context of the whole creation. Salvation is comprehensive: all of human life and all of the non-human creation will be restored.

Israel's Mission

God's mission is carried out in and through a people. Two texts give us a lens to tell the story of the story of Israel's mission: Genesis 12:1-3 and Exodus 19:3-6.

The first two chapters of the Bible show us God's original design for His creation. Genesis 3-11 tells the tragic story of humanity's rebellion and of its escalating and devastating effect. In this ominous darkness, God chooses Abraham to be a light. He makes a twofold promise: He will make Abraham into a great nation and restore to them the blessing of God's good creation; through that nation God will bring blessing to all the nations of the earth (Genesis 12:2-3). From the beginning, God's people are chosen and blessed to be a blessing.

In the book of Exodus, God forms that nation to fulfill its purpose. He liberates them from bondage to Egyptian idolatry and brings them to Mount Sinai. There He calls them to be a holy nation and a priestly kingdom (Exodus 19:3-6). A priest mediates God's blessing to others. They mediate blessing as a holy nation—a people who are on display before the nations demonstrating what it means to live the way God designed human life.

Upon the heels of this call, God gives Israel the Torah, a pattern of what a holy nation looks like in that context (Exodus 20-23). First, Israel's life is oriented backward: a picture of

God's creational intention for human life. Second, Israel's life is oriented forward: a sign and preview of God's final destination for all history. Third, Israel's life is oriented outward: an encounter with idolatry that shapes all other nations. The law directs Israel in the way of life and calls them to reject the death-dealing path of idolatry. As Israel lives this way, they will offer an attractive alternative and invite the nations into covenant with God.

The remainder of the Old Testament is a commentary on just how well Israel lives up to their vocation. But instead of being a light to the nations, Israel continues to be engulfed by the darkness of idolatry. God acts in mercy and judgment to restore them to their calling. He gives them what they need to fulfil their task, including the law, a sacrificial system, priests, a temple, kings, and prophets. But it all ends in disaster when Israel is judged and banished from the land.

At this point the writing prophets enter the drama. They proclaim that Israel is being judged for their sin, but there will come a time when their sin is been paid for (Isaiah 40:1-2) and they will be gathered and renewed to fulfil their calling (Ezekiel 36:22-32). Then peoples from all nations will enjoy the blessing of God's restoration.

This will happen as the climax of God's story when His kingdom is finally restored through an anointed king in David's line and by the power of God's Spirit (Joel 2).

And so for centuries Israel lives in fervent hope that the time will come when God will gather and restore them to their calling so He can complete His work.

Jesus's Mission

Jesus steps onto the stage of history and announces the promised day has come: the kingdom of God has arrived (Mark 1:14-15). He is God's anointed king and the Spirit is on Him to deliver the creation from the power of evil (Luke 4:16-18). Surely now is the time for God's universal purposes to be realized. Yet Jesus says that He is sent only to gather the lost sheep of Israel (Matthew 15:24). Can this be God's King who will rule the whole earth?

The gospels tell us the story of Jesus's attempt to gather all of Israel so that He might restore them to their calling of bringing blessing to the nations. He proclaims the good news and demonstrates the power of God's renewing work in mighty deeds that picture His new world inviting faith and repentance.

Only a small number respond, and He gathers them into a small community and begins to teach them a way of life. Jesus invites His newly gathered Israel to be a picture of God's original creational design, to be a preview of the end-time kingdom, and to encounter the idolatry not only in the pagan nations but right in Israel's very own life.

The prophets made it clear that Israel's sin must be paid for before renewal could take place. Jesus takes on this role. His goal is to gather Israel beneath His wings as a mother hen gathers its chicks (Matthew 23:37). Here is a vivid picture of a barnyard fire where the mother hen spreads her wings to protect her chicks from the full force of the fire. At the cross Jesus spreads His wings and experiences the full brunt of God's burning wrath so they

can be renewed and restored to their calling. The good news is that at the cross Jesus takes not only Israel's rebellion but the sin of the whole world (John 1:29).

Jesus's resurrection signals a new day: God's new world dawns. With the power and guilt of sin in the old age defeated, and the renewing power of the age to come now present, Jesus summons gathered Israel. He sends them out to take up their task to live among the nations as a model and picture of what God intends for human life (Matthew 28:18–20).

Church's Mission

Before that mission begins, God breathes out His Spirit to give them new life. The Spirit is God's end-time power to renew the face of the earth. At Pentecost in Acts 2, the Spirit gives the freshly gathered community a foretaste of the coming salvation, making them a preview of what human life is intended to be. They are sent in the power of the Spirit to make known the good news in life, word, and deed.

The New Testament tells the story of Israel's mission to the nations. Before the first century ends, they are a multi-ethnic, non-geographical community who enjoy the blessing of God's end-time salvation. This community called church lives as part of the long story of the Old Testament. They are incorporated into the covenant made with Abraham (Genesis 12:2–3; Galatians 3:8) and so are blessed to be a blessing to all peoples. They are given the same task as Israel (Exodus 19:3–6; 1 Peter 2:9–12).

Yet this community is something new. They are made up of all nations and no longer live together as a political community on one geographical territory. More importantly, they are a people of the new covenant liberated from their sin with the gifts of a new heart and the Spirit (Jeremiah 31:31–34). This new community is empowered for their mission.

This community is a people who gather to nurture this new life through the Word, prayer, fellowship, and the Lord's Supper (Acts 2:42). Thus, they manifest an attractive way of life to which others are drawn (Acts 2:43–47; 4:32–35). They witness to the good news in their lives, words, and deeds as they are scattered throughout the empire.

The book of Acts tells the first chapter of the story of the church's mission to the ends of the earth. These communities are planted in every place. And that mission continues today wherever the church is found. The church is called in each context to be a picture of God's final restoration. They are sent into business and art, sports and entertainment, scholarship and politics, with the good news that God is restoring it all. Yet challenging idols is a painful calling and the church will often suffer, so they must carry out their mission as a community rooted in a vibrant corporate and individual spirituality. But there is a promise: Christ will use their faithfulness for His mission and one day will complete the work He has begun. He will make all things new!

SCRIPTURE AND THE RENEWAL OF IMAGINATION

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A few years ago, I went for a hike in the Lake District of England with a good friend. The night before our hike, we bought a topographical map of the region and planned a route that began not far from the hostel where we were staying. Although the map had good information on hiking trails, it did not label many of the side-roads and villages that dotted and crossed the region. No problem. We did our best to orient the topographical map according to our limited knowledge of the region and set off early one morning for the trailhead.

A couple minutes into our hike, we began to sense that something was wrong. Although we could orient ourselves by several features in the landscape, the map did not wholly correspond to our surroundings. For the first hour, we would walk for awhile and then stop to pull out the map and find some way of making sense of our surroundings from the map. But the process only confused us. No amount of imaginative work could connect our map and current location. We began to wonder if we had the wrong map, or whether we were not on the map at all.

Then a sudden realization gripped us. The problem was not our map or our location. The problem was our imagined place on the map. We realized that we had been tracing our route from the wrong unmarked village. Once we oriented ourselves from a different village, our place, route, and surroundings appeared before us in a whole new way. All along, we had been reading the right map and paying attention to the right landmarks, but we failed to put it all together and so we could not see where we were or where we were going. Our failure was one of imagination. We were unable to see the relationship between the map and our context, and so all our detailed attention and our readings of the compass led us in the wrong direction.

When it comes to the use and role of Scripture in our churches, a similar failure takes place. We tend to care about the right things—neighbors in need, practices of spiritual formation, authentic worship—and we try to be guided in our speech and action by the right authoritative text—Scripture—but too much of the time we end up lost. We fail to see both the Scriptural text and our context in right relationship, and so our leadership runs aground because we are unable to interpret where we are and how God is leading us. Our problem is that we have not adequately attended to the vigorous practices that shape a missional theological imagination.

Imagination can be a troublesome term. Its popular use suggests an emphasis on what is “unreal” or “not-yet.” We tend to say things like, “My daughter has a great imagination,” to communicate my daughter’s capacity for inventing stories, events, or images. As such, we have an ambiguous relationship with imagination. We value its inventiveness while being

suspicious of its utility. Imaginative people can sometimes help us find a new way forward, but they often have trouble finding solid ground. Because of this popular use of the term, the modifier “theological” can be confusing. Is theological imagination the capacity for making things up? Don’t the Scriptures caution us against that as a potential act of idolatry?

However, our popular use of imagination offers an impoverished vision of how we live in and image our world. In philosophy and the human sciences, imagination has come to refer to the ways in which our “image” of reality shapes our encounter with it. Similar to the concept of paradigm or of gestalt in perception, imagination clarifies the way in which we always see the parts in terms of the whole. Like the famous drawing that could be an old woman with a crooked nose or a young woman looking over her shoulder, the way we see the whole determines which parts we identify. The parts simply reinforce our initial seeing of the young or old woman. This feature of human seeing and knowing is pretty consequential for all of life. Before Copernicus and Kepler, it was self-evident that the earth was a stable and fixed entity around which the heavenly bodies moved. Certain abnormalities in the details persisted—in the same way that the surroundings on my ill-fated hike failed to conform to the map—but the reigning paradigm for the universe subordinated all contrarian data points. The dominant image of reality kept others from seeing the fact that the earth revolved around the sun. Thus, imagination names the way in which we see the world through our existing image of the world. Garrett Green, in the book *Imagining God*, calls this the “paradigmatic imagination.”

When describing the paradigmatic imagination, we must resist the tendency to picture this faculty as existing within individuals, as though everybody sees through their own self-constructed paradigm. Imagination—if it names this broad idea of the way in which we image reality—must be understood as a social and historical entity. In this way, the paradigmatic imagination functions a bit like language. It is public and social. This means that our ways of seeing are best thought of as a type of world that is shaped by our practices, the communities within which we live, our language, and our histories.

We share and shape our paradigmatic imagination together. Anyone who has come back from a retreat with a series of jokes or perspectives that just don’t “translate” to those who did not attend has experienced this social feature of the imagination.

The fact that we all experience and interpret through a particular paradigm or socially formed imagination should not come as a surprise to us, nor should it resign us to the fatalism of bad maps and lost hikers. Just like we (long ago) learned to image the world as moving and spinning through space, so also our paradigmatic imagination is a flexible and formidable feature of our lives.

Understanding it helps us to think differently about the task of leadership in our churches. Besides asking questions about practice and mission, we must also consider the shape of our theological imagination: how do we imagine the world and God’s engagement with it? This is not a pure exercise, but one that forces us to attend to the influencing factors of our time in history and our cultural context. Certainly, features of our theological imagination come from dominant practices of our society. For example, the precedence of economic and transactional soteriological metaphors in North American evangelicalism reflects our daily

catechism in the ways of a market economy and runaway consumerism (i.e. salvation as “free”). Or, our occasional use of the Bible as a personal self-help manual reflects an image we’ve adopted in a Dr. Phil world.

But an awareness of these obviously negative strands in our theological imagination also discloses an opportunity for congregational leadership. The Bible does not come to us as an object for us to interpret from our culturally framed point of reference. It is not a passive text from which we pluck occasional moral instruction or data about the origins of the universe. Rather, the shape of the Scriptures as a set of stories with a particular narrative arc stretching from primordial to new creation helps us to see the Bible as a particular kind of world that re-describes or remakes our world through forming our imagination. A missional Christian theological imagination is one that is continually shaped, described, and re-described by the Scriptural narrative.

The consequence of this realization is now clear. We get lost in our leading, discerning, and acting as Christians because our social imagination becomes static and resistant to the re-description of the biblical story. Like the disciples on the Emmaus road, our eyes are simply incapable of seeing the unexpected presence of Jesus in our midst. Of course, it is Jesus Himself who opens the Scriptures, who re-describes the world for these disciples. It is Jesus Himself who speaks in and through the Scriptural story and who shapes their theological imagination so that they can see a crucified and resurrected messiah. Is our contemporary situation any different?

So how can we structure our life as the church so that we might inhabit the biblical story more truthfully? Where should we place ourselves so that the voice of Jesus might renew our theological imagination? These questions invite a whole new essay, but a couple comments can be made here. Since a theological imagination must be formed by inhabiting the Scriptural story, it is vitally important that we create practices of discernment, discussion, and dwelling in the Scriptural text. Second, since our imagination is public and social, we must create space for ongoing conversation centered on the biblical story and yet rooted in our particular context. It is, after all, conversation that helped two lost hikers find their way—on an ancient road to Emmaus and (less dramatically) a not-so-ancient one in England.

DEVELOPING THE MISSIONAL IMAGINATION OF YOUR CONGREGATION

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Those who flunked poetry essays or managed to create little more than blotchy sketches in art class will no doubt feel a little cool at the mention of the word. But imagination is a profound concept that can shape the way a congregation sees itself, God, and the world around them. The imagination is a central, even vital, source of life because it is through the imagination that we can see those places where God is at work in shaping our communities of faith. It is in our imaginations where the Spirit of God births vision, hope, and new prayers for our neighborhoods.

David Morgan eloquently describes the importance of the imagination in shaping the life of a community when he says, “To belong to a community is to participate, to take part, to perform a role, to find a place within the imagined whole. [. . .] Moreover, belonging is nurtured by the *aesthetic* practices that are designed to generate and refine feeling on the crossed axes of human relationships and human-divine interaction.”¹ The imagination is a kind of “sensuous cognition,” according to Morgan. We long for our communities to experience more than just a conversion of belief. We desire, as God does, that our communities participate in the mission of God with their very being: heart, soul, mind, and strength. To shape the missional imagination of a community is to help them fully embrace, delight in, and feel the missional heart of the Father. This starts with creative and surprising experiences that dislodge the imagination to see anew what God is up to in the midst of the world around them.

Here are eight practical ideas for engaging the missional imagination of your congregation that come largely out of the experiences of my own church community in Calgary, Alberta.

Embrace the Word “Experiment”

Unchecked imagination can be our worst enemy. Church communities can build up fearful expectations that shape scary outcomes in their minds. Not only does Jesus call us not to live in fear, but He offers us His guidance and peace as we venture in new directions. Building a vocabulary that allows for experimental forays into the unknown will build confidence and trust in the Father.

Taking on a missional “experiment” offers the imagination a release valve to let out fear. As you empower others to try creative or risky projects, you may even come to expect unforeseen results.

¹ David Morgan, *The Embodied Eye* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 147.

Travel Together

There's nothing like staying in your basement to cut off your imagination for the neighborhood. Likewise, there is nothing like staying in the church building to shape and reinforce a congregation's imagination for self-protectionism. In recent years, our church has learned to travel together: Israel, Brazil, Mexico, and Kenya have each opened our eyes. Each experience has broadened our missional imagination to see the ways that God is working around the world and right here in our own neighborhood.

Create an Art Show

A few years ago, we dedicated a small space in our church for art. We hosted professional artists from a local Christian art society to showcase their work, and then did a couple community art shows ourselves. Artists came from unexpected places, and we were compelled to reflect upon the broad giftedness in our community.

Simple experiments like this can instill a sense of communal participatory awe that can infuse new life in the imagination of a community.

Pose Good Questions to Your Community

People walk by our church building every day, and we wanted to know what our neighbors dream about. Taking a cue from artist Candy Chang and her work in New Orleans, we created the "Before I Die" wall that allowed people, chalk in hand, to share their dreams about what they hope to do with their lives.² A simple but well-placed question may spark broader conversations and a few surprises.

Tell the Old Stories

The imagination is shaped by looking back as well as forward. It is shaped by the stories we tell and retell. Sometimes that's where we need to start. For a recent fiftieth anniversary celebration we created a wall dedicated to the five centuries of God's work in our midst and neighborhood. Not only did it generate plenty of stories and nostalgia, it allowed people to imagine what God might shape in us for the next fifty years.

God Sightings

Open mics are risky. But try setting aside time on Sunday mornings for people to share God sightings, places in their lives where they've seen God at work. Not only is it a healthy missional practice to identify and thank God for His work in our lives, but it opens our imaginations and invites further observation and participation.

Cry Together

Theologically we believe that church is a place where we can mourn together. However, in practice we may live as though Sunday mornings are all smiles. When a congregation goes

² <https://beforeidieproject.com>.

through hard times hand-in-hand and takes time to embrace those who suffer, the community begins to live into the hope that church is for the broken-hearted. Recognizing sorrow and pain lays bare in our imagination the deep need for God and may serve to bring new life rooted in the hope of Christ. “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted” (Matthew 5:4 NIV).

Model the Missional Life

Living missionally can be a stretch for the imagination used to seeing church as a program and place rather than a body of believers living attentively with Jesus in their contexts. As leaders live out the missional life and share their stories and struggles, a previously closed imagination may begin to embrace the possibility that they, too, can live missionally. A woman in my neighborhood was nervous about having strangers over for supper. After months of watching others model hospitality, she started to change. One day she burst into our gathering and declared, to much celebration, that she had shared supper with a neighbor and had a remarkable experience.

Skye Jethani writes, “Like Jesus, we must find ways of getting past defensive walls and enter the chamber where peoples’ imaginations are sleeping and stir them from hibernation.”³ How might you slip past the well-fortified defenses of your community’s imagination? May we develop a Spirit-shaped imagination to see and participate in the profound work that God is doing today.

³ Skye Jethani, *The Divine Commodity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 27.