

WORLD MISSIONS TODAY

A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE OF MISSIONS



*For God so loved the world
that he gave his one and only
Son, that whoever believes in
him shall not perish but have
eternal life.*

John 3:16

EVANGELICAL TEACHER TRAINING ASSOCIATION

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Some people regard missions at best as an extension of North American denominations and at worst as the imposition of Western culture. Others view missions as spreading political influence or as a massive welfare program for underdeveloped nations. Still another group equate missions with “civilizing,” a carry-over from a colonial concept which assumed Western ways were best. Such impressions of missions are inaccurate and unbiblical.

From a biblical perspective, missions does not originate in human relationships. Instead, missions begins with the divine initiative. God so loved the people He created that, even in their rebellion, He seeks to redeem and restore the lost. Not only does God seek the unsaved, He also directs believing men and women to be involved in communicating the gospel.

OLD TESTAMENT

The Old Testament introduces God’s plan of redemption. As part of His ultimate goal to provide salvation for all people and to communicate the good news of this provision, God revealed Himself to selected men and a separated nation. He also reached out to other nations in a variety of ways. God cared for both Rahab and Ruth and showed concern for “strangers” in the midst of Israel, Jonah was required to enter Gentile territory and preach to the people of Ninevah.

There is a unity and continuity in all that God does. What He revealed in Old Testament days is consistent with and part of all He has been doing among men in every age. God’s revelation of His purposes is progressive. Sacrifices in the Old Testament days brought into focus what God was saying about redemption. The Passover lamb, for instance, foreshadows the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the World” and the death of Christ. An understanding of the basic concepts revealed in the Old Testament, therefore, can help us see the plan of God in contemporary missions.

NEED OF SALVATION

The human race has degenerated progressively since Adam disobeyed God. History records a world sinking ever deeper into idolatry, sensuality, and depravity. Three times in the first chapter of Romans, Paul used the words “God gave them up” to remind the people that God had relinquished mankind to the consequences of their rebellious choices.

The first eleven chapters of Genesis reveal the origin of sin and the fact that God must judge it. Although sin entered by one man, it was practiced by each of his descendants. Cain was guilty of hatred and murder, Lamech of polygamy and blood revenge, the antediluvians of incest and violence, Noah of intemperance, Ham of lack of respect and modesty, and the Babel builders of rebellion and self-glorification. Even Noah had no merit of his own. He had to find grace in the eyes of the Lord. because all have sinned, missions is concerned with reaching all men.

God demonstrated His despair over man’s sin when he destroyed the human race. The extent of the flood, drowning all but eight who accepted God’s provision, reveals that God will indeed judge all sinners. The flood was a historic preview of the ultimate judgment to be placed on all who do not find salvation in Jesus Christ. The final condemnation and its consequences will be as comprehensive as the flood.

PROVISION OF SALVATION.

Throughout the Old Testament, God was preparing a people to witness to the nations concerning His person and provisions, particularly the provision of redemption. Israel was the means through which He would speak, but not the extent of the persons He would save.

At the moment when all men sinned in Adam, God promised a Redeemer who would provide restoration to fellowship with Himself. In His call to Abraham, God made an all-encompassing promise, “all in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

A thousand years later, David in the Psalms, often spoke of a salvation for the Gentiles. When his son Solomon dedicated the Temple as the centre of worship of the Lord, he included in its ultimate purpose

the witness to all men. "That all the peoples of the earth may know Thy name." Toward the end of the Old Testament period, the prophets frequently referred to salvation for the Gentiles even while denouncing their sins and warning of judgment.

NEW TESTAMENT

Jesus' statement in **John 20:21**, "**As the Father has sent Me, I also send you,**" summarizes missions in the New Testament. The Gospels record Jesus' obedience in fulfilling the mission on which His Father sent Him. The Acts and the Epistles record the church's response to Christ's Great Commission, especially as reflected in the life and ministry of the Apostle Paul.

THE GOSPELS.

When Jesus identified Himself with men to reveal the glory of the Father. He bridged the ultimate cultural gap - the separation between heaven and earth, God and man. This is recorded in **John 1:14**, "**The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us.**"

Jesus was motivated by love for the father and love for people in their need, not by desire for adventure or self-glorification. Basic mission concepts were in His birth, life, and death.

Many facets of Jesus' ministry reflect and reinforce the missionary nature of His life. Not only did Jesus reveal Himself as King of the Jews with mighty acts and fulfill many of the prophets' predictions. He also moved with ease among those whom His people despised. He made contact with the Samaritans through His communication with the woman at the well of Sychar. Later Jesus healed Samaritan lepers and made many fruitful contacts with the Romans, even healing the son of an officer. In addition, He taught and healed in Greek cities and other Gentile areas. Such modeling of cross-cultural communication resulted in many later responding to the preaching of Philip and the apostles.

Jesus revealed His concern for all of mankind when He gave His reason for coming to earth "To seek and to save that which was lost." His threefold parable in **Luke 15** clearly reveals the basic mission concept that God loves sinners, seeks till He finds them, and receives them when they repent. In **John 10:16** Jesus referred directly to His desire to save Gentiles: "**I have other sheep, which are not of the fold; I must bring them also.**" His plan for the future was to build His church, a body of believers worldwide.

On the night before the crucifixion Jesus' ministry in the Upper Room climaxed a candidate school for those who would lead the first missions thrust in history. Almost every verse of **John 13-17** reveals the fiber of missions. He stressed the importance of the Holy Spirit, prayer, bearing fruit, dealing with opposition and going into a hostile world so that many might believe on Him.

In Christ's post-resurrection ministry, the most prominent feature was the Great Commission. Speaking with all authority, He gives the basic command: **as we are going make disciples of all nations.** Obedience to the missionary mandate involves:

- i) Communicating persuasively the facts of the gospel in a way which has meaning for the hearer. The gospel must penetrate all cultures and all languages, reaching men and women in all parts of the world
- ii) Leading individuals to accept the finished work of Christ by repenting and believing on Jesus as Lord and Saviour.
- iii) Separating converted sinners from self-centred relationships and helping them identify with the body of Christ by establishing them in the loving, Christ-centred community of the church.
- iv) Teaching believers to use their spiritual gifts and live victoriously over sin by the power of the Holy Spirit.
- v) Instructing and leading believers in effective ministry and witness in their community and for those selected by the spirit, into a cross-cultural communication of the gospel.

THE ACTS AND THE EPISTLES.

Pentecost marked a turning point in God's reaching out to the lost. Jesus had paid the penalty for sin, conquered the bondage of death, and returned to the Father. With His work finished, the disciples were commanded to continue all that Jesus had begun and taught. God was implementing a systematic plan to communicate continuously the good news to every corner of the earth until Christ's return.

Jesus' parting promise recorded in **Acts 1:8** informed His disciples that their power was to be supplied by the Holy Spirit as they purposed to be His witness and planned to establish an ever-widening witness in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the remotest parts of the earth. Being led away from Jerusalem as far and as fast as possible was a radical concept. Since the days of David, Jerusalem had been the place where men met with God. Now Christianity had to become mobile and penetrate all cultural settings to introduce people to God. Consequently, the disciples were commanded not to leave Jerusalem until the Spirit came to indwell and empower them. With the Holy Spirit indwelling him, each believer could go out and witness.

The Book of Acts records the first thirty years of the church and the fulfillment of Jesus' promise. For the first seven years, the Apostles evangelized Jews and proselytes in Jerusalem and the surrounding towns. In spite of internal and external stresses and severe persecution, the church thrived. A committed company of believing, sharing, praying, learning and witnessing people bound themselves together as the body of Christ.

Persecution and spiritual momentum carried these witnesses thirty miles north to the heart of Samaria, the first cross-cultural penetration into an area Jesus Himself had pioneered.

The number of Gentile believers greatly expanded with the conversion of Saul of Tarsus (Paul) and the introduction of the gospel at Caesarea, the governmental centre for Palestine. From there, the good news spread some three hundred miles northward to Antioch, the third largest centre of the empire. The disciplined church at Antioch submitted to the Spirit as He sent out Barnabas, Paul and John Mark. These men broke new ground, evangelizing Gentiles and Jews of the Dispersion. Within a few years the area now occupied by Turkey, Greece, and southern Yugoslavia was evangelized. In addition, churches in such key cities as Philippi, Thessalonica, and Ephesus became sending churches like the one at Antioch. The witness which began in Jerusalem, the Jewish religion capital of the world, reached to Rome, the Gentile political capital. Between these two cities, apostles and new believers disciplined thousands of people from a variety of cultures.

A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE OF MISSIONS

It is doubtful if Paul or his associates ever consciously developed a mission strategy. We can discern, however, several mission principles in the Spirit's leading and the ability of these ministers of the gospel to meet new situations.

- i) ***Identification with lost men and women.*** Rejecting his extreme pharisaical separation, Paul strove to accept and be accepted by sinners of every social, ethnic, and religious group. He worked to become all things to all men.
- ii) ***Involvement with a home church.*** Paul maintained close bonds with the church at Antioch and reported back after each missionary journey to these unnamed saints who had confirmed his call and had been instruments of the Holy Spirit in commissioning Barnabas and himself.
- iii) ***Concentration on influential cities.*** The Holy Spirit directed those sharing the gospel to centres of Roman administration and Greek culture. These were places from which the Word could flow naturally to other centres along commercial, military, governmental, and personal lines of communication. Philippi was a "little Rome;" Athens, the cultural centre of Greece; Ephesus, the religious centre of the empire; Corinth and Thessalonica, centres of commerce.
- iv) ***Limitation of work to four provinces.*** The Holy Spirit directed Paul westward toward Rome and prevented him from moving into other areas where he would have had a natural concern. Despite his early residence in Damascus and academic connections in Jerusalem, he did not try to reach these centres or the many other parts of the Roman Empire. Paul's purpose was not to make contacts in all the world but to plant churches in selected areas. By limiting the extent of his outreach, it was possible for him to stay in each place long enough to establish a church..
- v) ***Baptism, instruction, and involvement of believers as soon as possible***
Paul had no concern for church politics. His purpose was to make disciples who would become disciplers.
- vi) ***Leadership of a team.*** Despite his unusual experience and outstanding gifts, Paul was not jealous of this position or protective of his pride.
As a leader, he was first and always a servant. Conscious of his weakness and unworthiness, Paul depended on the Lord to work through him to multiply the impact of all members of his team.

The apostle's life and method of ministry hold many implication for missions today. By studying these precedents and making ourselves available to the same Holy Spirit, we can share the excitement and power experienced by that first missionary generation

SUMMARY

From the promise of salvation to Adam and Eve to the presence of the redeemed in the new heaven and new earth all Scripture testifies to a seeking saving God. The mission mandate for our day is rooted in this eternal purpose plan.

The motivation and method of missions rest on the person and work of Christ, as recorded in the Gospels, and on the priority of the early church as, recorded in the Acts and the Epistles. While the Apostles bore much lasting fruit, no doubt they would have greatly rejoiced if they could have anticipated its abundant multiplication in the twentieth century. Our generation in turn, bears its own heavy mission responsibilities as we approach the end of the age of grace and of missions.