

**Shapevine Missional Series**

**THE  
FAITH  
OF  
LEAP**

**EMBRACING A THEOLOGY *of* RISK,  
ADVENTURE & COURAGE**

**MICHAEL FROST &  
ALAN HIRSCH**



**BakerBooks**

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## About the Shapevine Missional Series

**T**he key purpose of Shapevine the organization is to bring the various elements of missional Christianity—namely, church planting movements, urban mission, the emerging church, the missional church movement, the organic/simple church, and marketplace ministries—into meaningful dialogue around the truly big ideas of our time. Consistent with this purpose, the Shapevine Missional Series in partnership with Baker Books seeks to bring innovative thinking to the missional issues of church planting, mission, evangelism, social justice, and anything in between.

We seek to publish both established authors as well as others who have significant things to contribute but have operated largely under the radar.

The series will focus on three distinctive areas:

- **Living—Practical Missional Orthopraxy**

Orthopraxy is what makes orthodoxy worth having. We yearn for the experience and continual flow of living out the gospel message in our day-to-day lives for the sake of others. The stories and ideas in the Shapevine Missional Series are aimed at providing practical handles and means to wrap our readers' minds around the idea of living as the people of God, sent into the world with the Spirit and impulse of Jesus himself.

- **Learning—Solid Missional Orthodoxy**

Jesus both lived and proclaimed a theology of a missional God. His was and is a message of mercy, justice, and goodness toward others. It was this message that erupted into the greatest movement in the history of humankind. The same God who sent his only Son now sends those who follow his Son, in the same manner and with the same message. This is at the heart of a missional theology.

- **Leading—Tools for Missional Leadership**

Our aim is for the books in this series to serve as tools for pastors, organizational leaders, and church members throughout the world to equip themselves and others as they travel the path of faithfulness in the missional life.

As a global interactive forum, Shapevine allows anyone to both learn and contribute at whatever level suits. To learn more, go to [www.shapevine.com](http://www.shapevine.com) or contact us at [info@shapevine.com](mailto:info@shapevine.com).

Alan Hirsch and Lance Ford

## Series Editor's Preface

**C**learly coming into deeper knowledge and experience of God is a profound adventure into the infinite unknown. Given that we will always be finite creatures, and God always infinite, this adventure is one that is unlikely to ever end. So we might as well get used to the idea of journey, pilgrimage, risk, and exploration.

While we have libraries filled with books about spirituality, and literally tens of millions of books exploring aspects of theology, we have not been able to identify *one* significant book studying the nature of adventure itself—its role in shaping our thinking about God, our experience of life, or our participation in mission, church, or discipleship. Not one! Similarly, there is painfully little exploration on the associated subject of risk, liminality, *communitas*, and its implications in the life of faith and in leadership.

As one of the authors of this book, I found this deficiency shocking, and given that our experience of God and gospel partakes directly of the nature of adventure, and (as we shall see) the Bible has much to say about it, I believe this ought to disturb you, the reader. What insight does this give into how we experience God and existence itself? Is our understanding of these matters now so passive and tedious that we simply miss this most illustrious metaphor of life—one that is so celebrated in myth, narrative, film, and poetry? And what then does this say about the church itself and how we view faith?

We think that nothing less than the renewal and vigor of Christianity, and with it the mission of the church, is bound up with this

subject. Within these pages, the reader will find not only a fresh perspective on somewhat tired subjects but also an invigorated sense of *elan vital* along with (hopefully) an increasing desire to partake of a little adventure of one's own.

Together with the other books that are now part of the series, we feel the book you're holding genuinely adds new knowledge to the church and some fresh impetus to partake more vigorously and faithfully in the redemptive mission of God in our day.

*You proclaim your truth in every age by many voices:  
Direct those, we pray, who speak where many listen or write  
where many read;  
that they may do their part  
in making the heart of your people wise,  
its mind sound, and its will righteous!  
Amen*

Alan Hirsch  
Shapevine series editor



# The End of the Beginning

## *Introduction*

A great deal more failure is the result of an excess of caution than of bold experimentation with new ideas. The frontiers of the kingdom of God were never advanced by men and women of caution.

—Oswald Sanders

You never know how much you really believe anything until its truth or falsehood becomes a matter of life or death to you.

—C. S. Lewis

**W**hen Abram was called out of Ur with these words of commission—

The LORD had said to Abram, “Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you.

“I will make you into a great nation  
and I will bless you;  
I will make your name great,  
and you will be a blessing.” (Gen. 12:1–2)

—he responded in an act of obedience that quite literally altered the course of history. This was surely one of the most momentous and decisive moments in the history of world redemption. But it was not an act taken dispassionately, for it must have involved significant risk and enormous amounts of courage to pull off. In fact, Abram was being called by a deity, who at that point in his experience must have been to him a Great Mystery. And he was called to step out on an uncertain journey into a great unknown.

This took a leap of faith to be sure, but it is also a near perfect example of what we call the *faith of leap*. All the elements explored in this book—risk, adventure, courage, and the implications for church, discipleship, mission, and the self—are in some seminal way contained, as well as demonstrated, in Abraham’s courageous response to God.

Think of it this way: Abram’s somewhat “unbalanced” action put him (as well as his rather large household) at serious risk. At the very least, it dislocated him from his land, severed him from the familiar comfort of kith and kin, and resulted in a dangerous, lifelong journey that involved what can only be called open-ended adventure and discovery. It was a truly existential act. It was a leap of faith to be sure, but it also led to a life of faithfulness that has set the parameters of how we as God’s people ought to understand what it is to live a life pleasing to God.

The result is that we all now take our cue from Abraham. Paul even says it is the Abrahamic type of faith that is required to access the promises of God in the first place. It is precisely this type of risk-embracing, adventure-engaging, courageous faith in God that justifies. Without it we cannot even be saved, let alone live the Christian life (see, for example, Rom. 4; Gal. 3). It is not superfluous to the Christian life; we are saved by faith, but we are also called to continue living by the same faith (Rom. 1:16–17; Eph. 2:8–10).

When Abraham acted in response to God’s command, and stayed the course in the open-ended adventure that followed, he gave us faith’s archetypal human expression. It is called “faithfulness” in the Scriptures themselves, and it forms the basis of what the Bible understands as true heroism—it is for good reason that Abram was later renamed Abraham, the father of the faithful.

Abraham’s type of faith (the *faith of leap*) sets the standard for subsequent acts of biblical heroism. For instance, it took a similar

faith of leap for Peter to immediately drop his fishing nets and follow Jesus in Matthew 4, and later to launch himself from a boat in the midst of a windstorm, toward the ghostlike figure of Jesus in the middle of the Sea of Galilee in Matthew 14. Likewise, Paul's missionary journeys into the unknown are truly *Abrahamic* and have set a high standard for all Christian discipleship ever since. So too all the other acts of faith, by countless saints, that have demonstrated courage, conviction, and the capacity to risk all for God.

If you are reading this book, chances are that you have already taken the leap of saving faith, but like all who are called to follow Jesus, you are required to live with the faith of leap. All disciples of Jesus (not just a select few) are called to an ongoing, risky, actional, extravagant way of life—a life resonant with that distinctly wild—and yes, *Christlike*—faithfulness of their Lord and Master. This is the faith that is willing to leap into service of his unfurling reign in this world, believing that by so doing we are partnering with him in a cosmic project for the regeneration of all things, far and away more amazing than anything we could have conceived of ourselves.

## **From the Leap of Faith to the Faith of Leap**

Most of us scan the news every day, but have you ever considered why we actually do this? What draws us back to the television news channels or the daily newspaper or the myriad online news services day after day, night after night? Our first response might be that we are simply keeping up with what's going on in the world, that we want to be able to engage in informed conversation with others. But that can't fully explain our fascination with the unfolding of events nor the enormous amounts of money and media resources put into capturing and channeling that news to information-hungry audiences around the world.

Perhaps we follow the news out of an almost mysterious sense that all of life is somehow interconnected, and that events that happen across the world can, and often do, have global, and sometimes very personal, significance. After all, September 11, although it happened in New York, Washington, and the countryside of Pennsylvania, was global in impact. While it changed the world, it also impacted us

very personally as well. In many ways the news involves the unfolding of the human story of which *I* am, *we* are, a fundamental part. Life, including our corporate life, is marvelously intertwined and open-ended. Who knows what will happen next?

For good or for ill, we are all players in the living drama going on around us. God has designed us as decision makers in his very image, as agents of the kingdom, not only to partake in history, but to prayerfully shape and direct it in his name as a true act of worship.<sup>1</sup> And the part we play will depend largely on a clear sense of our mission, on the level of intentionality in what we do, and on the fortitude and integrity with which we do it. In short, it will depend on our desire to muster the faith of leap. It will also depend on the guide(s) that we follow in that endeavor.

This idea—that we all have our parts to play in a grand unfolding story—is variously portrayed by Tolkien’s marvelous characters in the Lord of the Rings trilogy. One particularly wise character, Samwise Gamgee, proves his uncomplicated genius by rightly locating his and Frodo’s plight within a larger, now unfolding adventure, the outcome of which no one could predict. Whilst approaching Mordor, and resigned to their common fate and calling, he says to Frodo,

The brave things in the old tales and songs, Mr. Frodo, *adventures* as I used to call them. I used to think that they were things the wonderful folk of the stories went out and looked for because they wanted them, because they were exciting and life was a bit dull, a kind of sport, as you might say. But that’s not the way of it with the tales that really mattered, or the ones that stay in the mind. Folk seem to have been just landed in them, usually—their paths were laid that way, as you put it. But I expect they had lots of chances, like us, of turning back, only they didn’t. And if they had, we shouldn’t know, because they’d have been forgotten. We hear about those as just went on—and not all to a good end, mind you; at least not to what folk inside a story and not outside it call a good end. You know, coming home, and finding things all right, though not quite the same—like old Mr. Bilbo. But those aren’t always the best tales to hear, though they may be the best tales to get landed in! I wonder what sort of a tale we’ve fallen into?<sup>2</sup>

Such stories are later remembered, Sam observes, because their characters—usually against their own wishes—find themselves

embarking upon a quest, a mission, the outcome of which involves something immensely larger and more important than their own personal comfort and happiness. Tolkien understood that a quest is never a matter of one's own desire but rather of one's calling. For instance, in the trilogy, Frodo frequently questions why he has been *chosen* for this utterly dreadful task. But however he might struggle to articulate it, he does feel *called*, he feels profoundly obligated, to continue his particular mission (his "errand," as he calls it) in spite of the horrendous situations in which he continues to find himself.<sup>3</sup>

And remember, Frodo and his friends have no guarantee, perhaps not even the likelihood, that the quest will succeed. In fact, they seem to be constantly moving *toward* danger, never away from it toward any kind of permanent safety. They seem to constantly inhabit the liminal space: *Liminality* is the term we use to describe a threshold experience. It is composed of any or a combination of danger, marginality, disorientation, or ordeal and tends to create a space that is neither here nor there, a transitional stage between what was and what is to come. As a result, it is experienced as a place of discomfort and agitation that requires us to endure and push into what is to come. And it describes perfectly the experience of Frodo and his companions in the Lord of the Rings stories.

Liminality, it seems, is the true context of a quest. To remind Frodo of the radical open-endedness of the journey, his uncle Bilbo composed a "walking song" to give him courage and determination when he will be sorely tempted to veer off the Road.

The Road goes ever on and on  
 Down from the door where it began.  
 Now far ahead the Road has gone,  
 And I must follow, if I can,  
 Pursuing it with weary feet,  
 Until it joins some larger way,  
 Where many paths and errands meet,  
 And whither then? I cannot say.<sup>4</sup>

The Fellowship's quest to destroy the Ring—having no guarantee of success but rather an immense likelihood of failure—is not unlike any true quest of life, and perhaps especially true for the disciple

and for Christian community. Tolkien, speaking through Bilbo here, proposes the idea that we all have an “errand”—a unique mission and purpose—that far from being some artificial adventure (the kind one experiences in Disneyland) takes us to the heart of the meaning of one’s life. And whether we like it or not, we are all on a journey, a Quest if you will, every day of our lives, and the path we must take is full of perils, and our destiny can never be predicted in advance. As Legolas says, “Few can foresee whither their road will lead them, till they come to its end.” And, “the question—and thus the Quest—concerns *how* we shall travel the road and whether we shall complete our errand.”<sup>5</sup> And for disciples of Jesus, like the Fellowship of the Ring, the struggle for the good against the evil requires nothing less than everything—the giving up of our lives—whether sooner or later, whether bitterly or graciously, whether by happenstance or intention.

We think that Tolkien is spot on here. He mythically portrays for us the Christian story and the Quest of the church. As people caught up in the Jesus story, we can interpret life truly only from within a larger gospel narrative where we all play a part in the constant unfolding of God’s purposes in his world. We are explicitly warned that there can be no final respite until we reach our final Sabbath rest (Heb. 4:1–11), and although there will, thankfully, be wonderful resting places along the way, these we can never settle in for too long. We rest only to be strengthened for the Journey.

As it happens, we are still in the middle of an open-ended story of what Jesus is doing in the world, and the book of Acts must continue to be written by Christians in every age and context. We are the people of the ultimate Quest—we are on a wild, and sometimes dangerous, adventure to save the world. This is our story and our song.

## **The End of the Beginning**

As Jesus’s people, we are part of a story that originated in the eternal heart of God, was carried out through the redemptive mission of the Son, and continues in the sending of the Holy Spirit and in the commissioning of the church in the power of that Spirit. It’s a story

that has unfolded first through Israel but now further extends itself through the messianic movement that Jesus started. But the biblical people of God, be they Israel or early church, far from being the end of the story, are rather the “end of the beginning.” They just got the whole thing started—we now carry the baton. But they witness to us, calling us to remain true to the Quest. And so we joyfully continue, perhaps even bring to completion, the Mission with the same kind of faithfulness and integrity that our biblical forebears brought to the task.

We are the people born of the *missio Dei*. This means that the church is a result of the missionary activity of God and not the producer of it. The church is therefore defined by its mission and not the other way around. And this mission of redemption is not yet fulfilled; therefore, we are still on the Journey. As in our previous books, we say that Christology (our primary theology) determines Missiology (our purpose and function), which in turn determines Ecclesiology (the forms and expressions of the church).<sup>6</sup> We are the missional people of God, and we have a job to accomplish that only we, as Jesus’s people, can do.

The church doesn’t *have* an agenda; it *is* the agenda. The church doesn’t *have* a missional strategy; it *is* the missional strategy. Therefore, to be the church as we are meant to be is of utmost missional importance in our day. But herein lies the rub: Christianity has been on a long-term trend of decline in every Western cultural context that we can identify. Part of the reason is that we now live in a post-Christian, post-Christendom world—the result is that seventeen centuries of “Western church” have effectively inoculated our culture against the gospel.

British missiologist Stuart Murray defines post-Christendom as

the culture that emerges as the Christian faith loses coherence within a society that has been definitively shaped by the Christian story and as the institutions that have been developed to express Christian convictions decline in influence.<sup>7</sup>

He notes some significant shifts that have massive consequences for how we go about church and mission as post-Christendom effects the following transitions:

*From the centre to margins:* in Christendom the Christian story and the churches were central, but in post-Christendom these are marginal.

*From majority to minority:* in Christendom Christians comprised the (often overwhelming) majority, but in post-Christendom we are a minority.

*From settlers to sojourners:* in Christendom Christians felt at home in a culture shaped by our story, but in post-Christendom we are aliens, exiles, and pilgrims in a culture where we no longer feel at home.

*From privilege to plurality:* in Christendom Christians enjoyed many privileges, but in post-Christendom we are one community among many in a plural society.

*From control to witness:* in Christendom churches could exert control over society, but in post-Christendom we exercise influence only through witnessing to our story and its implications.

*From maintenance to mission:* in Christendom the emphasis was on maintaining a supposedly Christian status quo, but in post-Christendom it is on mission within a contested environment.

*From institution to movement:* in Christendom churches operated mainly in institutional mode, but in post-Christendom we must again become a Christian movement.<sup>8</sup>

Our situation has fundamentally changed, and we must now find ways to adapt or to simply continue on the way of decline. In our opinion, though, far from representing a defeat of the gospel, this situation—which is just beginning to dawn upon the consciousness of church leaders in the United States—gives us a wonderful opportunity to return to basics and recalibrate back beyond the highly institutionalized, overly stylized forms of church that have currently imprisoned our imaginations. The time is ripe to (re)discover a much more potent and theologically consistent understanding of ourselves. It's a time to journey in our minds and hearts, to find a better way to be the good news people of God that Jesus designed us to be. The Christian community, at least as Jesus intended it, is one of the most exciting aspects of the gospel experience: the church is the frontier of the kingdom, the place



where *it* all happens, where love lives, where the living witness to our Lord must take place.

## **Casting Off in the Midst of Crisis**

If we take Jesus's founding words as seriously as he actually intended ("And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven," Matt. 16:18–19; see also 28:18–20), then we have to admit that we have been in a Rip Van Winklesque slumber for way too long already. We have been whacked out by the dreaded opiate of "religion," and as a result we have ended up with something significantly less than a biblical experience of church.

But crisis is in some real sense normative for the church of Jesus, because it is there where we are most authentic. David Bosch, one of our great guides in the twentieth century, elaborates on the words of another great missiologist, Hendrik Kraemer, when he says,

It is . . . normal for Christians to live in a situation of crisis. . . . "Strictly speaking, one ought to say that the Church is always in a state of crisis and that its greatest shortcoming is that it is only occasionally aware of it." This ought to be the case . . . because of "the abiding tension between (the church's) essential nature and its empirical condition." . . . The church "has always needed apparent failure and suffering in order to become fully alive to its real nature and mission." . . . And for many centuries the church has suffered so little and has been led to believe that it was a success. . . .

*Let us also know that to encounter crisis is to encounter the possibility of truly being the church.*<sup>9</sup>

Crisis is no bad thing. In fact it's an opportunity to rediscover the adventurous church. And the signs are good: it seems to us that the church in the United States is indeed beginning to rise to the challenge, although we have just put our foot to that road again—and who knows where it will take us. We will have to take risks, to chance failure, to be willing to walk away from the familiar paths that have brought us to this point. It is clear that simply opting for more of the same is not going to resolve our problems. We must be willing

to dream again, to innovate, and to risk the rejection of peers who think that the status quo is sufficient to the task. The church should be one of the most adventurous places on earth—the locus of all quest, the highly adaptive Jesus community at the very forefront of what God is doing in the world. But let's be honest—this is not the case with the church-as-we-know-it.

It's time to move, to cast off from safe shores, and take a journey again! The church as an expression, perhaps the most concentrated expression, of the kingdom of God on earth should be a fully God-alive, dynamic, adventurous, world-transforming agency.

We love this quote, ascribed to Catholic theologian Hans Küng, because it highlights our intrinsic need for adventure and innovation:

A church which pitches its tents without constantly looking out for new horizons, which does not continually strike camp, is being untrue to its calling. . . . [We must] play down our longing for certainty, accept what is risky, live by improvisation and experiment.<sup>10</sup>

To do this, to rediscover church as missional adventure, we will have to start by *reJesusing* the church<sup>11</sup>—we need to be willing to factor Jesus, the wild Lord (his life, teachings, ministry, salvation work), back into the equation of church—to become disciples *on the Way*. And in terms of the church, we will need to rediscover the meaning of the word *movement* and relinquish being administrators of a stifling status quo, or worse, purveyors of fine religion. If we do this, we will experience spiritual renewal, the burning fire, and the accompanying gravitas that pervaded the New Testament church.

To end this introduction where we started—all who have seen the Lord of the Rings movies, or better, have read the books, will quickly recognize that Tolkien's work is imbued with the mystical sense that life is a mission that carries us beyond that which is familiar. On the Road, wherever it might take us, even small acts have grand possible consequences. As Baylor University professor Ralph Wood says,

To get out of bed, to answer the phone, to respond to a knock at the door, to open a letter—such everyday deeds are freighted, willy-nilly, with eternal consequence. From the greatest to the smallest acts of either courage or cowardice, we travel irresistibly on the path toward ultimate joy or final ruin.<sup>12</sup>

Wood then quotes Tolkein directly:

[Bilbo] used often to say that there was only one Road; that it was like a great river: its springs are at every doorstep, and every path is its tributary. "It's a dangerous business, Frodo, going out of your door," he used to say. "You step into the Road, and if you don't keep your feet, there's no knowing where you might be swept off to."<sup>13</sup>

According to Tolkien, we can "keep our feet"—i.e., we can avoid being swept away to the death that comes from having failed our mission—only so long as we have a sure sense of where we are supposed to be going and how we may rightly arrive there.

That we are all, individually or corporately, on a mission emanating from the heart of God is clear and unavoidable—there is, biblically speaking, no such thing as a nonmissional church or disciple. And because we *are* that, we are part of the unfolding of the Story, and we must play our part and do it faithfully. To take ourselves out of the Quest is to block the purposes of the *missio Dei* as it flows through us, and is therefore blatant unfaithfulness to God and disloyalty to the grandest of Causes.

To keep our feet on the Adventure, however, will require staying close to our Founder and Leader, who is himself the Way, the Truth, and the Life, the Alpha and Omega. He is well able to define, keep, shape, and guide us into the future of the kingdom of God, because he is also the King.