

What does the Bible say about mission?

Speaking of trying to condense the wisdom of the ages into a few pages, this is surely an impossible task! It is foolhardy to attempt to summarize what the Bible says about mission in a few pages. So let's just pick out a few texts and say a couple key things about them in order to get a taste of the riches of scripture.

The first thing to remember is that the New Testament should be read as a missionary document. (See especially David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, pp. 15ff, which will inform much of this essay.) Jesus calls his disciples out of the world to follow him so that they might be "sent" (the Latin word is *missio*) into the world. The New Testament is the story of mission history (especially the Book of Acts) and mission theologies. I say "theologies" (plural) because the New Testament writers employ many different descriptions and images and dimensions of mission, and together they show us the depth of what our missionary God is doing.

What about the Old Testament? Is mission found there? Yes, but in a much more primitive and less obvious way. We do not find in the Old Testament missionaries being sent across cultural boundaries. The image there is more one of the "city on a hill." The people of God exhibit in Zion (Jerusalem) what the reign of God is like, and the Gentiles come to that light. But Israel never goes out to bring the nations in. If they come, it is because God brings them. So God, beginning in the Old Testament, is presented as the "missionary God." This continues in the New Testament. Our mission work does not "save" people. We point to the missionary God whose reign is being established. God brings people to repent and believe and live under that reign.

What are the important mission texts in the New Testament? Understanding, first of all, that the entire New Testament is a missionary document, I will choose several key texts as a taste of what is said and a reminder that different writers highlight different aspects of mission.

Matthew 28:16 – 20 Known as the "Great Commission," there is no more famous text associated with mission. As with all scripture, we only understand its richness when we see it in the context in which it is written. As the final words of Matthew's gospel, it summarizes everything that Matthew wants to say about Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

We must remember first of all that Matthew was writing for his community...the Jewish Christians living in Judea. They were in crisis because of opposition from other elements of the Jewish community. Should they continue to worship in the synagogue? Should they keep the Law? What about the Gentiles? There was disagreement on these questions among Matthew's community.

He wants them to distinguish themselves as the “church” (the Greek is *ekklesia*, translated literally as “assembly” and Matthew is the only gospel writer to use it). They are the “true Israel” (thus he uses many references from the Old Testament) who are following the true Messiah. Because of their break with the synagogue, Matthew challenges them to reach out to the Gentiles. This is a radical new thought to Jews.

Matthew addresses two equal and opposite errors:

1. those who think that everyone needs to observe all of the details of the Old Testament laws (legalists)
2. those who think that there is no boundary on their behavior (enthusiasts).

There is a lot of meaning in the words that he uses:

“go, therefore” The followers of Jesus are the “sent people of God.” They believe that he is the Lord of all creation and they can not remain silent. If Jesus is really Lord, they must go and tell everyone.

“make disciples” This is very important for Matthew because “disciple” is the name for the followers of Jesus, and not just the twelve that he originally called. These disciples are to make more disciples who resemble the first ones. It is not that the twelve were perfect, because God is the one who saves. The success of mission does not depend on the perfection of the missionary.

Their job is to build up the church. Of course, the “church” that Matthew knew was very different from the church as we know it. That will always be so when disciples are made in each different cultural contexts. But the point is that Jesus is sending them to build the church. There is a continuity between the original twelve and all of us who come after them. There is a strong view of the church here, but not simply in the sense of numerical expansion.

“all nations” The Greek is *panta ta ethnos*. But this reference to “nations” is not to our understanding of the modern nation state (US, Canada, China, etc.). As the Greek root suggests, it is a reference to “ethnic” groups or cultural groups or language groups. Jesus is Lord of all, therefore his disciples will work to see that every person can worship the Lord in his or her own language.

“baptize” We are first of all called into becoming disciples. We are not mature or complete disciples when we are baptized. Baptism is a gift of grace, not a reward for good works. It is an act of God whereby we partake in the promised forgiveness and the new life which comes through the work of the Holy Spirit within us.

“teach” Jesus commands those who go to make disciples and to “teach” them. This is not primarily intellectual information, but a change in the will that results

in a decision to follow Jesus and submit to God's will as revealed by Jesus. Becoming a Christian is not just understanding certain propositional truths. It is not just words, but deeds which match those words more closely each day. This is a teaching in which there is no room for hypocrisy, as if we are more deserving than others. Those who are disciples will practice what Jesus taught. God's reign of righteousness will require a costly discipleship.

"with you always..." Matthew does not include in his story an account of the ascension. His focus is on the always present Lord who walks with his people whom he has sent out.

Luke 4:16 – 30 Jesus defines his mission with his very first appearance in public. He reads from the prophet Isaiah and claims that he is the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. David Bosch (p. 89) identifies three fundamental concerns of Luke in this passage:

1. the centrality of the poor in Jesus' ministry

It is especially important for us American Christians to recognize that we are materially rich. Most of us do not *feel* like we are rich, but we all are, relative to most people on earth.

Some have suggested that Jesus is speaking of those who are poor in a spiritual sense. That may be true, but we can not escape the plain meaning of text. Jesus always demonstrates a special concern for those on the margins of society and without the basic needs of life.

Jesus does not suggest that the poor are without sin. Sinfulness is rooted in the human heart. Both the materially rich and the materially poor can be spiritually poor. Salvation comes with repentance and forgiveness. This salvation is available even to the outsider who is welcomed at the banquet table which Jesus has prepared.

2. the setting aside of vengeance

This story is unusual because the mood shifts from one of local pride in Jesus to a mob scene in which his neighbors want to throw him off a cliff.

It helps to remember that first century peasant life among Jews was "a seething cauldron" of hatred of the occupying Roman army. The audience was expecting Jesus to cut loose with a scathing denunciation of Rome and a promise that God would bring his vengeance on them. He is expected to bring down the wrath of God on these foreigners who demean and oppress Israel.

Jesus' claim that this text about the coming messiah in Isaiah was at that moment being fulfilled in himself brought expectations of liberation from pagan Rome. But, Jesus ends his reading in Isaiah just before the place where the prophet calls for "the day of vengeance of our God." Jesus radically reinterprets the popular expectations of the messiah. On this note he launches his ministry and from it we learn much about the plans of our missionary God.

3. the Gentile mission

The crowd is angry because Jesus has challenged their assumptions of a privileged position with God. He reminds them of God's favor on foreigners such as a Gentile woman in Sidon and Naaman, a Syrian. This is not an anti-Israel attack, but neither will his mission be limited to the Jews.

At the very beginning of his ministry, Jesus makes clear his understanding of God's universal love for all people. Jesus sees his particular work to be among the Jews, but on several occasions he demonstrates this larger vision in his interaction with Gentiles. All of this sets the stage for the early church to launch its mission to the Gentiles.

For a careful treatment of this text, see Ken Bailey's video tape "The Editings of Jesus Within the Writings of Luke."

Acts 1:8 We look at this text next because Luke also wrote the book of Acts. What he begins in Luke he continues in Acts. So it is not surprising that Luke begins his "Acts of the Apostles" with the final words of instruction from Jesus. As noted above, Jesus focused his ministry among Jews. Even Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, stops first in the synagogue when he comes to a new city. But the Lord's last words were that his disciples were to move out in concentric circles. In fact, Luke divides Acts into these geographical parts.

It is clear from this text that mission is God's mission, (*missio dei*) not ours. Only when the Holy Spirit acts will the sent ones become witnesses. It is not so much a command as it is a promise. God does not force us into mission, but those who are indwelt by the Holy Spirit can not help but respond. "One beggar telling another beggar where to find food," is a good description of what happens. The Gospel and the salvation that comes to those who repent and believe is such *good news* that we can not help but tell others.

If mission is Spirit led, then it must exhibit the fruit of the Spirit (see Paul's words on this). Mission that grows out of pride or superiority or arrogance has no place in Jesus' plan. David Bosch suggests that we go in "bold humility."

This one verse eliminates any geographical definition of mission. God's mission is for all people in all places. It is not simply to the "less fortunate" however we might be superiorly inclined to define them. Neither can we declare that "charity begins at home," with the underlying assumption that it also "ends at home." There is simply no one who does not need to hear the story of Jesus.

John 20:21 "This must determine the way we think about and carry out the mission; it must be founded and modeled upon his. We are not authorized to do it in any other way." (See Lesslie Newbigin, *Mission in Christ's Way*, p. 1)

We are not Jesus and we can not become Jesus, but we can "have the mind of Christ" and we can become like him. So we need to become intimately acquainted with the life of Jesus and how he exhibited the reign of God in the world. Our witness and our way of witness in the world must be consistent with his.

Jesus loved the sinner and recognized that all of us are sinners. He hated sin and wanted to forgive our sin so that we could be restored to fellowship with God. He had no time for a self-righteous legalism, but neither did he have any time for a self-absorbed ignoring of God's laws for humankind. He loved the sinner but he would not wink at sin because he knew that sin brings death.

It is clear from Jesus words that we are called out of the world to repentance and forgiveness for the purpose of learning a new way of living. Part of that new life is being sent into the world to announce the reign of God and invite other to repent and believe and be restored in fellowship with God and others. We are "sent" (the core meaning of the word "mission") so that we can be witnesses. But it is always the Holy Spirit that draws people to God, not our mission programs.

These are not necessarily the most important texts, but they are among the most commonly mentioned. An excellent summary of what the Bible says about mission has been done by the Rev. Bill Crooks, pastor at Trinity Presbyterian Church in Mercer, PA. Bill's Doctor of Ministry project at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary includes a chapter on mission in the Bible. You might ask him to share a copy with you. wpc@wononline.net

There are many books on mission in the Bible, but some from the bibliography that you might consider (from easiest/briefest to comprehensive) are:

Lesslie Newbigin, *Mission in Christ's Way*
David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*
Donald Senior and Carroll Stuhlmueller,
The Biblical Foundations of Mission
Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder
Constants in Context
Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God*

What resources have you found to be faithful and useful?