

Afterword by R. Kent Hughes



A  
COVENANTAL  
VISION  
*for*  
GLOBAL  
MISSIONS

Edited by Paul Wells,  
Peter A. Lillback, and Henk Stoker

“This unique and useful collection of essays, written by pastor-theologians from across the world, arises from a global missions conference in South Africa. The theme of the covenant is the tie that binds them, building on and enriching recent insights from what has been termed *missional hermeneutics and theology*. The authors commend this comprehensive missional impulse while bringing it into conversation with the riches of Reformed theology. Yet they demonstrate that Reformed distinctives are no addendum. Their Potchefstroom Missions Declaration begins with the bold statement, “The Reformed faith is missional, or it is not Reformed.” This collection does more than enlarge on the missional component of core theological themes. The authors also make application to the heart of those engaged in missions, to the outward-focused identity that the church must embrace, and to new missional realities in the world.”

—**Rob Edwards**, Assistant Professor of Pastoral Theology,  
Westminster Theological Seminary

“*A Covenantal Vision for Global Mission* is a treasure trove of mature theological reflections on how Reformed covenantal theology intersects with various aspects of global missions. The renowned scholars who have written for this significant work should be commended for their insights and contribution to Reformed missiology for this generation and generations to come.”

—**Lloyd Kim**, Coordinator, Mission to the World, PCA

“This book is the outcome of a missions conference held at the Potchefstroom campus of North-West University in South Africa in July 2015. While the contributors are from around the globe, and their points of view reflect various Reformed traditions, the book has a cohesiveness: a covenantal vision for the global mission. This is reflected in the Missions Declaration that was formulated at the conference’s conclusion. For Reformed theology, the covenant is the source and well of world mission. The *pactum salutis*, the pretemporal, intra-Trinitarian covenant of redemption, provides the center of gravity for Reformed thinking. It is followed by the covenant of works/creation, which because of Adam’s sin would invite the covenant of

grace, and the other covenants up to the covenantal structure of the Great Commission. If theologians and missiologists are still debating the merits and problems of *missio Dei* theology, Reformed theology with its Christ-centered focus, rooted in the biblical redemptive history of promise and fulfillment, provides an antidote to certain of its dangers. The book is recommended reading for all those who want to familiarize themselves with good biblically based Reformed mission theology.”

—**Hannes Wiher**, Associate Professor of Missiology, Faculté libre de théologie évangélique, Vaux-sur-Seine, Faculté Jean Calvin, Aix-en-Provence, France

A  
COVENANTAL  
VISION  
*for*  
GLOBAL  
MISSION

EDITED BY PAUL WELLS,  
PETER A. LILLBACK, AND HENK STOKER

**WSP** WESTMINSTER  
SEMINARY PRESS

**R&R**  
P U B L I S H I N G  
P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

© 2020 Westminster Theological Seminary

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—except for brief quotations for the purpose of review or comment, without the prior permission of the publisher, P&R Publishing Company, P.O. Box 817, Phillipsburg, New Jersey 08865–0817.

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked (NEB) are taken from the New English Bible, copyright © Cambridge University Press and Oxford University Press 1961, 1970. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. [www.zondervan.com](http://www.zondervan.com) The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™

Italics within Scripture quotations indicate emphasis added.

Printed in the United States of America

### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Names: Wells, Paul Ronald, editor. | Lillback, Peter A., editor. | Stoker, Henk, editor.

Title: A covenantal vision for global mission / edited by Paul Wells, Peter A. Lillback, and Henk Stoker.

Description: Phillipsburg, New Jersey : P&R Publishing, [2020] | Includes bibliographical references and indexes. | Summary: "An international group of scholars from five continents show how Christian missions are grounded in the classic biblical and historic Reformed theological understanding of God's covenantal relationship with mankind"-- Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019034922 | ISBN 9781629957302 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9781629957319 (epub) | ISBN 9781629957326 (mobi)

Subjects: LCSH: Missions--Theory. | Reformed Church--Missions. | Reformed Church--Doctrines. | Mission of the church.

Classification: LCC BV2063 .C68 2020 | DDC 266--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019034922>

To the multitude of Reformed and Presbyterian  
missionaries who replied to Christ's call to foreign missions  
throughout our history since the Reformation



# Contents

Foreword by Peter A. Lillback	vii
A Missions Declaration	xi
Introduction	xiii

## **Part 1: The Covenant Theology of Mission**

1. The Source of Mission in the Covenant of Redemption	3
<i>Davi Charles Gomes</i>	
2. Covenant of Creation, Cultural Mandate, and Mission	21
<i>Pierre Berthoud</i>	
3. The Covenant of Grace as the Paradigm for Mission	49
<i>Peter A. Lillback</i>	
4. Mission and Gathering God's New Covenant People	75
<i>Flip Buys</i>	
5. Mission in the Light of Covenantal Eschatology	105
<i>Paul Wells</i>	

## **Part 2: Covenant Theology and the Mission-Minded Church**

6. Missions in the Fear of God	125
<i>Flip Buys</i>	
7. Christ's Dominion over Creation and Spiritual Warfare in Mission	145
<i>Henk Stoker</i>	

8. Missional Preaching and the Covenant 169  
*Robert Norris*
9. Tithing as a Covenantal Strategy for Mission 185  
*In Whan Kim*

### **Part 3: Covenant Theology and Global Mission Vision**

10. Covenantal Missions and the City 207  
*Naas Ferreira*
11. The Witness of Reformed Christianity in a Minority  
Situation: Indonesia 235  
*Benyamin F. Intan*
12. The Missional Minority in Post-Christian Europe 269  
*Paul Wells*
13. Covenantal Apologetics and Mission 293  
*Guilherme Braun*

Epilogue 305  
*Kent Hughes*

Select Bibliography on Mission and Covenant 321

Contributors 329

Index of Scripture 331

Index of Subjects and Names 341

# Foreword

This book brings together contributors from Africa, Asia, North and South America, and Europe. It is the outcome of a missions conference held at the Potchefstroom Campus of North-West University in South Africa in July 2015, and the majority of the contributions were presented there. It is my privilege, on behalf to the editors, to thank the organizers at Potchefstroom and the Educational Commission of South Africa for making this meeting possible.

We herein seek to celebrate the Christian church's mission concern and the global vision and international scope of the gospel of Christ. Indeed, the church's worldwide missionary task embraces the biblical claim that the good news of Christ's death and resurrection is to be preached for the salvation of mankind. More specifically, these articles reflect the reality that the Reformed tradition has long been an active participant in the proclamation of the gospel of Christ to the four corners of the earth.

The reason for our conference and these studies, however, is not merely to reaffirm the global Reformed mission. We have sought to reemphasize it, but we do so with a specific aim in mind. As Reformed confessional Christians, we assert that the practice of missions must be pursued with a simultaneous commitment to a missional theology that is grounded in the biblical-theological teaching of Scripture. In other words, our Reformed missional practice and our Reformed missional doctrine should be viewed as being inseparably connected. As the apostle Paul admonished the church in Ephesus, "Speak the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15).

Thus, the weighty subject of missions is presented here, not only as a vital practical concern of the church, but also as a theological and academic enterprise that requires deep thought and careful research. It is the conviction of the editors and the contributors to this volume that the union of the task of missions with the theology of the covenant is the best paradigm for developing Christ's global mission. Discussions concerning the mission of the church are too often conducted with insufficient engagement with the great theological truths of the biblical covenants—of redemption, of creation, and of grace.

These articles seek to ground the growing interest in the missional character of Christian outreach in the classic biblical and historic Reformed theological understanding of God's covenantal relationship with mankind. It is our sincere hope that these essays will inspire further reflection on these important concerns of the church, so as to motivate greater practical and theological means for advancing Christian witness throughout the world.

And finally, let me note that in the editing of the papers, we have employed blind peer review as an integral part of the process. Moreover, the writers have made fresh contributions that advance their previous interests in the covenant and global mission. Further, this collection is the culmination of scholarly research, reflecting various academic emphases and differing theological traditions. While the contributors come from around the globe, and their insights and points of view reflect various Reformed traditions, there is a cohesiveness to the message—a biblically based, covenantal vision for the global mission of the Reformed tradition. This coherent vision is reflected in the Missions Declaration that was formulated at the conclusion of the conference in Potchefstroom in 2015 and refined at a meeting in Jakarta the following year.

May our Lord's kingdom mission hereby be advanced. May his missionary mandate be encouraged. And may the growing collaboration of Reformed scholars worldwide continue to expand and deepen on a global scale. *Soli Deo gloria.*

Finally, we express our sincere gratitude to the respective organizations represented by each of the contributors to this book, with special gratitude to North-West University, Westminster Theological

Seminary, and the ministry of the international journal *Unio cum Christo* in conjunction with the Reformed Evangelical Seminary in Jakarta. We also express our gratitude to the World Reformed Fellowship for bringing us together in São Paulo, Brazil, where the writing of this book was first proposed.

Peter A. Lillback  
Convener and Editor



## A Missions Declaration

1. The Reformed faith is missional, or it is not Reformed. [Isaiah 6:1–7; John 3:16; Romans 1:16–17]
2. Mission has its origin in God’s eternal being and plan: it has its content in the good news that God is Lord of creation and its Savior in Christ; it has as its goal the glory of God in his kingly rule. [Psalm 110; Hebrews 2:10–18; Revelation 21:1–8]
3. Mission is good news: the Father is known in the Son, the one mediator, in his person, life, death, and resurrection; the Son sends witnesses as ambassadors with his word; the Spirit applies the truth in newness of life. [Psalm 87; Matthew 28:19–20; 2 Corinthians 5:17–21; Colossians 1:24–29]
4. The Reformed faith announces the renewal of broken covenants: God restores fallen creation, he regenerates sinful people, he renews communities in reconciled life. Mission proclaims and results in God’s *shalom*, peace in all spheres of life. [Jeremiah 33:14–26; John 17; Romans 5:12–20; Revelation 21:1–4]
5. Mission is covenantal activity: God reaches out to lost sinners in the universal gospel call; believers are God’s elect people united in *koinonia* (fellowship) in Christ and receive the signs of God’s covenant; they worship God in spirit and in truth in the *ecclesia* (church) and proclaim redemption in all of life. Their worship is also a witness to the majestic presence of God among them. [Jeremiah 31:31–37; Acts 2:37–41; 1 Peter 2:4–12; 1 John 3:1–3; 1 Corinthians 14:23–25]

6. The church in her mission reaches out to the suffering with the compassion of Christ in faith, love, and hope, assisted by the transforming power of his Spirit. [Psalm 103; Job 29:11–17; Isaiah 53; Matthew 5:16; Mark 6:34; Colossians 3]
7. In her mission, the church heralds the new creation to be revealed at Christ's *parousia* (return), when God's glory and man's freedom will be completely manifested. [Psalm 96; Isaiah 11:1–10; 1 Corinthians 15:20–28; 2 Corinthians 5; Revelation 21:5–8]
8. The Reformed faith always seeks ways of expressing its global mission in the multicultural, multiethnic contexts of the present world in which believers are called to live and witness. [1 Corinthians 1:18–2:5; 9:19–23; Galatians 3:27–29; James 2:1–13; 1 John 2:7–11]
9. The churches of the Reformation from the earliest times have been mindful of their mission, and examples of self-sacrificial witness abound. Nevertheless, they have not always maintained mission as a priority. By failing to heed the call of Christ, they have often fallen into self-satisfaction, indifference to the lost, coldness to the needy of the world, unnecessary love of possessions, and internal conflicts. We pray that the Lord would deliver us from self-centered worldliness and help us to increasingly become all things to all people for the sake of the gospel. [Romans 1:17; 1 Corinthians 9:19–23]

Potchefstroom, July 31, 2015

Jakarta, March 11, 2016

# Introduction

This book is an approach to Christian mission from the covenantal perspective of Reformed theology, with contributions coming from five continents. It is the outcome of a conference held on the Potchefstroom Campus of North-West University in South Africa at the end of July 2015. It seeks to lay the foundations for Christian mission from the perspective of the Reformed tradition, considering what missional calling and practice are, and what a global vision for missions in a covenantal context might look like. This context is both biblical and theologically pivotal, for Jesus Christ is the head of God's covenant dealings with creation and human beings.

There is no greater challenge to the Christian church today than the one posed by mission to a shrinking and rapidly changing world, one that is incredibly diverse with its ethnic, religious, cultural, social, and political conflicts, plus the major fracture between poverty and affluence. What is mission, what is its vision and motivation, and how can it be done effectively?

Reformed theology and mission are two subjects that might seem to be strange bedfellows, because they are sometimes wrongly assumed to be incompatible. In this case, however, first taste does not tell, because contrary to received ideas, the structural lines of Reformed theology are missional and press outward in kingdom-oriented action. This thrust is energized by the “in Christ” focus of Reformational thinking: Christ is the key because he is the electing divine actor who is central in history, the incarnate missionary, the visionary sender of the apostolate, and the coming Lord who will roll up the heavens

and earth, bringing in the eternal kingdom of reconciliation in a new creation of love, righteous justice, and peace.

If the jury is still out, deliberating on the merits and imbalances of late-twentieth-century *missio Dei* theology, then Reformed theology, with its focus on Christ, rooted in the Bible's redemptive history of promise and fulfillment, the already and the not yet, provides an antidote to certain of its dangers. It is not more active theology or more social strategy that is needed in global missional reflection, but more of Christ and his word, and, with him, more love, more faith, and more hope, with a warmth of heart that he alone gives to those he sends. It is his comforting and consoling presence that is longed for by the church suffering oppression under the cross in many places today, and it is his humility and meekness that are needed to model attitudes in other places, where Christians have become rich, prosperous, and sadly indifferent. So if this book is about Reformed theology and mission, it is always and ever about the coming of Christ's reign into a shadowy, gray world. All the contributions in the three parts of this book point in that one direction: theology, missional calling to action, and global vision.

Mission work itself is a form of mediation. Missionary witnesses stand with the truth, *for* God and *before* men. Put this way, we can see that mission must always be accomplished "in Christ" as he, *par excellence*, is the one who stands for God and before men in his unique incarnate work of mediation: "There is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 2:5). In this respect, it can be said that the purpose and work of God is mission to a world gone wrong, that Christ is a missionary, and also that all mission work is accomplished in Christ. This is the spirit that animates this book.

The words "in Christ" express the whole of God's mission to and in the world: *from* eternity, *to* time, *to* eternity—including secret election, incarnation, redemption accomplished and applied, justification, sanctified life, and finally glorification. But how is this mission carried out? What is the status of Christ, and how does he act as missional agent? These questions can only be answered theologically—by reference to Christ's divinity and humanity. Karl Barth's so-called Christocentrism, which makes Christ simultaneously the elect and

the reprobate one, is not biblically grounded. Following Calvin, it is more appropriate to speak of Christ as the one mediator in his divine and human natures, pointing to the historical person and work of the God-man and the fulfillment of the covenant promise in him.

When we speak of the person of the mediator, we cannot forget the Chalcedonian formulation concerning the eternal person of the Son. The act of mediation is “in Christ,” and Christ is at once the electing God and the elect man. As God, Christ himself, considered in his divinity, contains all the essence of the Godhead. In election, he it is who eternally designates himself as mediator, in communion with the Father, and he it is also who subordinates himself to the Father in the economy of incarnation. As the second person of the Trinity, Christ has the *jus eligendi*, the right to choose, and as Son he accepts the office of mediator, involving incarnation, humiliation, suffering, and salvation, as we have it in Philippians 2. In his High Priestly Prayer, Jesus witnesses to the success of his mission accomplished: “I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do” (John 17:4). In his divinity and humanity, Christ the mediator is the electing God and the elected man. Divine transcendence and aseity are the fount of Christ’s humanity, and his mediation in the flesh is eloquently witnessed to in the letter to the Hebrews (Heb. 9:15; 12:24).

This perspective is a good way of relating the two aspects of election in Reformed theology that people stumble over, because they think it blocks missions; the *vertical* and *horizontal* perspectives are united in the person of the mediator. As Calvin put it, “The decree was eternal and unchangeable, but must be carried into effect by *Christ Jesus our Lord*, because in him it was made.”<sup>1</sup> But how is this done? As elect man, Christ comes into the world to accomplish active and passive obedience as the second and final Adam, the perfect covenant servant. Can the well-known expression that Christ is the “mirror of election” be endorsed? It seems necessary to be more precise than

1. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*, trans. William Pringle, Calvin’s Commentaries (repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 256 (comm. on Eph. 3:11).

this, and in a biblical sense.<sup>2</sup> As mediator of the divine and human natures, Christ stands as prophet, priest, and king, to use Calvin's *munus triplex*. In his unique divine and human person, he fulfilled the offices in suffering and glory. In his humanity, Jesus stands as the rejected prophet, the sacrificed priest, and the king on the cross. In his divinity, he is the Logos, the efficacious sacrifice of infinite value, and the king of glory. The mission of Christ has as its content the three offices. It is through these that election is accomplished on the horizontal plane and is recognized by the many sons whom Christ will bring to glory (Heb. 2:10–18).

The mediation of the resurrected Christ in his glorification is concretized in his heavenly intercession. His work of salvation in the expiation of sin has infinite value and is universally sufficient for all. This is the foundation of the worldwide mission of the church and of the Great Commission of Matthew 28:20—the horizontal task of the free offer of the gospel. Yet in his divine, vertical intercession, Christ represents his own, the elect, chosen according to grace. Reconciliation, actual redemption, and propitiation are particular, personal, and efficacious because of the precise nature of Christ's intercession for his own. Christ *will* save, through the preaching of the good news, those for whom he died; none of his children will be snatched from his hand (John 10:28). The fact that Christ continues his mediatorial work in heaven is the foundation of mission work and the assurance of its success.

Union with Christ, being a new creation “in Christ,” implies union with him as risen Lord in his mission of salvation. The privilege of the people of God is to be a witnessing people, partaking in the *munus triplex* of the mediator: “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9). The prophetic, priestly, and kingly offices of the mediator become incarnate once again, in a new and

2. Richard A. Muller, *Christ and the Decree: Christology and Predestination in Reformed Theology from Calvin to Perkins* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986), 17–38.

surprising way, in the humanity of Christ's people. Their missional calling and responsibility is to shed abroad the light, as those whose identity is bound up with the Light of the world. Because they have received mercy, they can do no other than be messengers of mercy.

So the horizontal end of the golden chain that began in divine election, with Christ as the elect One, God and man, comes into view with him as the prophet, priest, and king in his suffering and glory. The mission that Adam failed to accomplish in creation as prophet, priest, and king is fully and finally realized in Christ. The new people of God are called to bear witness in mission to the new creation, already begun here and now in and through the work of the mediator. As a people with prophetic, priestly, and kingly functions, they are called to ministry of the word, to priestly demonstrations of mercy, and to kingly victory in trampling under their feet the powers of darkness, sin, and evil. The messianic community, in Christ, exists for mission, not for institution or human ambition.

The mission of the church is not expressed by attributes of divine glory, but in the strangely contrary way of divine choosing, which is the path of humility and suffering. Its calling reflects in content and form the ministry of the mediator. Treasure there is, but the treasure is in earthen vessels. As the medieval mystic John Tauler said, commenting on "Learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart" (Matt. 11:29): "We must give our minds with willing industry to read it over and over again attentively, and practise it in our life, ever looking to the admirable model of the divine humanity of Christ, whose whole life was not only meek and humble, but whose words, ways, walk, and all that ever He did, are simply the illustration of this doctrine."<sup>3</sup> The way of election is that of mission in self-emptying and meekness. Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood: "Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come" (Heb. 13:13–14).

3. John Tauler, "Sermon for the Sixth Sunday after Epiphany," in *The History and Life of the Reverend Doctor John Tauler of Strasbourg, with Twenty-Five of His Sermons*, trans. Susanna Winkworth (London: H. R. Allenson, 1905), 109.

As the body of Christ, the church is a ministry of mission. This constitutes the calling of the whole body, as all are one in Christ and one with him. This must be so, and we must strive for it to be so, in terms of the church as both organism and as organization. Organizations that do not exist for this goal inevitably fade away into sociological forms of human bureaucracy. Mission must always keep the threefold office in the forefront of its policies as determinative of its vision, so that the service of God in a lost world finds expression in the service of our fellow human beings.

The contributors to this volume follow their efforts with the earnest prayer that they will stimulate missions to the glory of God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and that many will confess with Peter, “To whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God” (John 6:68–69).

Paul Wells, Peter A. Lillback, Henk Stoker  
Editors

# PART 1

## THE COVENANT THEOLOGY OF MISSION



# 1

## The Source of Mission in the Covenant of Redemption

*Davi Charles Gomes*

### **Abstract**

In the first chapter of this book intended to contribute to a missional Reformed vision by placing it in the context of a covenantal approach to theology, the challenge is to set the rhythm and the framework. Other contributions will develop the connection with covenant theology and relate it to the implied missions, church life, and the world. God's revelation in Scripture gives us a metanarrative of history as redemptive history, beginning in Trinitarian acts in eternity past, embracing time, and culminating in a new history, the history of the new creation in Christ. Mission is not simply one aspect of theology or a sideshow in this history, but the substance of the story: the whole Bible is a missional phenomenon, with the amazing grace of God as its heartbeat. In this perspective, the Great Commission is not an epiphenomenon of the church's historical existence, but the summary of a program for the fulfillment of an even deeper and eternal purpose that implicates the being of God himself.

### **Introduction**

“Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them

as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away” (Rev. 21:3–4).

Only a person who is dead inside would not be moved by this picture painted in the book of Revelation. Here we find one final gift of scripturally revealed grace, as God brings to a close his verbal self-disclosure with a glimpse at the end of the book, an insight that serves as a fixed point, a provisional conclusion, to the first step in the fulfillment of a plan God set out for himself. Its provisional character will be considered later, but for the present the main point is that this vision serves as the closing bracket, the final quotation mark, of the great metanarrative of human history. What then is the starting point, the opening mark? Before getting into how theology has sought to answer that question, it is important to make the connection between this metanarrative and the fulfillment of the Great Commission.

Christopher Wright describes how this became clear for him as a young theologian troubled by the lack of connection he observed between theology and missions: “Theology was all about God. . . . Mission was about us.”<sup>1</sup> He continues: “Mission is about what we do.” That was the assumption, supported of course by clear biblical commands. “Jesus sends me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” Many years later, after a time when Wright taught theology as a missionary in India, he found himself giving a module entitled “The Biblical Basis of Mission” at All Nations Christian College, an international mission training and graduate school in southeast England. The module title itself embodied the same assumption. “Mission” is a noun, the given reality. It is something we do, and we basically know what it is. “Biblical” is an adjective, which we use to justify what we already know we should be doing. The reason why we should be doing missions—the basis, foundation, or ground on which we justify it—must be found in the Bible.<sup>2</sup> Wright recognized this to be a “mild caricature,” yet his concern with this disconnect created in

1. Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2006), 21.

2. Wright, *Mission of God*, 21–22.

him a desire to show students that the Bible does not simply contain passages that justify the mission endeavor, but rather “that the whole Bible is itself a ‘missional’ phenomenon”:

The Bible renders to us the story of God’s mission through God’s people in their engagement with God’s world for the sake of the whole of God’s creation. The Bible is the drama of this God of purpose engaged in the mission of achieving that purpose universally, embracing past, present and future, Israel and the nations, “life, the universe and everything,” and with its center, focus, climax, and completion in Jesus Christ.<sup>3</sup>

So what is the difference? Is not finding in the Scriptures a basis for doing missions the same thing as seeing the Scriptures from a missional perspective? Not really! What makes the difference is the depth of purpose, understanding that Jesus’ mandate to the church summarized in the Great Commission is not simply an epiphenomenon in the church’s historical existence, but in fact the summary of a program for the fulfillment in the church of a deeper and eternal purpose that has to do with the being of God himself (Eph. 1:3–23). Brazilian theologian Wadislau Martins Gomes speaks of that: “The purpose of God, in this case, is to instill his holiness (his glory, his grace, his character) in us, as members of his body; ours is to reflect the glory of his character, by grace through faith.”<sup>4</sup> The connection is clear: the mission of the church (*missio ecclesiae*) derives from the mission of God (*missio Dei*), and the latter is the manifestation of God’s purposes rooted in his own being!

At this point, I will offer the plan for this essay. So far, I have dealt with the connection between “doing missions” and the grand purpose of God himself. Revelation 21 offers a marvelous glimpse of the fulfillment of that grand design, but other passages are just as

3. Wright, *Mission of God*, 22.

4. Wadislau Martins Gomes, *Sal da Terra em Terras dos Brasis: Como Vemos e Somos Vistos na Cultura Brasileira* [Salt of the earth in Brazilian lands: How we see and are seen in Brazilian culture] (Brasília: Monergismo, 2014), 29.

exciting. Its universality, for example, is pictured in the words of the prophet Habakkuk: “For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea” (Hab. 2:14). The next step is to offer a perspective on the source and origin of God’s plan. Then I will turn to some missional implications of this perspective. Finally, I will return briefly to the eternity of God’s plan, as the “beyond” hinted at in the very fulfillment of the eschatological hopes expressed in Revelation 21 and Habakkuk 2.

### **The Covenant of Redemption**

A perspective on the plan of salvation that wishes to avoid synergism will of necessity gravitate toward a covenantal viewpoint. Princeton theologian Charles Hodge put it succinctly: “The plan of salvation is presented under the form of a covenant.” This is evident, he continues, “proved not only from the signification and usage of the words . . . [but] more decisively from the fact that the elements of a covenant are included in this plan,” such as parties, mutual promises or stipulations, and conditions.<sup>5</sup>

The first obvious aspect of a covenantal approach to the plan of salvation is the relationship that God establishes with those who will become the objects of his grace through Christ. In Reformed theology, this is traditionally called the covenant of grace. However, there is something else that is implicit in the existence of such a covenant, as Augustine recognized:

Behold, then, why the Son of God was sent; nay, rather behold what it is for the Son of God to be sent. Whatever things they were which were wrought in time, with a view to produce faith, whereby we might be cleansed so as to contemplate truth, in things that have a beginning, which have been put forth from eternity, and are referred back to eternity: these were either testimonies of this mission, or they were the mission itself of the Son of God.<sup>6</sup>

5. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 2:354.

6. Augustine, *On the Trinity*, IV.19 (25).

Two things are remarkable about this passage from *De Trinitate*. First, it is here that we begin to find references to the mission of the Godhead (the *missio Dei*). Second, Augustine makes a distinction between the aspects of this mission that unfold within time and the aspects that “are referred back to eternity.”

In sixteenth-century thought, not only was the idea of a covenant of grace between God and his people present, but in many ways the idea that this would be rooted in a transaction within the Godhead was also there. Some have argued that it was first in the theology of Cocceius (1603–69) that a more explicit concept of an intra-Trinitarian pact at the root of the covenant of grace makes its appearance. Geerhardus Vos, however, shows how this idea was present before Cocceius, in such writers as Caspar Olevianus (1536–87), William Ames (1576–1633), and others.<sup>7</sup> Richard Muller defines the concept of a covenant of redemption, or *pactum salutis*, in its developed form:

In Reformed federalism, the pretemporal, intratrinitarian agreement of the Father and the Son concerning the covenant of grace and its ratification in and through the work of the Son incarnate. The Son covenants with the Father, in the unity of the Godhead, to be the temporal *sponsor* of the Father’s *testamentum* (q.v.) in and through the work of the Mediator. In that work, the Son fulfills his *sponsio* (q.v.) or *fideiussio* (q.v.), i.e., his guarantee of payment of the debt of sin in ratification of the Father’s *testamentum*.<sup>8</sup>

Muller goes on to make an interesting analogy, arguing that even if for some the idea of a *pactum salutis* may seem speculative, it has an

7. See Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1985), 217 (“pactum salutis”); Geerhardus Vos, “The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology,” in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1980). Peter A. Lillback points to passages in Zwingli and especially in Calvin that adumbrate the idea of a pretemporal intra-Trinitarian covenant (*The Binding of God* [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2001], 101, 212–13). Cf. John V. Fesko, *The Trinity and the Covenant of Redemption* (Fearn, UK: Christian Focus, 2016).

8. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms*, 217.

important role in accentuating “the eternal, inviolable, and trinitarian foundation of the temporal *foedus gratiae*, much in the way that the eternal decree underlies and guarantees the *ordo salutis*.”<sup>9</sup> However, some, including Karl Barth, have looked upon the idea of this covenant of redemption as less than biblical, or at best as lacking explicit scriptural support. For Vos, this criticism is mistaken:

It was not taken from the Scriptures ready and completed, but grew out of them. The federal theologians after Cocceius sometimes painted too human a picture. It has not always been defended too happily exegetically either. But, as far as its core is concerned, it lies so firmly in the principles of Reformed theology that it has endured every attack and, despite its transcendent character, has assured itself of a permanent place in the minds of believers.<sup>10</sup>

Before we proceed, however, and especially because of our interest in the connection between the covenant of redemption and a missional vision, it may be good to attempt a description (rather than a definition) of that compact. With “poetic license” and at the inevitable risk of anthropomorphism that is always present when we describe aspects of intra-Trinitarian relations, I propose the following description: The covenant of redemption (*pactum salutis*) refers to the “event” outside time and space, sometimes called a “counsel of peace,” in which Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in an overflow of love in the Godhead, agreed upon and committed to create a people as an object of love and grace, so that they would be brought into a familial relationship with God himself. This is expressed in God’s own promise: “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (Jer. 31:33). This intra-Trinitarian covenant is, for Reformed theology, the starting point in the metanarrative of human history. God himself purposes to become the sender, the sent, and the enabler in a mission

9. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms*, 217.

10. Vos, “Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology,” 335; Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 2:360; cf. Ps. 40; Rom. 5:12–21; Heb. 10:10.

of redemptive purpose, in order to establish, outside his own being, unique objects of his grace and glory!

### **Contours of the Intra-Trinitarian Covenant**

One way to delineate the basic contours of the covenant of redemption is to see it in contrast to the covenant of grace in three of the basic aspects of each covenant: the parties, the promises, and the conditions.<sup>11</sup>

First, as to *the parties* of the covenants, the covenant of grace is made between God and the elect. Christ appears in this covenant with a double role, for he is the mediator of the covenant and at the same time, as a person of the Godhead, its initiator. Yet, in the covenant of redemption, it is the Father who covenants with the Son and the Spirit concerning this plan. Hodge discusses the common confusion between the two covenants as follows:

This confusion is avoided by distinguishing between the covenant of redemption between the Father and the Son, and the covenant of grace between God and his people. The latter supposes the former, and is founded upon it. The two, however, ought not to be confounded, as both are clearly revealed in Scripture, and moreover they differ as to the parties, as to the promises, and as to the conditions.<sup>12</sup>

Second, *the promises* involved in the two covenants are also distinct. In the covenant of grace, God promises to reconcile to himself, through Christ's complete work, those whom he has called. His gracious offer of salvation is received by the faith produced in the believer by his Holy Spirit. The same Spirit so unites believers to Christ that they become partakers of the merits of Christ and are progressively conformed to his perfect image. This transaction has the

11. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 2:358–59.

12. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 2:358–59. Hodge also makes an important distinction between an Augustinian view that considers the elect as the human party to the covenant and the Pelagian, semi-Pelagian, Arminian, and Lutheran views that would take all of fallen humankind to be the party of the covenant.

Trinity on one side, Christ as mediator, and the elect on the other side as recipients of the promises. Yet, once more, it presupposes that other transaction, in which promises are made within the persons of the Godhead. These promises involve the creation of a special people, their redemption through Christ to the praise of his glorious grace, and the establishment of a union by the Holy Spirit that enables this people to enjoy permanent and intimate communion with God.<sup>13</sup>

Third, *the conditions* presented in these two covenants are different. The covenant of grace demands that Christ offer up himself as a sacrifice on behalf of those who will be God's people, and it also demands that through the action of the Holy Spirit they will receive by faith the grace dispensed in Christ. In the covenant of redemption, the Father, in order to fulfill his purpose of creating for himself a people, assigns a task to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, a task they commit to accomplish in order to secure the realization of the eternal purposes of the Trinity:

That a multitude whom no man can number should thus be made partakers of his redemption, and that ultimately the kingdom of the Messiah should embrace all the nations of the earth.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Source of History and Time**

All three covenantal aspects described above involve the idea that the covenant of grace presupposes the covenant of redemption. Perhaps we can explain their relationship in a way that will highlight the importance of the pretemporal nature of the covenant of redemption: if the covenant of grace unfolds through created time, then the covenant of redemption has as its backdrop timeless eternity itself,

13. Morton H. Smith, *Systematic Theology* (Greenville, SC: Greenville Seminary Press, 1994), 1:329: "Hoeksema has a very helpful treatment of the whole subject. He makes the point that the idea of a covenant in the Bible is not that of a pact or agreement. 'It is the relation of the most intimate communion of friendship in which God reflects his own covenant life in his relation to the creature, gives to that creature life, and causes him to taste and acknowledge the highest good and the overflowing fountain of all good.'"

14. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 2:362.

with only God's own being "back of it." That is why it becomes, in turn, the condition of the unfolding of the covenant of grace.

By analogy, if the covenant of redemption implies that God set himself a mission that precedes all of created reality (the *missio Dei*), then the purposes of that created reality, as the temporal unfolding of a timeless purpose, are, *sub specie aeternitatis*, the creaturely analogue of the Creator's mission. The *missio ecclesiae* then traces its roots to the *missio Dei*. Time and history are the stage for the unfolding of a glorious plan in which Christ by the Spirit attracts to himself those whom the Father gave him. This divine plan places them together as a body of which he is the head, a body indwelt by his Spirit, that becomes the instrument whereby redemption is proclaimed and experienced. Before time itself, as the very source of history, stands a counsel of peace, a pretemporal disposition and compact of a gracious God, established with none other than himself. Herman Hoeksema adds further color to this image:

This covenant is not conceived as a means to an end, as a way unto salvation, but as the very end itself, as the very highest that can ever be reached by the creature; not as a way to life, but as the highest form of life itself; not as a condition, but as the very essence of religion; not as a means unto salvation, but as the highest bliss itself. . . . In that case the counsel of peace is presented as the decree which dominates all other decrees of God concerning the ultimate end of all things as God has conceived it in His counsel. Instead of a decree concerning the means, the counsel of peace is the decree concerning the end of all things.<sup>15</sup>

The glory of such a plan lies in the fact that this eternal arrangement roots all our experiences and collective histories, the whole of history itself, in a grace-giving movement of the glorious and eternal Trinity. At the same time, the missional character of this perspective becomes so clear that I cannot help but recall the words that a Brazilian poet and songwriter used to describe the vision of a final

15. Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1985), 318.

moment of eschatological revelation, although his own pantheistic hopes for the eschaton completely missed the point:

And what, at that moment, shall be revealed to all people, will surprise everyone, not for being exotic, but for the fact that it could have remained hidden, when it was always so obvious!<sup>16</sup>

### **Implications of a Covenantal Missional Perspective**

In the beginning, I referred to the picture painted in Revelation 21 as a provisional end point of the biblical metanarrative. If the previous section provided some help in grasping the import of the eternal source of that beautiful story of the mission of God, it will be useful to complete the picture with a further aspect. This missional approach opens up an array of other horizons—beautiful strands of this narrative, such as its gracious nature and its gracious manifestation through the church, as well as the all-encompassing reach of the plan that unfolds through created reality.

### **The Gracious Nature of the *Missio Dei***

The eternal covenant made within the Trinity determines a temporal missional goal for the whole work of Christ and of his Spirit, namely the creation of a people, a “multitude that no man can number,” made up of every language, nation and tribe, so that “the kingdom of the Messiah should embrace all the nations of the earth.”<sup>17</sup> Hodge emphasizes that even within the covenant of redemption there is interplay between the universality of the redemptive mission and its particular goal:

In virtue of what the Son of God covenanted to perform, and what in the fullness of time He actually accomplished, agreeably to the

16. Caetano Veloso, “Um Índio,” in *Bicho* (Studio Album, PolyGram, Universal Music, 1977), track 5 (my translation): “E aquilo que nesse momento se revelará aos povos / Surpreenderá a todos não por ser exótico / Mas pelo fato de poder ter sempre estado oculto / Quando terá sido o óbvio.”

17. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 2:362.

stipulations of the compact with the Father, two things follow. First, salvation is offered to all men on the condition of faith in Christ. Our Lord commanded his disciples to go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. . . . It follows, secondly, from the nature of the covenant between the Father and the Son, that the covenant of grace has also special reference to the elect.<sup>18</sup>

God has determined in himself a mission that includes Christ's lordship over all creation, the proclamation of salvation in Christ to all people, to be received by faith, and that this gracious offer of salvation that makes us willing partakers of Messiah's kingdom will be effective in those given by the Father to the Son from the beginning. Both determinations of this mission, including all of creation and applying particularly to the elect, are overtly and essentially gracious. They flow from the grace and love that are inherent in the very being of God. The eternal and glorious Trinity moves outward in a gracious expression that has as its purpose the reflection of his glory in the objects of his grace!

The first implication of this gracious movement of God is that its recognition should cause wonder and awe. Martyn Lloyd-Jones highlights one aspect of this when he says, "Here we come to something that is the source of the deepest assurance and consolation that any Christian person can ever know in this world of time." He then adds, "What could be more comforting and reassuring than the fact that there is nothing contingent about this salvation, nothing accidental, nothing that needs modification?"<sup>19</sup> Yet this aspect of personal reassurance, based upon the gracious nature of the *missio Dei*, can be complemented by another implication that Lloyd-Jones also pointed out: "Salvation has originated in the mind of God—it is God's own purpose." This means that "even the Lord Jesus Christ does not have to placate God" in the sense that it might be thought that there was reluctance on the part of God with regard to the elect. He continues:

18. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 2:362–63.

19. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Saved in Eternity: God's Plan of Salvation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1988), 55.

Sometimes our hymns can be rather dangerous, and there are certain of them that would lead us to the conclusion that the Son of God has to plead with the Father to have mercy and pity upon us. But that is a gross misunderstanding of the term “Advocate,” it is something that is absolutely foreign to biblical teaching. Rather, the Bible teaches that “God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them” (2 Cor. 5:19); “God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son . . .” (John 3:16). It is all from God. So this idea that the Lord Jesus Christ is at great pains to persuade God the Father to forgive and accept us is utterly unscriptural and entirely false; the source and origin of salvation is the great and eternal heart of God.<sup>20</sup>

So this vision of God’s mission, as a pure manifestation of a gracious disposition toward his creatures, places us on a belvedere from which we can view the whole story, the whole narrative. From this perspective, we realize that everything about our lives, our own personal histories, our institutional histories, indeed all of human history—all these things are not actually central plots or main narratives, but subplots of a greater narrative. Everything that happens in time and space consists of perfect strands, flawlessly adjusted subplots, that fit together in the fulfillment of one narrative that starts with God, ends with him, and is all about him—a wonderful expression of God’s gracious decision to elect and create adequate objects of his grace and love.

### **The Gracious Manifestation in the Mission of the Church**

Once the gracious nature of the covenant of redemption and the mission of God is grasped—keeping in mind that from that first covenant flows the covenant of grace, in which salvation and participation in the kingdom of Christ are offered to the elect—then that grace is seen as manifested in time through the mission of God’s people. Flip Buys says, “I believe that a revitalization of our understanding of

20. Lloyd-Jones, *Saved in Eternity*, 55.

the concepts of the covenant of redemption (*pactum salutis*) . . . and the covenant of grace is vital for developing a Reformed approach to global missions and understanding the true calling of the church in the world.” He goes on to say that this should clarify an understanding that:

(1) The church as the covenant community of the King, is the instrument of God’s Mission (cf. Matt. 9:37–38; John 13:20; 15:16; 17:18; Eph. 3:8–10). The church is not the end of God’s mission, but the instrument of it—God’s tool in the outworking of his plan to usher in his kingdom. But (2) the church is also the goal of mission (cf. Rev. 5:9–10; 7:9–12). This is not to say that the church is somehow secondary to the mission: on the contrary, the multitude of the redeemed worshipping the Lord through Christ in the New World is the church of God, the new humanity in Christ, the church (as assembly) of Christ. We need to refresh our vision of the church called to be the covenant community of the King.<sup>21</sup>

In summary, what is the mission of the church, if not the temporal manifestation of the graciousness of the rule of Christ? Does this instrument of God’s glorious grace make music only for its own sake? If its mission is rooted in the very movement of the Trinity outside himself, it is only natural that it must also be a movement that expresses the beautiful music of grace to all of creation, for the sake of the glory of the King. Hence, the mission of the church has to do with the hope of seeing the “multitude that no one can count” singing in one voice the great hymn that celebrates the glorious grace of the King. It is about expressing outwardly the grace that has created, gathered, and prepared a wonderful symphony of joy for those who perform it and of beauty for all to see and delight in!

This implies that the mission of the church is rooted in grace and must be gracious in every aspect. It also means that it expresses outwardly moving beauty. Finally, this mission is permeated by a sense of

21. P. J. Buys, “The Church as Part of God’s Mission in the Light of God’s Eternal Covenant of Redemption.” Unpublished class notes for Biblical Foundations of Missions, Mukhanyo Theological College (quoted with the author’s permission).

otherness conjoined with participation, in which we realize the beauty of being able to speak at once of “I,” of “thou,” and of “we”—which is found in perfect form only within the unity and diversity of the triune God himself. This establishes the Trinity as the archetype for relational movements, of which the church must be an ectype. This makes the church obligated to her Lord, to her own, and also to those outside her—obligated and obliged to become what she is intended to be, compelled to be a well-adjusted body in which each part fulfills its calling under the head, duty-bound to express its true nature and its calling in engagement with all of creation.

Three overarching implications follow: First, the church must be a canvas on which God paints a beautiful and colorful display of his grace. Second, the church has a mission to sound clearly the glorious music of the gospel to the ears of the listening world, since the same creator of the melody creates the instruments of his sound and the ears that receive it. Finally, the church must understand that its mission includes being an instrument to gather in the whole number of those given to the King, and also being the ever more perfect expression of the realization of the covenant of redemption for the whole of creation. This is how Christopher Wright summarizes it:

God calls his people to share his mission. The church from all nations stands in continuity through the Messiah Jesus with God’s people in the Old Testament. With them we have been called through Abraham and commissioned to be a blessing and light to the nations. With them, we are to be shaped and taught through the law and the prophets to be a community of holiness, compassion and justice in a world of sin and suffering. We have been redeemed through the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and empowered by the Holy Spirit to bear witness to what God has done in Christ. The church exists to worship and glorify God for all eternity and to participate in the transforming mission of God within history.<sup>22</sup>

22. Christopher J. H. Wright, “What Do We Mean by ‘Missional’?” Foreword to *Reformed Means Missional*, ed. Samuel T. Logan (Greensboro, SC: New Growth Press, 2013), xii–xiii. In this book, different authors deal with the practical implications of

## The Radical Reach of a Missional Approach

Having dealt theologically with the source and origin of missions in God's own covenant with himself, the next step is to consider the consequences. In an endorsement for the multiauthor book *Reformed Means Missional*, I commented: "At a time when some people are asking how to be Reformed and missional at the same time, this book comes to show that being Reformed *is* to be *intrinsically* missional."

We need to apply the implications of a Reformed perspective that should be intrinsically missional. In the afterword to the same book, Frank James sounded a warning about using the word *missional* as an empty buzzword, "the latest fad, or the lingo of trendy Christianity." He continued:

To be missional takes courage. It requires a revision of what it means to live out the gospel in this messy postmodern world. It obliges us to contemplate the Trinity in deeper ways, understanding that the mission begins there, with the intratrinitarian "sending" from which the church is analogously "sent" into a redemptive mission. . . . To be missional is to accept the challenge and responsibility to be his agents in advancing his mission.<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, the church needs to be constantly reminded, not only of her missional nature, but also of the roots of this identity, in order to speak effectively to and in the postmodern world, and to continue speaking until the kingdom comes. Wright, once more, helps us grasp how radical this can be:

Now such an understanding of the mission of God as the very heartbeat of all reality, all creation, all history and all that yet lies

---

a Reformed missional outlook: ecclesiology (Martin Allen), belief and behavior (Samuel T. Logan), theology (Thomas Schirrmacher), social justice (Flip Buys), the city (Timothy Keller, Susan M. Post), responses to violence and abuse (Diane Langberg, Basyle Tchividjian), migration (Elias Medeiros), secularism, Islam, "hidden believers," homosexuality (Robert Calvert, John Leonard, John Nichols, John Freeman).

23. Frank James, afterword to *Reformed Means Missional*, ed. Logan, 253.

ahead of us generates a distinctive worldview that is radically and transformingly God-centered. . . . This worldview, constituted by putting the mission of God at the very center of all existence, is disturbingly subversive and it uncomfortably relativizes one's own place in the great scheme of things.<sup>24</sup>

Wright goes on to illustrate some of the shifts that this understanding should cause: Instead of asking "Where does God fit in the story of my life?" we begin to wonder where we fit in his story. Instead of seeking for an individually tailored purpose for our lives, we ask how we can be "wrapped up in the great mission of God for the whole of creation." Furthermore, instead of seeking to apply the Bible to our lives, we should see the Bible as the reality to which our lives should conform. Instead of wondering how to make the gospel relevant to the world, we should see that God is "transforming the world to fit the shape of the gospel." Rather than trying to see if our care of creation and nature "might fit into our concept and practice of mission," we should make sure we are aligned with God's purpose for all of creation and the anticipation of a new heaven and new earth. Finally, instead of asking "What can legitimately be included in the mission God expects from the church," we should ask what kind of church God expects for his mission. In summary, "I may wonder what kind of mission God has for me, when I should ask what kind of me God wants for his mission."<sup>25</sup>

### **Conclusion: Eternity and Beyond**

There is, however, one final issue, as previously indicated: to explain why the vision pictured in Revelation 21 is only a provisional conclusion to the great narrative that opens with the *pactum salutis*.

Just as the covenant of redemption is pretemporal, so its fulfillment, in an absolute sense, is eternal. Yet the metanarrative of created reality does come to a conclusion, which is the eschatological hope

24. Wright, *Mission of God*, 533–34.

25. Wright, *Mission of God*, 533–34.

that should motivate and move the church toward a fixed consummation. The great wedding feast of the Lamb, the perfectly personal and yet universal moment when Christ himself wipes away all tears and puts an end to death, is the conclusion: Behold, God is now making his permanent tabernacle with his people! Behold, he has written his will in their hearts! Behold, “the former things have passed away” (Rev. 21:3–4)!

However, in another sense this is only the end of the first things, the fulfillment of the covenant of grace and the history of redemption as we know it, as revealed. Is this the end of the whole story? I think not, for there we also find the promise: “Behold, I am making all things new”!

Might we not consider that, in another sense, this is simply the beginning? Could it be that the covenant of grace, as the temporal subspecies of the covenant of redemption, implies that the eternal mission of God will go on, as that wonderful assembly of the redeemed is enveloped in the eternal song of worship in the new heaven and the new earth? God has not revealed what lies beyond, so perhaps we do well not to speculate. One thing, however, is sure: knowing that the whole human *épopée* is rooted in eternity and standing in amazement of what lies between creation and consummation, directs the church to wait in the holy, joyous expectation that is wonderfully captured in the verse borrowed from the African-American churches by Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811–96) and added to John Newton’s (1725–1807) hymn “Amazing Grace”:<sup>26</sup>

When we’ve been there ten thousand years,  
Bright shining as the sun,  
We’ve no less days to sing God’s praise,  
Than when we first begun.

This expectation for eternity and beyond should jolt us to action, to act now!

26. Jonathan Aitken, *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), 235.