

VOICES from the
MISSIONAL MOVEMENT



VOLUME FIVE

**LOVING GOD WITH ALL OUR
STRENGTH**



NORTH AMERICAN BAPTIST CONFERENCE

LOVING GOD WITH ALL OUR STRENGTH

VOICES FROM THE MISSIONAL MOVEMENT

–VOLUME 5–

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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.

LIVING AS STEWARDS

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I often hear the word *missional* used to describe two competing visions. To some, missional is only an adjective added to existing programs concerned with relevance. To others, missional is an invigorated effort to serve the neighborhood or to establish new evangelism programs. Both perspectives are incomplete. They fall short.

Missional comes from seeing God as the God of mission (*missio Dei*) and then envisioning all of life as a response to God's call, to bear witness to the God who made us.

Both the Old Testament and the New state that life to the fullest includes loving God with all of our strength. Teachers such as Dallas Willard see this as bringing our bodies under the lordship of Christ. Put another way, we need to be stewards of all that God has entrusted to us. This means that we bear witness to God by the way we steward the time, treasures, and talents He has given and by leading the way in taking care of the earth.

Ours can be a fast-paced and margin-less culture. Our pace can leave us weary and devoid of time to stop, be still, and cultivate deep and meaningful relationships. Sleep deprivation, road rage, and obesity may all be related to our pace in some way. We have our children in multiple sports and music and arts programs and often find ourselves occupied on many evenings a week. As followers of Jesus, we have added church meetings to the equation. Our neighbors see us infrequently and any invitation toward them to join us at a church event may be met with a puzzled look. "You expect us to add something else to our lives? We see your pace. Why would we want to be like you?"

Dallas Willard said, "We must ruthlessly eliminate hurry from our lives, for it is the disease of the soul." If we are too busy for our neighbors, it is likely that our God is too busy for them also.

The same is true with the resources He has entrusted to us. Many Christians live with debt and are less generous than they would like to be or know that they ought to be. Do we not serve a generous God?

Yet the difference in charitable giving between Christians and their neighbors is less than perhaps we have been instructed it should be. We have all heard the stories, stating that if Christians would even tithe, we could bring resolve to many global issues. We think the money in our possession is ours, not His which He has entrusted to us. And the way that we use it on ourselves cannot help but paint a picture of a God who lacks generosity.

I was privileged to spend time with a man who, though he has had to be the steward of millions upon millions of dollars, has remained in the same house for twenty-three years

and drives a thirteen-year-old truck. I was so deeply impressed with the integrity of this man and marveled at how God was using him – not necessarily because he was brilliant (although he is a pretty sharp guy) but rather because he could be trusted as a steward of that which God has given. His family now gives over 90 percent of their annual income.

The same is true for the gifts that God has given. When we use our abilities and gifts on our own fame and reputation, we paint a picture of God that leaves our world disappointed. Yet when we give all we are and have towards the kingdom of God and His reputation, God uses this attitude and effort to draw others to Himself.

Much could be written about the stewardship of this earth. For many years, organizations such as Green Peace led the way in earth-keeping. Thankfully, today many Christians are coming to realize that the very first invitation of God towards us as humans was to be good stewards of creation. We bear witness to the God of all creation through the way we either trash or care for the earth.

Being missional means that we see all of life through the lens of bearing witness to the God of mission. This includes the way in which we use the resources He has entrusted to us. It is a great privilege to be entrusted with that which is His to paint a picture of the God that desires all people to come to know Him.

COMING FORTH WITH LAZARUS

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I've a new Bible hero of late. Lazarus. Not Luke's scabrous beggar (Luke 16:19), but Mary and Martha's ill-begotten brother. Most of his story is told in John 11 – Lazarus's sickness, Jesus's (reposeful) delay, Lazarus's death, Mary's and Martha upset with Jesus, Jesus Himself upset ("Jesus wept"), and then the pièce de résistance: Jesus's command to a corpse, "Lazarus, come forth!" What follows is a miracle of power and wonder: a man three-days dead, pungent with rot, rouses to the voice, obedient even in death. Death must loose its grip and give up its prey. Lazarus comes forth.

That's the story most of us know. But it's the story after that one that I've cottoned onto. Afterward, next time Jesus is in Lazarus's town, the family hosts a banquet in His honour. As they should. It is a gala event, a hullabaloo of food and festivity and, I should think, endless and dramatic retellings of the story – "and then Jesus started crying, and I thought, 'Oh no, what could this mean?' but next thing He's standing up above that sepulchre like Moses on the mountain and in a voice like thunder. . . ." Everyone wants to be there. And not just to see Jesus. They want to get a peek at Lazarus, too:

When the great crowd of the Jews learned that he was there, they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus. (John 12:9-11 NRSV)

I think it was Nietzsche who said that if Christians wanted him to believe in Jesus, they'd have to start looking more redeemed. Well, Lazarus here is looking more redeemed, and it's having its effect. Three, in fact. Lazarus has become as interesting as Jesus. Lazarus has become as effective as Jesus. And Lazarus has become as dangerous as Jesus.

People want to see Lazarus every bit as much as they want to see Jesus, and some want to trust in Jesus every bit as much as Lazarus trusts in Him, and some want to kill Lazarus every bit as much as they want to kill Jesus. Lazarus has become a kingdom magnet, a firebrand evangelist, a holy menace.

That's why he's my hero. He's what I aspire to be. But here's what I really came all this way to tell you: Lazarus does all that by doing nothing. Watch:

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him.

Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. (John 12:1-2)

If we're going more redeemed, maybe what's needed most is to simply recline more with Jesus. I wrote a book on Sabbath a few years ago. The book's called *The Rest of God: Restoring Your Soul by Restoring Sabbath*. I was at pains, writing it, to avoid two things: a Pharisaical legalism, where the glory of Sabbath gets ground down to a dust-pile of rules; and a post-modernist vagueness, where the practicality of Sabbath gets lost amidst blog-like musings.

Along the way I made several discoveries, both theological and personal, but this was the keystone: Sabbath-keeping is rooted in, and gives rise to, a conviction that God is sovereign. Either God is in control, or He's not. If He's not – if I am, or you are, or Trudeau is, or the UN and the World Bank are – then who can rest? We ought to be worried, and very, very busy. If matters are in the hands of anyone other than God (or in no one's hands), then there is no rest, not just for the wicked, but for the righteous, too. There's just no rest altogether. The only sensible pose in such a world is wariness and fretfulness and Mad Hatter franticness. Run, Rabbit, run, and watch your back, and sleep with one eye open, and keep one hand on your sword.

If God be not God.

But if God be God, then there's time enough. If God be God, then in repentance and rest is our salvation, in quietness and trust is our strength (Isaiah 30:15). Philip Melancthon once said to his friend Martin Luther, "Today, Martin, you and I will discuss God's governance of the universe," to which Luther replied, "No, Philip. Today you and I are going fishing, and we'll leave the governance of the universe to God."

Here are a few practical things that might help you to know the rest of God.

Reorient

Sometimes we need to change our attitude, not our activities. Resentment feeds weariness, and so begrudging the time you spend doing something is sure to make the doing of it long and dreary. For me, thinking of the church as Christ's bride, not an organization, changed my attitude: I want to serve her. Fairy tales have told us that radiant beauties sometimes wear the disguise of ugly crones. The Bible tells us that the bride of Christ sometimes does the same – and, indeed, that Christ Himself sometimes wears the disguise of "the least of these." Believing this – that serving ordinary people is a way of serving Jesus and His bride – renews my motivation.

Refocus

Often in the midst of overwhelming busyness, I stop – not for hours but long enough to catch my breath, regain perspective, fill my lungs with fresh air. Sometimes I write a poem – an astonishingly effective way to rediscover, with wonder and thankfulness, what I've grown deaf and blind to in my mad rush. Or I go for walk and pay keen attention to sounds,

colors, stillness. Such pauses are mini-Sabbaths that replenish me and send me back to my tasks with fresh energy and creativity.

Reconnect

Busyness, unrelieved, kills togetherness. A vicious irony of ministry is that those of us who build and serve community often have no time for it ourselves. Jesus and His disciples were often going full-tilt at ministry. But in the midst of that, He knew when to pause just so these friends could spend time with one another. So I do that. In the first of the Lord of the Rings movies, the company of travellers is trying to open a stone door in the side of a mountain. The inscription above the door reads, "Speak, friend, and enter." Gandalf, the leader, interprets this to mean he must speak the proper magical incantation and the door will open. He tries several, all to no avail. He pushes at the door, uselessly. Finally, Frodo, one of the companions, asks what the Elvish word for "friend" is. Gandalf speaks it, and the door swings wide. When my talking and my pushing get me nowhere, taking time to speak friend – or to speak with a friend – often gets me unstuck.

Maybe King David pulls all this together for us. Ever wonder when David wrote Psalm 23? What was the occasion? I have a theory: the day his son Absalom overthrew the kingdom. It's a wild guess, to be sure. But there are two clues, one in the Psalm and one in the account of Absalom's overthrow and David's evacuation, that David turned that evacuation into Sabbath. The clue in Psalm 23 is verse 5: "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows."

In the presence of enemies, with an insurrectionist son sitting on his throne and a bitter old rival throwing curses and dirt on his head (see 2 Samuel 16:5ff), could David have reflected back to those early days of shepherding and remembered that, even here, especially here, in the valley of the shadow of death, God watches and protects and puts goodness on his tail and leads him finally to something far better than an earthly palace: the very house of God? The clue in the account of the overthrow is 1 Samuel 16:14: "Now the spirit of the LORD departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the LORD tormented him."

And there he refreshed himself. This was arguably the worse day David ever had. But in the throes of it, he didn't simply collapse. He refreshed himself. The word in Hebrew for refreshed is *nepesh*. It has another meaning: the soul. Literally, David restored his soul (Psalm 23:3). David, I think, did more than take a shower, put on fresh clothes, barbecue a steak, play a game of pool. David, I think, practiced the sovereignty of God. He reoriented, refocused, reconnected (and maybe, just maybe, he wrote a poem). And left the governance of the universe to God.

SABBATH AS PROMISE AND INVITATION

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Sometimes creation points clearly to the Creator. Several years ago, I was in Arizona teaching a weeklong intensive course. The desert, with its different shades of brown, captivated me. If one ignores the artificial signs of abundance such as golf courses, and air-conditioned shopping malls, and swimming pools, the Arizona landscape appears scorched, alien, and hostile: brown earth broken up by sinewy plants, cactus, and scrub brush. It is a picture of scarcity and limited resources. Limited water. Limited shade. Limited food. Vultures circling high above.

One day we went for a short hike. No longer driving past the desert, I was able to stop, listen, and look more closely. I expected to see the sand and death and struggle of desert life up close. But when I stopped, I saw something entirely different. Instead of scarcity, I saw abundance. Life. Abundant life. At first it was the little things, like the diversity of cactus and other plants nearby. But then, as I stopped to take in the landscape, I saw even more life. I noticed a tall cactus ahead of me with what seemed to be movement. A hole near the top of the cactus had birds flying in and out. I approached the cactus and began to notice several other cactuses with what looked to be a whole colony of birds flying about.

In this place of punishing heat and within the cactus—this symbol for scarcity and death—I discovered abundant life. Creation points to its Creator. Life is more powerful, creative, abundant, excessive—even indiscriminate or profligate—than we know. Life finds a way. We see this in the weeds that immediately fill an area where the land has been disturbed or in the way that new trees grow right out of the stumps of old trees or in the way that giant cedars in British Columbia thrive on improbably steep slopes in rocky soil. Life finds a way. Life points toward unimaginable abundance. This tells us something about God. Creation points, imperfectly, toward the Creator.

I couldn't see this from the highway when I was rushing between appointments. At 120 KPH, all I saw was death and dust. I noticed abundance when I stopped. This is like God's Sabbath rest. It comes to us as promise and invitation: the promise of abundance and the invitation to stop, to rest, to notice.

The Bible talks about the world in many different ways. Sometimes it emphasizes the ways in which the world isn't fair or the ways in which it is corrupt. Psalm 10 cries out, "Why, O LORD, do you stand far off?" and notices that the ways of the wicked "prosper at all times; [. . .] their eyes stealthily watch for the helpless" (NRSV). This tends to be the world we see at 120 KPH. We are familiar with death and disappointment, fear and injustice. It often feels as though we are abandoned to the desert. In short, we often feel like scarcity is what characterizes this world and the Bible gives us language to describe this world in terms of

longing and loss. The world is corrupt and broken and dangerous. It is sinful. We don't need help noticing this part of our experience. We become acquainted with the desert every time our child comes home from school with a verbal wound inflicted by another student or when we hear reports of the refugee situation in Syria or we find the month lasting longer than our money or if we think for just two seconds about our impending ecological crisis.

But this does not wholly describe the world that God so loves. The Bible insists that a closer look warrants abundance rather than scarcity. In Matthew 6, Jesus invites the disciples to look closely at the birds who do not plant their own crops but who still have plenty to eat. He tells them to take notice that the rain falls and the earth gives life to those that are just and those that are unjust. Here, Jesus draws upon a broad tradition in Scripture that "the earth is the Lord's and everything in it" and that God rules the earth with an unbridled enthusiasm for life. God wraps Himself in light "as with a garment." He stretches out the heavens with exuberance "like a tent" for His creatures, making the clouds His own chariot and riding "on the wings of the wind" (Psalm 104). In the rhythms of day and night, summer and fall, rain and sun, we see God's faithfulness and, frankly, *joie de vivre*. The joy in God's life, the joy of Father, Son, and Spirit in God's trustworthy care of creation. If we look close enough and from the right angle, grace appears as far as the eye can see.

We tend to move through the world at a pace so fast and with such a narrow perspective that all we can see is the first picture: danger, injustice, hopelessness, real and imagined hurts. We see a desert. We fear exposure. We see death. We frantically search for ways to protect ourselves and those dear to us. For some of us, it means acquisition of goods; we hoard what little money or possessions we have. For others, it means working ourselves silly to secure our place in the world or to prove our own worth. For others, it means a constant sense of anxiety or dread expressed in an inability to take risks or to enjoy the present moment. We are flying past life at 120 KPH in an air-conditioned car in fear of barrenness, in fear of the desert on every side.

This is no way to live. It is why God gives us Sabbath. When we stop, we risk venturing out into the desert – subjecting ourselves to the possibility of scarcity – so that we might discover something else: life. When we stop, we will be surprised to discover life on all sides and in surprising places. From the beginning, God promises rest for His creatures. God creates and sustains the world for the sake of life, promising to restore rest to a sinful creation prone to decay and death. As the water falls to the earth so that life will flourish, the Word of God restores creation to its proper relationship. When life finally wins out over death, the "mountains and hills before you shall burst into song" and "the trees of the field shall clap their hands" (Isaiah 55).

It is against this backdrop that Jesus comes and says, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:28–29). Jesus announces the promise of God – to give us rest – to fully enjoy the gift of God's presence and goodness. He also gives an invitation to learn how to receive God's rest in obedience. For this rest comes when we learn from Jesus, when we take His yoke upon us. It is easy to miss agrarian metaphors, but a "yoke" is a large wooden beam that connects oxen together for plowing fields. Jesus invites us to be connected to Him and

then to subsequently learn His way of life: a way of freedom and rest. Can we understand the practice of Sabbath as just this kind of invitation with a promise? Can we weekly respond to Jesus's invitation to come and receive His rest?

LOVING GOD WITH OUR TIME

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I think a lot about time. I regularly check to see what time it is, I hate when my time is being wasted, and I clench my teeth when the Wi-Fi goes down. If you're anything like me, you keep track of how quickly you can move from one thing to the next. When I'm flying through my to-do list, I feel powerful and important. Time is on my side and all is right in the universe. When all the tail lights brighten in front of me, I feel like I've been put in a timeout. I hate timeouts. I want to be on the playground, running around.

In the language of the New Testament, I'm telling you that I'm kind of obsessed with *chronos*, which is the general word for time in Greek. When we think of sand pouring through an hourglass or a little grey bar moving from left to right as we download, we're thinking of *chronos*. Of course we think about time very differently from how first century middle easterners would have. We slice time up into fine slivers in a way that would have seemed foreign to Jesus's disciples or the first readers of Paul's epistles. We also imagine time as a personal possession. This allows us to do things to time. We talk constantly about managing time, wasting time, making time, gaining time, losing time, and even finding time.

Because of our culture, as we think about loving God with our time, my bet is most of us think immediately about time management. We think about things like priorities, plans, and focus. We think about urgent versus important. And most of us feel guilty. We're instantly aware that our priority is not what it should be, that our plans are either inadequate or forgotten and that somehow we've lost focus.

But I don't really want to talk about prioritizing or planning or focusing. I bet you're relieved. I expect you feel at least a little bit weighed down and defeated by the whole enterprise of time management. If you're riding a wave of efficiency right now and can't relate to those of us who feel inadequate when it comes to getting focused and staying on target, I have two words: Just wait. To quote singer-songwriter Ron Sexsmith: "announcing your plans is a sure way to hear God laugh." Or as Eugene Peterson renders Proverbs 19:21 in *The Message*: "We humans keep brainstorming options and plans, but GOD's purpose prevails." The whole concept of time management smuggles in the lie that we're the ones in control. We do have power to make plans, but we are not ultimately the authors of our own stories. Sometimes life tears our plans to shreds. So here's the question that interests me: how do we love God with our time when we're not in control of it? How do we love God with our time when the truth is that time itself is not something we possess but rather a measure of something much bigger that is happening whether we want it to or not?

The answer may come from looking at another ancient Greek word for time: *kairos*. The Latin equivalent for *kairos* is *occasio*, from which we derive "occasion." The idea here is not

just of time in the general sense but of an opportune moment. In Greek mythology, Kairos is the god of the fleeting moment, depicted with a single crop of hair at the front of his head. He boasts that he has no hair at the back of his head because, “none whom I have once raced by on my winged feet will now, though he wishes it sore, take hold of me from behind.”¹ In simple English: opportunity only knocks once.

At first this may seem like more bad news. On the one hand, we can't manage time, and on the other hand, opportunities pass by never to be grasped again. But what if God is Lord of time? What if God is the orchestrator of opportunities? In the letter to the Galatians, Paul writes, “Let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. So then, as we have opportunity (*kairos*), let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.” (Galatians 6:9–10 ESV, parenthetical mine). Paul believed in divine appointments. While his life was full of things he could not manage and would not have chosen, he still saw God providing opportunities to do good.

Loving God with our time is not as much about our schedules and plans as it is about the opportunities that emerge within, outside of, and in spite of our schedules and plans. The primary value here is not efficiency or organization but sensitivity and love. My favourite scene in the movie *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* captures Gandalf in a moment of reflection about the battle against evil. Speaking of his mentor, he muses, “Saruman believes it is only great power that can hold evil in check, but that is not what I have found. I found it is the small everyday deeds of ordinary folk that keep the darkness at bay. Small acts of kindness and love.” And so it is. It's us ordinary folk loving God with our time by grasping small, everyday opportunities to love and be kind. As we do, we will be about our Master's business. While getting organized is a good thing, the secret is not ultimately to grasp control of time or seek significance by racing through our days.

Here's the good news: God is breaking up the steady, demanding drone of chronos with His redeeming kairos song. God-given opportunities are shining into the sameness of daily life. God is loving us in our time before we ever think of loving Him. As we live in Christ, we hear His song and can walk in His light. And we can love Him back while joining Him in loving others.

¹ W. R. Paton, translator, *The Greek Anthology, Volume V* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1918), 325.

LOVING GOD WITH ALL OUR STRENGTH: SABBATH AND TRUST

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The Lake District in England is a “thin place” for me. The likes of Wordsworth and Coleridge and Southey were all inspired by the beauty and serenity of the place. I hear God speak every time I go.

On one particular occasion, as I was walking up a hill (the British think it is a mountain), I heard God tell me to go and sit on a rather large boulder conveniently positioned to look out over the valley below. He proceeded to ask, “Do you trust me?” I responded quickly in the affirmative and got up to continue my trek up this hill. But He was not finished. I was told to sit and ponder this question a little longer. Needless to say, I became keenly aware that I do not fully trust Him. I know there is a way to live in the kingdom of God with a much deeper level of trust in Him.

The past few years I have found myself energized by engagement with the Sabbath. Many Saturday evenings at 6:00 p.m. (I try for every Saturday but am not always successful), I finish my week and put down my work. It is enough. We engage in a meal with neighbours and with friends from the church. We celebrate the previous week and the One who guided us through the week. And do we celebrate! We have great food and conversation. We stop so that we might celebrate that the Lord is good. We tell stories of the week to reflect upon where we have encountered God and the things we have heard Him say to us.

We celebrate, but we also rest. These days, I get to bed fairly early Saturday evenings. I want to be at my best for our Sunday worship gathering. Around 9:30, my wife and I finish the day with prayer together so we will be well rested for the morning. On Sunday, we gather with God’s people; we enjoy family lunch and recreation in the afternoon. After dinner on Sunday, I begin to think of the week ahead and pray for God’s presence in all that He guides me to do.

This practice of Sabbath gives life, and it helps me to grow in trust.

First, Sabbath invites us to trust God through acts of generosity. We come to the gathering on Sunday and give tithes and offerings with a monthly check. Personally, I have rejected the idea of auto-debit, for there is something about bringing a check to give on Sunday where I physically give back to the Lord a portion of that which He has entrusted to me. The regular giving of at least a tenth of what I have been given enables me to develop trust in God. He is the Author of life and the Provider of all that is good.

Second, the practice of Sabbath helps me to learn to trust Him with my time. In a world that seems to be going faster and faster, I find myself caught up in the pursuit of becoming

someone through activity. This is an indication of a lack of trust in Him. So the practice of stopping work – of resting and playing – helps me to realize He is God; I am not. We need to rest, to recreate, and to be renewed spiritually. These are all good uses of time on the Sabbath that are in line with what God intends. I need to view all time through the lens of the kingdom of God. Sabbath helps me to trust God with the gift of time.

Third, Sabbath reminds me that He has entrusted me with gifts and abilities for the sake of others. My gifts are not only for my own benefit but the common good, for the body of Christ and for the sake of the world. I come to the gathering of the community of God's people with something to bring. Money? Yes. Time? Yes. But I also come with a part to play. This gift to God is a response to how He has entrusted me with these skills and gifts for the sake of building up the body. We must get away from the ridiculous idea of paying people to "bless others" and get back to a more biblically correct understanding that we all have gifts to bring to the Lord in serving one another. As we – the Body of Christ – grow to maturity, we do indeed worship God and love our neighbour. Our gifts are for the sake of the world; that is what it means to be on mission.

There is more, but this will hopefully have encouraged you to look again at the value of the practice of the Sabbath. It is a practice that cultivates trust in the Lord. How is your congregation engaged in the practice of Sabbath? Do you trust Him enough?