

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF MISSIONS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

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6233 Missions

For Prof. Harvie Conn

1. BIBLICAL THEOLOGICAL ORIENTATION

In the New Testament the fundamental dividing point in the history of redemption is the complex unity of events comprising the death, the resurrection, the ascension and the session of Christ and the Day of Pentecost. Thus the New Testament is basically in two parts, the period of the humiliation and the period of the exaltation of Christ.

In accordance with these two epochs there is progression in the revelation about mission as Jesus passes from His humiliation to His exaltation. Not until His resurrection does Jesus give an unequivocal command to His disciples to go into ALL the world. Such a command is based on the fact that to Him has been granted all authority (Matthew 28:18). As Blauw puts it in the context of the message of missions: "Missions is the summons to the Lordship of Christ".

¹ Having been raised from the dead the work of Christ is the subjection of all things under His feet (1 Corinthians 15:20-28). While in the body of His humiliation Christ's work was to accomplish redemption, but in the body of His exaltation it is to apply that work in salvation and judgement (Psalm 2:8-9). ²

The high-points in New Testament revelation concerning the mission of the church is the so-called Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20 and parallels) and the Baptism of the Spirit at Pentecost in order that that commission might be fulfilled. The Old Testament is not ignorant of these things.

2. OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

As the Old Testament looks forward to the coming of the Messiah, no temporal distinctions are made. It appears as if, when the Day of the Lord comes, salvation will be effected and judgement will be meted out. In other words, when the kingdom of God would be ushered in, the end would also come (Isaiah 65:17ff., 66:22-23, Joel 2:28-32, Psalm 2:8-9). The whole outlook is centred around Israel. Zion will be the focus of attention of the nations, and all nations will travel to the mountain of God (Isaiah 2:2-4). Zion will be pre-dominant and all nations will serve her (Isaiah 49:22-24). Yet even before the coming of the Messiah the Lord prepares the nations at the time of the exile. Until this time, far from being commanded to evangelize the other nations, Israel is commanded to be separate ³ from them. These elements are largely carried over into Christ's own ministry and new features are added by Him as well, which get more explicit as his ministry progresses.

3. THE HUMILIATION OF CHRIST

During Christ's ministry the general policy in preaching the good news was that of confinement to Israel. These words appear explicitly on the lips of Jesus when the Syro-Phoenician woman confronted Him: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 15:24). Then when Jesus gives instructions to the Twelve, prior to their being sent

¹ Footnote? [all footnotes are the Professor's comments on the paper.]

² Does Ps. 2:8-9 refer very narrowly to the exaltation of Christ, or, more generally, to the exalted Messiah w/o distinction of these 2 epochs?

³ Even afterwards, the new Israel is commanded to be separate. Only now it is "in, but not of ...".

out to preach and heal, Jesus tells them: “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matthew 10:5-6). When Jesus had finished telling the crowd the parable of the vineyard the chief priests and scribes and elders perceived that Jesus was referring to them in their capacity as religious leaders (Mark 12:1-12). In the parable Jesus makes it clear that as a nation the Jews will be dispossessed of the vineyard (verse 9). The centrality of the Jews in God’s plan of redemption is clear in Jesus’ statement to the Samaritan woman: “You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for Salvation is from the Jews” (John 4:22).

What explains this policy of concentration on the Jews? What comes of the large body of universalistic material which is even apparent in the Old Testament? Why are the Jews dominant in God’s dealings?

1. God chose Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation, that in him all nations might be blessed. From his loins was to come the one who would reverse the curse that Adam had brought on his posterity. This it was that the Jews were hedged around with the law (Galatians 3:23-24), that they might be kept separate from the other nations until the Messiah should come. Thus in the plan of God the bearer of salvation was to be born a Jew (Galatians 4:4), and thus the Jews, as the receptors of God’s revelation (Romans 3:2), would be the first to hear the glad tidings from the lips of Christ and His commissioned ones. The apostles after Pentecost adhered to the same strategy.
2. Christ’s main mission during His earthly ministry was not so much to preach and heal,⁴ but to seek and save those who are lost (Luke 19:10, cf. Mark 10:45, Matthew 1:21). As the final scene of God’s redemptive plan was being enacted on Jewish soul, they had the privilege of being the first to receive the message.
3. The time was not ripe for the universal proclamation of the gospel. That phase could only be entered into with the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. The disciples were just not equipped for the mammoth task of taking the gospel to all nations until this event.⁵

But it should be clearly noted, that while there is a decisive particularistic emphasis on the Jews, the declared purpose of God towards all nations is by no means lacking in the Gospels. Jesus arouses the anger of the people of His own country by pointing out that in the lives of some of the prophets of old there was a decided concentration on the heathen (Luke 4:24-28). He could have cited the case of Jonah as well at this point (Luke 11:29-32). Jesus was not unconcerned about the nations round about, for He did not share the predominant Jewish feeling of aversion and hate. Thus He discoursed with the Samaritan woman (John 4) and the Syro-Phoenician woman (Matthew 15:21-28). He severely rebuked the retributive attitude of James and John towards the Samaritans (Luke 9:51-55). In a culture where the word Samaritan was abusive, on two occasions Jesus singles out for special commendation a

⁴ Is it quite helpful to distinguish between “seeking and saving” and “preaching and healing”? Was not the remark of Jesus in Luke 19:10 uttered at a time of “preaching”? This point is somewhat unclear to me. May need clarification.

⁵ One important factor missing here is that Jesus had not yet died and been raised again. Until redemption-promise became redemption-history, the fully universal aspects of the kingdom’s promises could not yet begin to be fulfilled. “If I be lifted up, will draw all men to myself ...”.

Samaritan (Luke 10:30-35, 17:11-19). Towards the end of His ministry the promise of future world-wide gospel preaching began to come clearly from Jesus' lips (John 12:32, Matthew 24:14, 26:13).

Therefore, the discriminative element in Christ's mission in favour of the Jews should not be seen in antipathy to the Gentiles but as preparatory to their conversion, following His offering up of Himself. As Christ's ministry anticipated His death, it was a time of instruction and preparation of His disciples for the time when He would no longer physically be with them. The Universal proclamation would wait until He, having ascended on high, would pour out the Spirit (Acts 2:33). God's plan was being worked out, according to His promises to the Patriarchs (Romans 15:8).

Whereas the Old Testament looks forward to the coming of the Messiah as the first and final manifestation of the Kingdom of God, Jesus begins to teach that the manifestation of that kingdom will be gradual. With His coming and ministry the Kingdom has undoubtedly come (cf. Matthew 12:28). His resurrection will bring in a new phase of the Kingdom (Matthew 16:28). The final eschatological coming of Christ will manifest the final phase of the Kingdom (Matthew 8:11). So the Kingdom is revealed before the end of all things, that is before the great and terrible day of the Lord. There is an interval after the coming of the Kingdom and before the consummation of the Kingdom. During this time, what Christ has accomplished vicariously on behalf of His people must be preached to all nations that His people from all nations be saved. In referring to His own death, Jesus likens it to the death of a grain of wheat: "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24). When the seed is planted the harvest needs time for growing, ripening and ingathering. Many of Jesus' parables seem to acknowledge this interval when the Kingdom of God will grow (Matthew 13:24-30, 31-32, 33, 36-43, Mark 4:26-29), Luke 10:2, 15:1-32). However, it is not until after the resurrection that the revelation concerning mission of the people of God is completed.

4. THE EXALTATION OF CHRIST

According to Luke's account, on the very day of His resurrection, Jesus commenced to instruct His disciples from the Old Testament and to clearly tell them that they were soon to begin to carry the message of repentance and forgiveness to all the nations (24:44-49). Matthew records that similar instruction was given by the resurrected Lord to the disciples in Galilee (28:18-20). His command, known as The Great Commission, is given in the very context of the deliverance by the Father of all authority in heaven and earth to Him. It is the resurrection that has demonstrated that Jesus is the Son of God (Romans 1:4, Acts 2:36). The One who appeared in weakness is crowned with glory and power (Philippians 2:5-11). His total dominion is over the total world (Blauw).⁶ The preaching of the gospel to every nation is an expression of that Lordship whereby those who hear will either be blessed or condemned by Him (2 Corinthians 2:15-16). This the world-wide preaching of the gospel must be seen as intimately connected with Christ as King in His being seated at the right hand of God (Hebrews

⁶ Footnote?

1:3-4). The Great Commission is therefore in the context of these two redemptive-historical events.

1. It is after the complete triumph of Christ on the cross and in the resurrection over the powers of darkness (Colossians 2:15). That victory was destined to be proclaimed indiscriminately to the whole world only after it had been accomplished.

2. There is also an intimate connection between the ascension, the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, and the command to evangelize. The Spirit could only be given when Christ had been exalted (John 16:7, Acts 2:33). The gospel could only be preached when the Holy Spirit had been poured out. So in the days that elapsed between the commission and Pentecost Jesus tells them to wait for the promised Holy Spirit (Luke 24:40, Acts 1:5). Precisely because of His exaltation is salvation granted unto His people (Acts 5:31).

During His ministry Jesus more and more withdrew ⁷ from the public scene in order that He might concentrate on the instruction of His disciples. Having risen, He now commands them to instruct others in all the things He has been teaching them (Matthew 28:20) with the promise that the Holy Spirit will be their helper (John 16:12-15). This activity is to pertain as characteristic of the church until the end, for it is until that time that Jesus has pledged His presence as that very commission is fulfilled.

It is very noticeable that beyond the Gospels the policy in preaching the gospel continues to be top the Jew first. The very commission that Jesus gives demands this, for it is beginning at Jerusalem that the work of witnessing will go on (Acts 1:8). Yet repeatedly as the Jews reject the message the apostles declare their intention to then give the privilege to the Gentiles (Acts 13:46-47, 18:6, 19:9, 28:28). In his epistles Paul enunciates that he, although appointed apostle to the Gentiles (Acts 22:21, 26:17, Galatians 2:7, 1 Timothy 2:7) was always concerned about his own countrymen first (Romans 1:16, 9:1-5).

The preaching of the gospel to the Gentiles was not though an automatic thing. Before Peter felt he could associate himself with Gentiles he needed special revelation from God in the form of a vision (Acts 10:9-16). Only after this did he go to meet Cornelius (10:23). A further problem later arose concerning the circumcision of the Gentiles, that is whether they had to identify themselves with the Jewish nation before becoming Christians and whether Jewish ceremonial customs still applied. ⁸ It was particularly the Council at Jerusalem which obtained for the Gentile Christians their freedom and which gave an openness for the unhindered proclamation of the gospel among them. Acts is a recounting of the history of the early church from the point of view of showing how the preaching of the gospel was so successful that the Lord even opened up the way for Paul to be His witness in Rome, the heart of the Empire. This preaching is specifically focussed on the event of the resurrection and presupposes it (cf. Acts 2:24ff., 3:15f., 5:31f., 10:40ff., 13:40ff., 17:31). Thus the world-wide mission of the church is built on the fact of the resurrection and the enablement of the power of the Holy Spirit.

⁷ Is this fully true? Even after Caesarea Philippi? E.g. Matthew 19:1-2, 20:29, Luke 9:51-19:48.

⁸ This interpretation of Acts 15 goes with a South Galatian hypothesis. A North Galatian hypothesis (e.g. Machen, *Origin of Paul's Religion*) might require another viewpoint.

5. CONCLUSION

The goal of the mission of the church is in preparation for the coming of Christ. It is not until the gospel has been preached throughout the whole world that the end will come (Matthew 24:14), for in heaven there will be those from all nations, tribes, peoples and tongues (Rev. 5:9, 7:9). God's purpose is to gather all things under the dominion of Christ (Ephesians 1:10). The barrier between Jew and Gentile has been broken down and both are being reconciled in one body through the cross (Ephesians 2:14-16). The task of calling in the elect of God, of beseeching men to be reconciled to God, has therefore not yet finished (2 Corinthians 5:18-20). God has clearly revealed His will. In praying that the Lord of the harvest might send labourers into the harvest field to gather up His sheep (Luke 10:2) every Christian should be praying for himself to find out where he fits in the ingathering of God's people. The world-wide mission is to proclaim the Lordship of Christ, that He is the One to whom all men will have to give an answer (Acts 17:30-31). But how can they believe unless someone should bring the glad tidings? And how can someone preach to them unless sent by the Holy Spirit (Romans 10:14-15)? Oh for more men today with a heart like Paul, to name Christ where He has not yet been named (Romans 15:20), who desire to take the gospel to those who are in dire need (Romans 1:15), and whose hearts are so full of compassion that they are willing even to give of themselves (1 Thessalonians 2:7-8).⁹

⁹ Very fine paper. Don't know why I bother to teach this stuff (Prof. Conn).