

A Time of Prayer: Consider

March 2024 Edition

CONSIDER: MISSION IN THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW¹

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.' (Matthew 28:16-20, NRSVA)


In his in-depth analysis of the theme of Christian mission in Matthew's gospel and related biblical scholarship, David J. Bosch highlights four pillars which he views as unique to Matthew's interpretation. Bosch argues that we cannot fully appreciate the "Great Commission" (28:16-20) without understanding these foundations.

Matthew's outlook on mission is rooted in and inspired by historical context.²

Bosch agrees with most contemporary scholars that the author of the first gospel was a member of the Jewish Christian community which had left Judea just before the Jewish war and likely settled in Syria, a predominantly Gentile environment. Although aware of the expansion of faith in Christ to Gentile areas beyond its region, this community continued to understand itself as a renewal movement within Judaism. But Matthew's gospel was probably written on the cusp of a final and absolute break with the synagogue in AD 85 and the community faced a crisis of unprecedented magnitude as regards its self-understanding. Matthew hence wants his community no longer to view itself as a sectarian movement, but, rather, consciously as Christ's church, and therefore as the true Israel. Indeed, his is the only gospel that uses the word *ekklesia* or "church" and Matthew has Jesus use it twice in his public ministry (16:18 and 18:17). Moreover, Matthew uses more explicit references and allusions to the Old Testament than any other evangelist, applying the label of fulfillment to practically every dimension of Jesus' life. This approach is not simply a technique to counter rabbinic claims that Jewish Christian communities were heretical, however, but deeply pastoral and missionary – *pastoral* in that he wishes to convey self-confidence to a community facing a crisis of identity; *missionary*, in that he wishes to embolden the community members toward seeing opportunities for witness and service around them. Although there is an apparent tension in Matthew's gospel between how Jesus articulates his mission's focus on the people of Israel on the one hand, and Gentiles' receptivity to Jesus' message and his deeds among them on the other, Matthew nevertheless

¹ Excerpts from: Bosch, David J. "Matthew: Mission as Disciple-Making" in *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991. The summaries provided are largely abridged versions of the arguments presented by Bosch in the pages indicated for each section. For ease of reading, his words are presented as prose rather than separated into direct quotations.

² David J. Bosch, "Matthew: Mission as Disciple-Making," 58-61.



nourishes universalism and skillfully conditions his reader toward a mission to the Gentiles. All restrictions are explicitly lifted in Matthew's Great Commission to make disciples of **all** nations.

Matthew's notion of mission holds (a) the closeness of Jesus to his disciples and (b) Jesus' lordship in creative tension by pointing to the incarnation as an ongoing reality.³


Matthew's gospel depicts a "low Christology" or a portrait of Jesus which emphasizes his humanity and his closeness to his disciples, who are like students with their rabbi. At the same time, however, Matthew leaves no doubt that Jesus is the Lord to be worshipped (in fact, Matthew uses the term *proskynein* or "to worship" or "to fall prostrate" some thirteen times, compared to twice in each Mark and Luke). This juxtaposition is evident in how Matthew sets the scene in concluding his gospel with the Great Commission. Unlike the closing scene in the longer ending of Mark or in Luke, in Matthew's account the risen Christ is not the One who has ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God, and who will one day return (cf Acts 1:11), but the One who remains with his disciples always, until the end of the age. Jesus is Immanuel, God with us (1:23). By bookending his gospel with this consistent message, Matthew stresses that it is one he wants his readers to retain. At the same time, however, Matthew's Great Commission is an announcement that Jesus' universal authority is already established beyond any dispute. Given this reality and hearing the solemn challenge to "make disciples", believers can do only one thing: help others to acknowledge Jesus' loving lordship. Indeed, mission is the logical consequence of Jesus' induction as sovereign Lord of the universe. In light of this, the Great Commission enunciates an empowerment rather than a command. It is a creative statement in the manner of Genesis 1:3, "Let there be..." Moreover, through this creative tension of Jesus' proximity and Jesus' lordship, Matthew's gospel underscores the ongoing reality of the incarnation. As Bosch puts it: "The experience of the presence of Christ is so overpowering that it embraces the future. Today's reality remains permanently valid...since the incarnation continues in the disciples' self-giving service to the world."

Matthew emphasizes the crucial importance of "right practice" (or orthopraxis) in a faithful pursuit of Christian mission.⁴

The Great Commission does not call on the disciples to "preach" but rather "teach". In fact, it is interesting that whereas in his gospel Mark uses the words "proclaim" (*kerysso*) and "teach" (*didasko*) interchangeably, Matthew always carefully distinguishes between the two activities. In Matthew, "preaching" or "proclaiming" is always directed to outside audiences, whereas Jesus always "teaches" his disciples. For Bosch, this extremely precise use of vocabulary underscores that for Matthew teaching is by no means a merely intellectual enterprise (as it often is for us and was for the ancient Greeks). Jesus' teaching is an appeal to his listeners' will, not primarily their intellect; it is a call for a concrete decision to follow him and to submit to God's will as revealed in his ministry and teaching. Matthew highlights the importance of God's

³ David J. Bosch, "Matthew: Mission as Disciple-Making," 78-81.

⁴ David J. Bosch, "Matthew: Mission as Disciple-Making," 66-69.



will for Jesus and the disciples more than any other evangelist. And of course, in Matthew's gospel Jesus' teaching about God's will features prominently, both in terms of its centrality within his book, as well as in his beautiful shaping of the teachings, including the Lord's Prayer which calls for God's will to be done. They are contained in five major sermons or discourses on the topics of discipleship (chapters 5-7); the apostolic mission (chapter 10), how the reign of God comes (chapter 13), church discipline (chapter 18), and false teachers and the end (chapters 23-25). Bosch argues, however, Jesus' command to teach all nations to observe "all that I have commanded you" refers most specifically to the Sermon on the Mount which expresses, like no other New Testament passage, the essence of the ethics of Jesus. Moreover, Matthew's gospel makes it clear that authentic disciples of Jesus are called to "bear fruit" (indeed the first half of his gospel could be captioned "the deeds of Jesus") whereas "Matthew's understanding of sin or failure, or more specifically Matthean, *hypocrisy*, reveals that it means the absence of good deeds, of fruit, even if one might have the right words. Right practice (orthopraxis) thus becomes the measure of right belief (orthodoxy). Indeed, Bosch boils it down like this: "love of neighbor may be regarded as the litmus test for love of God." With respect to mission, then, he argues that it is unjustifiable to regard the Great Commission as being concerned primarily with "evangelism" and the "Great Commandment" (Mt 22:37-40) as referring to "social involvement." The two are inextricably bound together in Matthew's gospel and it is impossible to "make disciples" without teaching them how to live according to the model that Jesus provided in his words and deeds, teaching which the evangelist has recorded in more detail than any other.

Matthew positions mission as central to Christian identity.⁵

Matthew's own community was one in transition, living on a frontier among peoples who were either hostile to or bewildered by their Christian faith and experiencing challenges in defining their own identity. And in the Great Commission Matthew explicitly acknowledges that while the first disciples all worshipped Jesus, "some doubted" or "hesitated." Matthew wanted to reassure his readers that mission never takes place in self-confidence but in the knowledge of our weaknesses, in the dialectical tension between worship and doubt, between faith and fear. Nevertheless, Matthew's gospel is known as "the gospel of the church" for very good reason as it emphasizes like no other the centrality of missionary discipleship to Christian identity. The Greek verb *matheteuein*, "to make disciples" occurs only four times in the New Testament, three of which are in Matthew's gospel (13:52, 27:57, 28:19). While for Matthew "making disciples" is not simply a call to expand the church's size but a "costly discipleship" in which Christians strive to obey God's will as revealed through Jesus, in his view Christians find their true identity when they are involved in mission, in communicating to others a new way of life, a new interpretation of reality and of God, and in committing themselves to the liberation and salvation of others. A missionary community is one that understands itself as being both different from and committed to its environment; it exists within its context in a way which is both appealing and challenging.

⁵ David J. Bosch, "Matthew: Mission as Disciple-Making," 73-83.