



# The Church on Mission

A Biblical Vision  
for Transformation  
among All People

CRAIG OTT

“With his usual precision, insight, and clarity, Craig Ott has provided a fresh, biblically grounded reaffirmation of the church’s mission. Rooted in God’s glory and contained in the multiplication of transformational churches among all people, Ott compels us all to deeper study of and intentional participation in God’s mission.”

—**Rochelle L. Scheuermann**, Wheaton College Graduate School

“Ott’s book provides a refreshing and thought-provoking new perspective on the mission of the church. He uses rich biblical exegesis to clarify the goal and direction of the church: transformation to extend God’s glory. Transformation as the purpose and goal of the church bridges the divide between often contentious dualities: word/deed, evangelism/social action, collective/individual, local/global. All of these are for a single purpose: the transformation of individuals, of communities, and of societies for God’s glory. Ott moves away from egocentric, personalized spirituality to discipleship with purpose. His book provides a thoroughly readable and biblically founded blueprint for a renewed vision of the church on mission. I will draw deeply from this book as I teach the next generation of agents of transformation.”

—**A. Sue Russell**, Asbury Theological Seminary

“Craig Ott has given us a carefully researched, thoughtfully written, and passionately presented exposition of the church and its calling. *The Church on Mission* offers a clear and cogent understanding of God’s people, their work, and their place in the world, doing so in a thoroughly biblical and theologically informed manner at a time when there is great confusion, uncertainty, and ambiguity about the church. Inviting readers to become students of both God’s Word *and* God’s world, Ott has provided us with a faithful and relevant vision for carrying out God’s calling, God’s commission, and God’s commandment to and for all peoples of the world. Pastors, church leaders, and students alike will be

blessed by their interaction with this refreshing, engaging, and highly readable book.”

—David S. Dockery, Trinity International University  
and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

“The church is the central part of God’s plan for his work in our world today. His glory is magnified as the church effectively lives out its mission among all people. In *The Church on Mission*, Craig Ott lays out a compelling biblical foundation of God’s mission for the church. Your understanding of God’s heart will be deepened and your vision for what Jesus is doing through his church will be expanded. I highly recommend it!”

—Kevin Kompelien, president, Evangelical Free Church  
of America

“In this small volume, Craig Ott casts a rich and impressive resolve for the church on mission that is riveted in careful and balanced scriptural interpretation. The church as a transformational community has the mission to glorify God through the power of the Bible, bringing about an influence on our globe as it reaches out to all the nations and thus invades the world with the glory of the Lord. This marvelous book offers a lifetime’s missional reflection on Scripture by an outstanding missionary theologian and teacher-scholar.”

—Robert Gallagher, Wheaton College Graduate School

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For Alice,  
my faithful and loving partner

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# 1



## Transformation to God's Glory

### *The Source and Goal of Our Mission*

What is the mission of the church? How one answers this question will determine how one believes churches should cast their vision, set priorities, direct their energy and resources, and measure their effectiveness. More importantly, clarity about the mission of the church is critical in aligning the church with God's mission and purposes for his people in this world. There is of course no shortage of wide-ranging answers to this question. On the one hand, if our answer is too broad and general, then it will offer little specific, practical guidance for the church. On the other hand, if our answer is too narrow, it risks neglecting important dimensions of God's purposes for the church and may be unable to adapt to the rapidly changing cultural shifts and challenges of ministry in the modern world.

Above all, the way I will seek to answer this question will be based upon the teachings of the Bible. Unlike human undertakings or even specialized ministries, the church is not at liberty to simply

define its mission for itself. There may be different ways to formulate a mission statement with various nuances and emphases. But *God* has created the church and commissioned the church for *his* purposes. That calling is spelled out for us in the Scriptures, and our role as his people is to clearly discern that calling. Time and again we must recalibrate our understanding of the church, examine the investment of our energies, and purify our motives so as to maintain alignment with that mission, God's own mission. To fail to do so risks the removal of our lampstand (Rev. 2:5). But the reward is great for those who have an ear to hear what the Spirit says to the churches. It is at once a humbling privilege, a weighty responsibility, and a joyful journey to be taken up in God's great story of redemption.

Of course this little volume cannot possibly do justice to this topic with the kind of depth and biblical study that it deserves. I've recommended other sources to that end.<sup>1</sup> The goal of this book is more modest—namely, to cast a biblical vision. I will explicate biblically what I believe is not the only way, but one of the best ways to concisely capture God's mission for the church: *to glorify God by multiplying transformational churches among all people.*<sup>2</sup> I will unpack and expand upon this statement from six perspectives: God's glory as the source and goal of transformation (chap. 1), the church as a new-creation transformational community (chap. 2), the transformative power of the Word of God (chap. 3), the transformational influence of the church in the world (chap. 4), transformation that reaches to all people (chap. 5), and transformation through multiplication, filling the earth with God's glory (chap. 6).

To be clear, when I speak of the *mission* of the church here, I am not speaking only about world missions or evangelism (although the mission of the church certainly includes that). Rather, I'm using the term "mission" in the sense of the overall purpose for which God sends the church into the world. I am not speaking of the tasks that missionaries sent out by the church are to fulfill,

which I understand as being related but more limited than what the mission of a local church includes.<sup>3</sup> The word “mission” stems from the Latin term for “sending.” God himself is a sending God, a missionary God, who sent prophets and angels as his messengers and who ultimately sent his Son as agent of his redemptive purposes in the world. Today he sends the church in the power of the Spirit as his people to further his mission of redemption and restoration. The church is indeed God’s missionary people, a sent people, as expressed in Jesus’s words to his disciples, “As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you” (John 20:21). Or as the apostle Peter expressed it, “But 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 Pet. 2:9).

In 1962 Johannes Blauw wrote a classic little volume, *The Missionary Nature of the Church*. It was a groundbreaking biblical study making the case for its title and arguing that “a ‘theology of mission’ cannot be other than a ‘theology of the church’ as the people of God called *out* of the world, placed *in* the world, and sent *to* the world.”<sup>4</sup> In this sense God’s sending purpose for the church—that is, the mission of the church—defines the very identity of the church. We must understand the church’s place in the larger picture of God’s salvation-historical purposes, as God’s primary instrument to bear witness to his kingdom in this age. The first and second comings are, as it were, bookends of the church’s mission. As Richard Bauckham frames it, “Mission takes place on the way from the particularity of God’s action in the story of Jesus to the universal coming of God’s kingdom.”<sup>5</sup> Jesus inaugurated the kingdom of God—that is, the establishment of God’s rule—with his first coming. Where the powers of evil and consequences of sin are being overturned, the kingdom is already in our midst.<sup>6</sup> But only with the second coming of Jesus will the kingdom come in fullness and all evil ultimately be defeated. In the words of David Bosch,

In her mission work the church lives in the tension between the “already” and “not yet” [of God’s kingdom]. Mission is essentially witness to the rule of God that has *already come* in Christ with a view to the rule of God *yet to come*. The missionary proclamation of the church gives the time between Christ’s resurrection and his return its salvation-historical meaning. . . . The existence of the church in the world infers her *mission* in the world. . . . Eschatology thus casts a bright light upon the profound missionary *responsibility* of the church.<sup>7</sup>

The church occupies this space of the already-but-not-yet kingdom in God’s grand story and has a role to play.

We should never lose sight of the reality that the coming kingdom is an *eternal* kingdom (2 Pet. 1:11). The church bears witness to the gospel of the kingdom in word and deed. This is the message that proclaims Jesus Christ, the only one who is able to “deliver us from the present evil age” (Gal. 1:4), by whom we no longer come into judgment, but pass from death to life (John 5:24), and in whom alone there is salvation (Acts 4:12). What we do in this age anticipates the coming age and has eternal consequences. But eternal life begins in this life. Although this world order is passing away (1 Cor. 7:31; 2 Pet. 3:11–13; 1 John 2:16–17), how we live and the difference we make in this world will extend into the next.<sup>8</sup> While the New Testament gives a certain centrality to the spiritual dimension of life, the physical and social dimensions are not irrelevant.<sup>9</sup> Our work this side of heaven is *not* comparable to rearranging deck chairs on the *Titanic* of this perishing world (as sometimes suggested). Nevertheless, the eternal perspective should never be far from our thought and action. It is therefore of ultimate importance that the church understand well its mission in this world. The stakes are eternal.

This book is an attempt to biblically explicate the church’s mission as summarized in the statement *to glorify God by multiplying transformational churches among all people*. Some readers from the outset will protest that this statement is flawed: it is too

church centered and not enough kingdom centered; it does not give prominent enough place to gospel proclamation; it is too focused on numerical growth; or it does not give adequate attention to the Holy Spirit. I acknowledge that a superficial reading of the statement could give rise to such concerns. But I will attempt to demonstrate with the unpacking of the statement that each of these important issues is in fact addressed.

## The Meaning of Transformation

Central to this mission statement is the concept of transformation; thus we must begin by clarifying its meaning. The words “transform,” “transformation,” and the like have been used in a wide variety of ways in the context of theology and mission. For example, people have spoken of “transformational local congregations,”<sup>10</sup> “holistic mission” and “social transformation,”<sup>11</sup> or prayer movements that claim to “transform” whole cities;<sup>12</sup> they have sometimes spoken of a paradigm shift that “transforms” mission theology in the postmodern world.<sup>13</sup>

So how is the concept of transformation to be understood in this book and in this mission statement? There are at least two ways in which a church might be considered transformational. One is the transformation of individuals and congregations as the gospel changes their lives. This occurs largely within the church. The other is the transformational influence that believers and congregations have upon the people and communities around them, largely outside the church. The two are intimately related, and throughout this book the discussion will move back and forth between these two dimensions regarding what it means to be a transformational church.

Transformation always has to do with change *from* something *to* something else, whereby the change is substantive and affecting the very essence or nature of the object. So when we speak of a transformational church, two questions emerge: *What* is being

transformed? and *How* is it being transformed? The approach taken here will begin by looking at the way the New Testament speaks of transformation. Scripture describes many aspects of dramatic change in lives and communities without using a specific word that could be translated as “transform” or “transformation.” Nevertheless, examining the biblical usages of the Greek term *metamorphoō* (to transform) and its cognates does provide a telling starting point.

To grasp the New Testament understanding of transformation we must first look at how *metamorphoō* was generally understood in the first century. What did the first readers of the New Testament think of when they heard the word? They were probably not thinking of caterpillars becoming butterflies, which might come to our mind when we hear the English word “metamorphosis.” The term *metamorphoō* would have been familiar to most first-century readers as a common religious term to describe the transforming power of gods.<sup>14</sup> Eliezer González comments, “Given both the fundamental role of traditional mythology and the prominence of the imperial cult, it is evident that metamorphosis was a well-understood concept in Graeco-Roman society. It was, however, understood within the traditional parameters prescribed by the culture and its paradigms of belief. Metamorphosis was the work of the gods, which could be accessed by magic.”<sup>15</sup> Early in the first century the Roman poet Ovid wrote a mythological narrative, *Metamorphoses*, a collection of 250 Greek myths describing various magical transformations performed by gods. Here is a sampling:

- Callisto is transformed into a bear after being raped by Zeus.
- Arachne is transformed into a spider by Athena.
- Syrinx is transformed into reeds while being pursued by an amorous Pan. Pan turns the reeds into the first set of pan-pipes.
- Pygmalion falls in love with a statue he had sculpted and is granted his wish for it to be transformed into a living woman.

- “Zeus notably disguises himself as a satyr to seduce Antiope, a shower of gold to seduce Danae, a swan to seduce Leda and a bull to seduce Europa.”<sup>16</sup>
- “The climax of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* is the metamorphosis of Julius Caesar through ascension and divinification after death.”<sup>17</sup>

Each of these transformations is substantive, qualitative, and supernatural.

The term is also used in Jewish literature of the intertestamental period. Humans could not become God, but they could become like angels, even more glorious than angels—a significant theme in intertestamental Jewish literature.<sup>18</sup> González summarizes, “‘Transformation’ and ‘metamorphosis’ resulting from an encounter or communion with the divine are categories that were widely used and understood in the ancient world. ‘Metamorphosis’ is a legitimate phenomenon across the breadth of the religions of antiquity.”<sup>19</sup> Thus the concept of transformation would have been familiar to the early readers of the New Testament.

Although no word that is translated as “transform” appears in the Old Testament, the concept is certainly there, particularly in the promise of the new covenant. Through Jeremiah the Lord promises, “I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me forever. . . . And I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me” (32:39, 40). Through Ezekiel God promises, “And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules” (36:26–27). Thus a day would come when God would establish a new relationship with his people that would involve more than forgiveness: it would include transformation of the heart—the inner life and will—so that it would love and serve God. This would be fulfilled with the redemptive work of

the Messiah and the gift of regeneration by the Holy Spirit in the New Testament era.<sup>20</sup>

## Transformation in the New Testament

The word *metamorphoō*, in various forms, occurs four times in the Greek New Testament. The biblical authors adopt this familiar religious term, but give it new meaning. This is a noteworthy example of contextualization in the New Testament whereby familiar pagan religious terminology is adopted but infused with new meaning as a bridge to understanding the gospel. W. A. Visser 't Hooft states that the authors of the New Testament “were surely concerned with the purity of the Gospel, but they were equally concerned to make it known and understood by the whole world around them. So they were willing to take a spiritual risk. With remarkable courage and imagination they sought to get under the skin of the pagan world and in order to do so they were not afraid to use a great deal of the terminology which they found in that world.”<sup>21</sup> When we examine the New Testament passages using forms of *metamorphoō*, a common theme emerges: *God’s glory!* Recall that “to glorify God” is the very first phrase of our mission statement and the ultimate goal of the church’s mission. In the Gospels we find *metamorphoō* used once in Matthew and once in Mark to describe the transfiguration of Jesus before his disciples: “And he was *transfigured* [*metemorphōthē*] before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light” (Matt. 17:2; cf. Mark 9:2).<sup>22</sup> Jesus’s earthly, temporal body is transformed before their eyes to reflect something of the transcendent eternal glory of his divine nature. Peter’s account emphasizes this, noting that with the transfiguration Jesus “received honor and glory from God the Father” (2 Pet. 1:17).

The two other occurrences of the term are found in the apostle Paul’s letters. Romans 12:2 reads, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be *transformed* [*metamorphousthe*] by the renewal

of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” We will return to this passage for a closer look in chapter 3. At this point we simply note that it is the believer who is transformed through the renewal of the mind, and the result is that one discerns the will of God. The transformation that is to occur is thus not a matter of mere outward behavior. Being *transformed* to discern God's norms and values is contrasted with being *conformed* to society's norms and values (this world). Such transformation is from the inside out and is clearly a condition not only for discerning God's will but also for obeying it and living in a way that glorifies God.

The richest passage speaking of the transformation of the Christian is found in 2 Corinthians 3:18: “And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being *transformed* [*metamorphoumetha*] into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.” Once again we see that the glory of the Lord is linked with the concept of transformation. Humans were originally created in the image of God, which was in one sense a reflection of his glory. With the entrance of sin, that image was marred, though not obliterated. Humans now reflect God's glory more like a broken or clouded mirror. Sin is described as falling short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23), and eternal judgment is described as being banned “from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might” (2 Thess. 1:9). But the transforming work of the Holy Spirit renews the image of God (Col. 3:10) and the human ability to reflect the glory of God. Our transformation is described here as a progressive increasing of glory: from our fallenness and lost glory to a more and more glorious reflection of the image of Christ—Christlikeness. The Message translates 2 Corinthians 3:18 like this: “And so we are transfigured much like the Messiah, our lives gradually becoming brighter and more beautiful as God enters our lives and we become like him.”

There is a certain eschatological anticipation in the transformation that begins here and now that will be ultimately fulfilled upon Jesus's return. A slightly different Greek term for transformation appears in Philippians 3:20–21 to describe the bodily transformation of a believer upon the return of Christ: “But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will *transform* [*metaschēmatisei*] our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.” Here the believer's body is transformed to become something like Christ's transformed body, which is *glorious*. David G. Peterson summarizes, “The transformation [Jesus Christ] makes possible is *spiritual*, establishing a new life of obedience and service, and *physical*, bringing us ultimately to share in his resurrection from death in a new creation.”<sup>23</sup>

The apostle John links this ultimate transformation, like Paul, with the beholding of Christ: “We know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2). Our beholding of his glory now is incomplete, as is our transformation and reflection of that glory. But upon his appearing, we will see him perfectly, and our transformation into his likeness will be perfected.

That renewed image is characterized by God's own glory, the glory of Christ—it comes from him—his life in us. It is the Spirit who enacts the transformation; we do not transform ourselves. González observes, “The use of *metamorphoō* is passive throughout the Pauline corpus; the agent of metamorphosis is God, and the object for the transformation of humanity is the Christ-likeness, whether this is expressed as the ‘image’ (εἰκὼν [*eikōn*]) of Christ, or through the ἐν Χριστῷ [*en Christos*, in Christ] motif.”<sup>24</sup> The early church father John Chrysostom eloquently explains, “Just as if pure silver be turned towards the sun's rays, it will itself also shoot forth rays, not from its own natural property merely, but also from the solar lustre; so also doth the soul being cleansed, and made brighter than silver, receive a ray from the glory of the

Spirit, and glance it back.”<sup>25</sup> Like the mirror that reflects the glorious light of the sun, we reflect a glory that is not our own, but is the glory of God reflected in us. Mirrors in the ancient world were made of metal, and reflections were very imperfect, and so it will be with us until Christ returns.

Wonderfully, 2 Corinthians 3:18 begins, “we all.” The offer of transformation is not limited to the elite of the Greek mystery cults, nor merely to Moses (described in the preceding verses), nor to special servants of God; rather, *all* who behold the Lord’s glory can be transformed. It will not occur by way of incantations, rituals, or ascetic practices. The means of transformation by which the Spirit works is found in a term used only here in the Greek New Testament and translated variously as “beholding” (ESV) or “contemplate” (NIV), but can equally mean “reflect/reflecting” (as indicated in the ESV and NIV footnotes). Paul may have intended this double, ambiguous meaning of both reflecting and beholding, because that is indeed what happens: as we behold the glory of the Lord, that glory comes to be reflected in our own lives, and this process as a whole is transformative.

Let us consider what it means to behold or contemplate the glory of the Lord. While something of God’s glory is revealed in creation (e.g., Ps. 19:1–6), ultimately we must understand God as he has revealed himself in Scripture. Study of and contemplation on the Bible as it reveals God’s character and purposes will evidence God’s glory. We consider his attributes such as righteousness and holiness, grace and mercy, justice and kindness, as well as his works in creation and history. But nowhere does the glory of God shine more brightly than in his self-revelation through the incarnation of his Son. Only a few verses later Paul writes of “the gospel of the *glory of Christ*, who is the image of God” (2 Cor. 4:4; cf. v. 6). John’s words are yet more profound: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, *glory as of the only Son* from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). The book of Hebrews tells us of the Son, “He is the

radiance of the *glory* of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power” (1:3). Contemplating God’s glory is fundamentally christological; that is to say, it is utterly Christ centered. To be transformed to reflect the glory of God means nothing less than living like Jesus, loving like Jesus, caring for the hurting like Jesus, healing the wounded like Jesus, speaking the truth like Jesus, being pure like Jesus, and selflessly serving others like Jesus. This is the character of God made visible in us, we who were once sinners falling short of God’s glory. This is God’s doing, by grace. This glorifies God. As Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount, “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give *glory* to your Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 5:16).

Such beholding of God’s glory is only a starting point. In the collective fellowship of believers, in the church, God’s glory becomes further manifest in ways that cannot be demonstrated by an individual. It is through the church that the manifold wisdom of God is made known (Eph. 3:10). Love becomes the hallmark of God’s people (John 13:35). The unity of Christ’s disciples in the bond of his love becomes a display of God’s glory and a testimony before the watching world. Jesus prayed, “The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me” (17:22–23; “you” here is plural). In this way we collectively as God’s people reflect something of the eternal love of our Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Paul’s prayer in Romans 15:5–7 expresses how God is glorified through us as a community of harmony and acceptance: “May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.” The opening lines of Paul’s Letter to

the Ephesians could not express this end more boldly, declaring how our election in Christ is “to the praise of his glorious grace” (1:6), how we who hope in Christ are to “be to the praise of his glory” (v. 12), and how our sealing with the promise of the Holy Spirit is “to the praise of his glory” (v. 14).

Thus at the very least we see that the *what* of transformation is the believer in Christ and the church as his people being transformed so that they live to God's glory, manifesting the love and character of God. The *how* of transformation is the work of the Spirit, which begins with the creation of new life in us (Titus 3:5) and grows by way of our contemplating God's glory in Christ (2 Cor. 3:18). A transformational church is a church that becomes God's instrument of such personal transformation through evangelism and discipleship. But the transformative work of the Spirit has a ripple effect, radiating out to impact families, congregations, and the wider community.

### **God's Glory, the Source and Goal of Transformation— and Mission**

Throughout this discussion we have seen the centrality of God's glory in transformation. Indeed, all that we do should be to the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31). By contemplating God's glory, the believer is transformed to reflect God's glory. Although the primary biblical texts speak more of personal transformation, this is paradigmatic for missional transformation in all dimensions. John Piper has famously said, “Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exists because worship doesn't. . . . Worship, therefore is the fuel and goal of missions.”<sup>26</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright expands upon this: “We could say that mission exists because praise does. The praise of the church is what energizes and characterizes it for mission, and also serves as the constant reminder . . . that all our mission flows as obedient response to and participation in the prior mission of God—just as all our