

The Story of the Bible and Motivation for Missions: God Desires an Eternal Relationship with People

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Abstract:

This article addresses the various terms forwarded by authors as the central theme of the Bible and looks at the historic terms regarding motivation for missions. These terms are placed on models in their relationship to eternal and temporal relevance; plots, and themes; and finally, motivations, actions, and results. The resulting theme distilled from these models shows how God loves people and how He wants an eternal relationship with them and He wants us to invite others into relationship with Him.

Introduction

Scholars have proposed many themes, motives, and purposes for the Bible generally and the motivation for missions specifically. In missiology, as in any discipline, founding principles and assumptions are important. In this article numerous proposed themes and purposes of the Bible and motivations for mission will be considered. These points will be analyzed, grouped, and evaluated. A proposed model for understanding the various terms will be presented which both reconciles the terms but also suggests the best-tested motivation for missionaries. Love will be found as the main motivation for both God and humans for mission. God loves people (us) and wants an eternal relationship with them (us), and He wants us to invite them into relationship with Him. God desires an eternal relationship with people.

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Establishing a Unifying Theme

Before one can propose a theological motif that can serve as a center or unifying theme for the Old and New Testaments, one must establish if in fact God had indeed intended a theme to emerge. The scholars who purport that there is no unifying theme seem to come from a liberal persuasion. This perspective may stem from a presupposition that prediction is not possible.¹ If the Bible were written by humans without the miraculous ability to predict the future, then numerous authors writing over hundreds of years would not have one central theme. However, scholars who believe that God inspired humans to write as the Holy Spirit moved them to see the biblical center as possible.

If a God who can see the future from the past and then inspire the Bible, then writing a book with a central theme is most reasonable. Isaiah states this precisely. “I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please” (Is. 46:10 NIV). Kaiser points out that the word “purpose” here is singular² implying that God has one purpose, which He is developing through history and revealing through the Bible. If this is indeed true, the task of biblical scholars is to find that purpose or central theme for an accurate interpretation and theology.

Central Themes Proposed

The question of the Bible’s central theme and motive for mission is unresolved in theological circles, even among those who agree that there is one purpose. Some of the themes suggested include salvation³ (of the Gentiles), kingdom⁴ (of God), the covenant⁵, “the rest of God, the work of the Holy Spirit, ... the resurrection, ... the promise, ... the blessing, the oath, the word,”⁶ redemption (in Christ)⁷, mission,⁸ *missio Dei*,⁹ worship,¹⁰ the glory of God,¹¹ God,¹² God in relationship with people,¹³ and love.¹⁴ What is the central theme of Scripture alongside the motivation for mission, and how do we reconcile these differing opinions?

Mission

Köstenberger and O’Brien state “few biblical topics are as important as mission”¹⁵ but seem to imply through the book that salvation is the central theme: “We have understood the notion of ‘mission’ . . . as intimately bound up with God’s saving plan . . . as framing the entire

story of Scripture.”¹⁶ The title of their book, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth*, reflects the supremacy of the salvation theme.

Kingdom

Glasser on the other hand focuses on “Kingdom” as the central theme. “This brings together the message of Old and New Testament narratives because the Kingdom of God is one of the central overarching themes of the Bible.”¹⁷ “The apostle Paul centuries later confirmed this when he stated that God’s purpose was to ‘bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ’ (Eph. 1:10).”¹⁸ Bartholomew and Goheen use the term “covenant” in the Old Testament and the “Kingdom of God” in the New Testament and emphasize redemption throughout.¹⁹

Promise

Kaiser in *The Christian and the “Old” Testament* wrestles with the central theme in detail.

This set of studies will fill what almost certainly is one of the largest vacuums in modern day believers’ handling and understanding of the Bible: an overall plan for the total 66 books of the Bible. The Bible wants us to see that despite all the variety and variegated forms of literature, subjects, and personalities, God has been at work in carrying out a single plan that embraces loads more than just the plan of salvation, the promise of the coming of the Messiah, or any other single theme . . . There is an all-embracing promise-plan of God that includes scores of other topics (such as the kingdom of God, the rest of God, the work of the Holy Spirit, the salvation of the Gentiles, the resurrection, and on and on) all in the one plan call the “Promise.”

The Old Testament never got around to focusing on a single name for this on-going plan of God but referred to it under a constellation of terms: the covenant, the blessing, the rest, the oath, the word, and more. Only when we arrive at the New Testament did the Spirit of God finally reveal that the name for this plan was the “Promise” of God.²⁰

Mission and missio Dei

In Kaiser’s other book, *Mission in the Old Testament*, he uses neither the word salvation (of Glasser) nor kingdom (of Köstenberger/O’Brien) nor the “Promise” from his earlier writing as the central theme. He calls it mission. “The Bible actually begins with the theme of missions in the Book of Genesis and maintains that driving passion throughout the entire Old Testament

and on into the New Testament.”²¹ While this is not contradictory to his term “Promise,” another word is added to the discussion.

In York we find yet another term; *missio Dei*. “The Bible tells this story of an advancing Kingdom, the mission of the triune God: providing redemption, finding the lost, and then using them to mediate kingdom blessing to those yet lost. In the story of missions, the Latin term for mission of God, *missio Dei*, refers to God’s plan to bless the nations through the gospel of Jesus Christ.”²²

Love and Eternal Relationship

Dillard and Longman suggest a multi-perspectival approach to biblical theology. “The Old Testament is about God, even to say that it is about God in relationship with people, is not really informative ... Thus as God’s redemptive plan progressed through the ages, so the history of revelation unfolded.”²³ This conclusion agrees with Lowenberg who offers, God desires an eternal relationship with man.²⁴ Bogosian argues for love over worship and glory which supports this eternal relationship theme.²⁵ And Willis similarly states, “God’s mission is to restore fellowship with man and make him a partner in world redemption,”²⁶ but later reverts and says, “the glory of God is the ultimate goal of God’s mission.”²⁷ Can these positions be reconciled?

Worship and Glory

No discussion on the motivation for mission is complete without considering what place of the glory of God and worship of God plays. The Calvinist places the glory of God as the highest theme.

“In the classical Calvinist missionary thinking, from Voetius to Edwards, the emphasis was on God’s sovereignty over everything and on the conviction that God and God alone could take the initiative in saving people.... Believers stood in awe of the majesty of God, the Wholly Other. In Protestant orthodoxy, however, the emphasis on God’s initiative became wooden and rigid; people were taught to wait in complete passivity upon the saving work of God in their souls ... In the period we are surveying here (the Enlightenment and following), by contrast, there was a growing awareness that God’s initiative did not exclude human endeavor and that His majesty was really the other side of His grace and love reaching out to humankind. In the wake of the Great Awakening, then the motif of the glory of God became wedded to other motifs, in particular that of compassion.”²⁸

This point was clearly demonstrated in the negative in 1786 when William Carey asked, “Have the churches of Christ done all they ought to have done for the heathen nations?” To which Dr. John Ryland replied, “Young man, sit down; when God pleases to convert the heathen world, He will do it without your help or mine either.”²⁹ The concept of the sovereignty of God through a Calvinist lens can be misconstrued to be a demotivating factor for mission.

John Stott and John Piper continue this theme. Stott comments on Romans 6, “The highest of missionary motives is neither obedience to the Great Commission (important as that is), nor love for sinners who are alienated and perishing (strong as that incentive is, especially when we contemplate the wrath of God, verse 18), but rather zeal-burning and passionate zeal for the glory of Jesus Christ.”³⁰ And Piper takes from Stott’s lead and makes this the opening of his thesis. “Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exists because worship doesn’t.”³¹

Bogosian seeks to return the mission motivation from glory (the result) to love. “The bottom line is this: missions doesn’t exist because worship doesn’t; rather missions exists because the Father loves people, the Son loves people and the Apostle Paul and missionaries throughout the centuries have loved people. That love constrained them to sacrifice all that was necessary to save the lost and perishing millions who were precious to them.”³² He comments on the shift from the glory of God to the love of God as the motivation for mission is producing positive results. “Remarkably, and wonderfully, this shift resulted in such an unprecedented ingathering of souls ... which he (Kenneth Scott Latourette) termed ‘The Great Century.’” “Altogether tens of thousands of missionaries were sent out filled with a love for the lost which resulted in the number of evangelical believers in Africa, Asia and Latin America increasing from about 6,000,000 in 1900 to about 305,000,000 in 2000.... So, unquestionably, the shift in paradigms was for the best.”³³

Model for Understanding Central Themes

So, who is correct? Are these differences simply just questions of semantics? How do we reconcile these different terms, which may be used even by the same person at different times in his/her own writings? Lowenberg suggest eight criteria for a central, unifying theme: 1) comprehensive, 2) inductive, 3) inclusive, exhaustive, and integrative, 4) progressive, 5) diachronic, 6) theological, 7) relevant, and 8) flow into the New Testament.³⁴

Is there a model for understanding the apparent discrepancies? Is it possible that some scholars have prejudiced their theme? It is an “all-too-prevalent temptation to impose one’s own philosophical grid or theological framework over the testament.”³⁵ Finding the unifying theme inductively rather than from personal theological leanings is critical.

Grouping: Eternal and Temporal

A grouping of the suggested themes is helpful at this point. First, some of the suggested themes are eternal (transcending the limits of human history) such as kingdom, the rest of God, the blessing, the word, fellowship, glory of God, worship, love, and relationship between God and man. Others are temporal (they are restricted to a beginning and at times an end – such as between the fall of man and the New Heaven and New Earth) such as salvation (of the Gentiles), the work of the Holy Spirit (in mankind), the resurrection, the Promise, the covenant, the oath, mission and *missio Dei*. Dividing the themes into these two major categories helps one to work constructively on the problem at hand.

These groupings help organize those that are eternal into a group of “God’s eternal relationship with man” plan. The eternal kingdom rule of God is His plan for relationship with man. The rest and the blessing are in His eternal plan for humanity. Fellowship, worship, glory, relationship, and the word are eternal. All these eternal themes are concerning God’s relationship with man in this present world and with those living in heaven.

All the others, the temporal ones, deal with bringing man from his sinful relationship to a fellowship relationship with God (such as salvation, the work of the Holy Spirit in mankind, the resurrection, the Promise, the covenant, the oath, mission and *missio Dei*). “There was no ‘mission’ in the Garden of Eden and there will be no ‘mission’ in the new heavens and the new earth (though the results of ‘mission’ will be evident).”³⁶

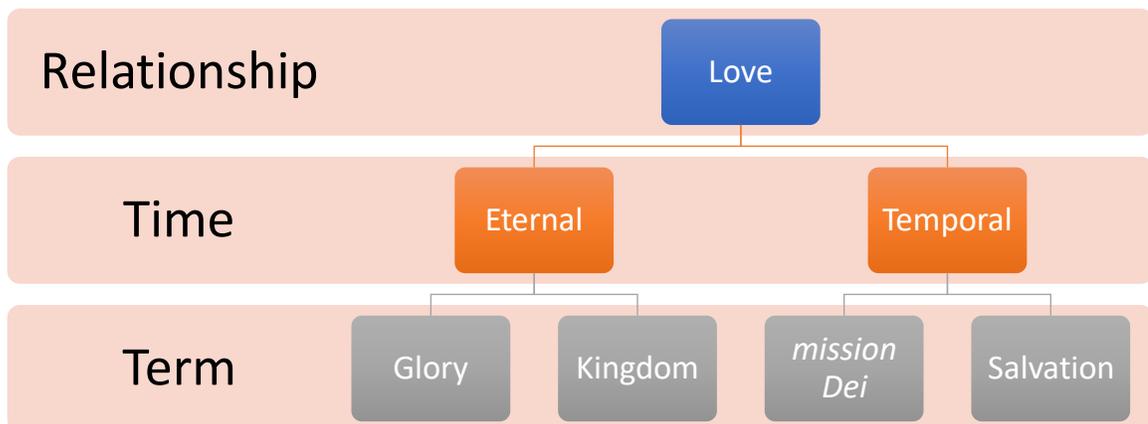
Proposed Resolution

I would like to agree with a theme among the list provided by Lowenberg,³⁷ which may serve to reconcile the central theme issue: God desires an eternal relationship with man. The central theme of the Bible includes both the temporal and the eternal. All the themes suggested seek to define mankind having the right relationship with God. The central theme of the Bible

could be defined as loving relationship or love. The central theme of the Bible and motivation for missions is this: God loves people and wants an eternal relationship with them, and He wants us to invite them into relationship with Him.

A Model Emerging

This theme provides an overarching term to contain all perspectives. For instance, the temporal purpose of God’s message to man from the fall to the new heaven and the new earth is a salvation message sent through His missionary Son, Jesus Christ. This point involves restoring man’s fallen relationship with God. The eternal message of the Word of God is that God will rule in the lives of his people forever in loving relationship with them. This thought involves eternal relationship between God and man. All the terms of the lists above readily fit into this larger term.



The Model Developing: Theme and Plot

In addition to distinguishing between the eternal and the temporal, it is important to distinguish between the theme and the plot. The plot is the series of events in the story that leads the reader to the conclusion, which is the theme. The theme is the main idea or lesson that the author desires the reader to grasp after reading the story. The plot is the process the character(s) go through to overcome the obstacles of the antagonist. Upon reading the story the reader comes

to understand the lesson or the theme intended by the author. In a large literary work as in the Bible, there are multiple sub-plots and sub-themes. But the question remains, is there a main theme that is developed by a main plot?

The terms previously discussed can be separated into plots and themes as well as eternal and temporal. The words and phrases that would be categorized as plots are salvation, the resurrection, the Promise, the covenant, the oath, mission and *missio Dei*. The words and phrases that would be categorized as themes are the work of the Holy Spirit in mankind, establishing the kingdom, the rest of God, the blessing, the word, fellowship, glory, worship, love, and relationship between God and man.

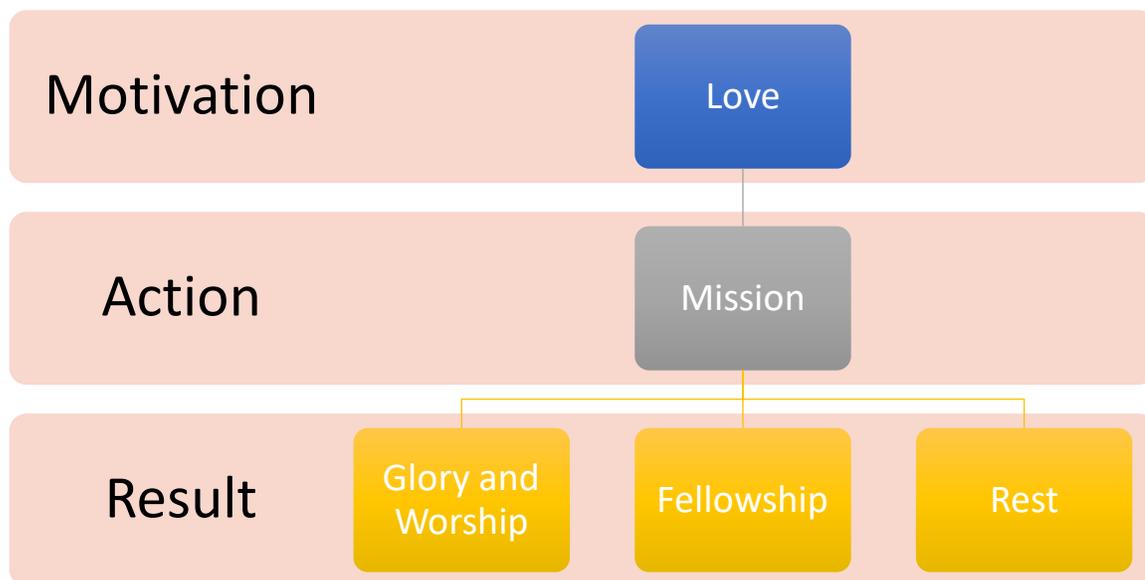
This theme, God loves people and wants an eternal relationship with them, and He wants us to invite them into relationship with Him, is found throughout Scripture. The tripartite formula, “I will be your God; you shall be my people, and I will dwell in the midst of you”³⁸ is found in part or in full at least 28 times from Genesis to Revelation.³⁹ All three elements of this formula speak of God’s desire for relationship with man. A similar formula “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt” is found about 125 times in the Old Testament.⁴⁰ Love is also held as the highest eternal element in 1 Corinthians 13, especially in verse 13: “And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love” (TNIV). Drummond called this the greatest thing in the world.⁴¹

It seems logical that a God who knows the future and desires to communicate with His creation would oversee the writing of His book. This God of order and design stated He had a purpose (Is. 45:10). It is the task of scholars to find that purpose to correctly divide the Word of truth. The many themes, which have been suggested by noteworthy scholars, fit in two major categories: temporal and eternal. The overarching theme that includes them all is God desires an eternal relationship with man.

A Comprehensive Model: Motivation, Action, and Result

A final comprehensive model which seeks to incorporate the various themes, sub-themes, plots, sub-plots, eternal and temporal elements is to look at the motive, actions, and results demonstrated in the Bible. John 3:16 can be used to illustrate this model. For God so loved (motive) the world that He gave His one and only Son (action), that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life (result).

Using this model, the motivation for missions (which is parallel to the theme or eternal purpose) is love. The action (which is parallel to the plot or most often the temporal) is mission. Words such as *missio Dei*, salvation, covenant, oath, promise, and word are the actions God takes to bring humans into loving relationship with Him. The result (which above is often seen as the theme) is eternal life. The other results listed in the discussion above in this model are results include glory, worship, fellowship, and rest.



Conclusion

This is important to grasp as one seeks to develop a missiology, to then understand the Great Commission as it relates to unreached people groups, and then eventually helps to form a model for church planting among all peoples of the earth. If love is the motivation of missions and central theme of the Bible, this will determine how one acts, lives, and conducts missionary endeavors.

The theme and story of the Bible and motivation for missions is this thought: God loves people and wants an eternal relationship with them, and He wants us to invite them into relationship with Him. God desires an eternal relationship with people.

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¹ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 30.

² *Ibid.*

³ Köstenberger and O'Brien state "few biblical topics are as important as mission"³ but seem to imply through the book that salvation is the central theme: "We have understood the notion of 'mission' . . . as intimately bound up with God's saving plan . . . as framing the entire story of Scripture."³ The title of their book, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth*, reflects the supremacy of the salvation theme. Andreas J. Köstenberger and Peter T. O'Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 268.

⁴ Glasser on the other hand focuses on "Kingdom" as the central theme. "This brings together the message of Old and New Testament narratives because the Kingdom of God is one of the central overarching themes of the Bible." "The apostle Paul centuries later confirmed this when he stated that God's purpose was to 'bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ' (Eph. 1:10)." Arthur F. Glasser, *Announcing the Kingdom: The Story of God's Mission in the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2003), 20-21.

⁵ Bartholomew and Goheen use the term "covenant" in the Old Testament and the "Kingdom of God" in the New Testament and emphasize redemption throughout the text. Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004). And The Bible Project leans toward "covenant partnership" as the theme, *The Bible Project, The Story of the Bible, Introduction to the Bible*, "The story of the Bible is about humanity's cycle of self-destruction and the Messiah who will restore the covenant partnership between God and humans." <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/the-story-of-the-bible/>, accessed November 19, 2021.

⁶ Kaiser says, "There is an all-embracing promise-plan of God that includes scores of other topics (such as the kingdom of God, the rest of God's characteristics and actions, the work of the Holy Spirit, the salvation of the Gentiles, and the Resurrection) all in the one plan call the 'Promise.'" Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. *The Christian and the "Old" Testament* (Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 1998), xiii-xiv.

⁷ Jeremy Kimble and Ched Spellman, *Invitation to Biblical Theology: Exploring the Shape, Storyline, and Themes of the Bible*, Grand Rapids, Kregel Academic, 2020. And Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004).

⁸ In Kaiser's other book, *Mission in the Old Testament*, he does not use the word "Promise" from his earlier writing as the central theme. He calls it mission. "The Bible actually begins with the theme of missions in the Book of Genesis and maintains that driving passion throughout the entire Old Testament and on into the New Testament." Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. *Mission in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 7. And C. T. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative*, Downers Grove, IL, IVP Academic, 2006, 18, states, "Missions is, in my view, a major key that unlocks the whole grand narrative of the canon of Scripture."

⁹ In York we find yet another term; *missio Dei*. “The Bible tells this story of an advancing Kingdom, the mission of the triune God: providing redemption, finding the lost, and then using them to mediate kingdom blessing to those yet lost. In the story of missions, the Latin term for mission of God, *missio Dei*, refers to God’s plan to bless the nations through the gospel of Jesus Christ.” John V. York *Missions in the Age of the Spirit* (Springfield, Missouri: Logion Press, 2000), 19-20.

¹⁰ John Piper, *Let the Nations be Glad* 2nd Ed (Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 1993, 2003), 17.

¹¹ John Stott, *Message of Romans: God’s good news for the world* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994), 53.

¹² Dillard and Longman suggest a multi-perspectival approach to biblical theology. “The Old Testament is about God, even to say that it is about God in relationship with people, is not really informative ... Thus as God’s redemptive plan progressed through the ages, so the history of revelation unfolded.” Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 36.

¹³ Dillard and Longman, 36 Lowenberg, 79.

¹⁴ Philip S. Bogosian “‘Missions Exists Because Worship Doesn’t’...Or Does it?” *Journal of Asian Mission* Vol. 11, Nos 1-2 (March – September 2009), Asian Theological Seminary, Quezon City, Philippines, 8.

¹⁵ Andreas J. Köstenberger and Peter T. O’Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 19.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 268.

¹⁷ Arthur F. Glasser, *Announcing the Kingdom: The Story of God’s Mission in the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2003), 20.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁹ Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004).

²⁰ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. *The Christian and the “Old” Testament* (Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 1998), xiii-xiv.

²¹ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. *Mission in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 7.

²² John V. York, *Missions in the Age of the Spirit* (Springfield, Missouri: Logion Press, 2000), 19-20.

²³ Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 36.

²⁴ Douglas P. Lowenberg, *Current Issues in Old Testament Interpretation: Doctoral Study Guide* (Lomé, Togo: Pan-Africa Theological Seminary, 2006), 77-79.

²⁵ Bogosian, 8

²⁶ Avery T. Willis, Jr. *The Biblical Basis of Missions: Your Mission as a Christian*. (Nashville: Convention, 1984), 12.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

²⁸ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991) 285.

²⁹ Joseph Belcher, *William Carey: A Biography* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1853) 19.

³⁰ Stott, 53.

³¹ Piper, 17.

³² Bogosian, 8.

³³ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

³⁴ Lowenberg, 77-78.

³⁵ Kaiser, 1991, 22.

³⁶ Köstenberger, 251.

³⁷ Lowenberg, 79.

³⁸ York, 29.

³⁹ Gen. 17:7-8, 28:21; Ex. 6:7, 4:22, 19:5-6; Lev. 11:45, 22:33, 25:38, 26:12, 44, 45; Num. 15:41; Deut. 4:20, 29:12-13; Jer. 7:23, 11:4, 24:7, 30:22, 31:1, 33, 32:38; Ezek. 11:20, 14:11, 36:28, 37:37; Zech. 8:8, 13:9; 2 Cor. 6:16; and Rev. 21:3-7.

⁴⁰ Kaiser 1991, 33-34.

⁴¹ Henry Drummond, *The Greatest Thing in the World*, London: Forgotten Books, 2016, title page.