Introducing World Missions
Chapter 3

3

Encountering Mission in the Gospels

Introduction

Proverbs 13:12 reads, "Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life." Hope in a messiah was generated by the promise that God gave immediately after the fall of Adam and Eve. After thousands of years of waiting, God's people are finally to realize that hope. Their sick hearts are about to become trees of life.

In the New Testament the One promised long ago by God comes in the person of Jesus. "Sending" was an important element in the Old Testament picture of mission. It is even more clearly central in the New Testament. God sent Jesus (John 20:21). In turn, Jesus returns to God and sends the Spirit to his followers (John 15:26; 16:7). In the power of the Spirit they are sent by Jesus into the world to proclaim God's kingdom and call people to glorify the King of kings through a worshipful lifestyle (John 20:21–22; Acts 1:8). This truly is good news for all people.

As a collection of documents telling the story of Jesus, the Gospels do not contain a systematic theology of mission. However, "The New Testament is a missionary book in address, content, spirit and design. . . . The New Testament is theology in motion more than theology in reason and concept. It *is* 'missionary theology'" (Peters 1972, 131 [emphasis ours]).

In this chapter and the next we explore the rest of the divine drama in three acts. In act 5, Jesus saves a people. In act 6, the church is established. Finally, in act 7, all is consummated and the curtain is drawn on mission.

Act 5: Saving a People: Jesus the Messiah

In this act, seen through the Gospels, God at last answers the hopes that the prophets had planted, nurtured, and stirred in his people. However, the fulfillment of their hopes comes in an unexpected way. Jesus did not come as a conquering king ready to take over Rome. Rather, he came as a humble teacher prepared to die on behalf of his people.

Each of the four Gospels was written with a specific purpose in mind. These various perspectives reflect each author's view of Christ's purpose and are in turn reflected in the different versions of the missionary commission of Christ found in the Gospel accounts.

Matthew

Matthew splits the story of God's history of salvation into four missional epochs or time periods (Harvey 1998b, 122): (1) the prophets proclaiming the promise of Jesus, (2) Jesus' own redemptive mission fulfilling the promise of the prophets, (3) the commissioning of the disciples to make disciples of all nations, and (4) the angelic mission at the return of Christ to separate the righteous from the unrighteous.

Today, the church stands in Matthew's third epoch, and three passages in his Gospel stand out as exemplars of that epoch: 9:35–38; 24:14; 28:16–20.

> Matthew 9:35–38
>
> Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field." (Matt. 9:35–38)

In this first exemplar text, Jesus' compassion on those separated from God and his urge to see them rescued are clearly seen. Also obvious is an intimate connection between "preaching the good news of the kingdom" and "healing every disease and sickness" (cf. 4:23). Jesus' sense of compassion for the people comes as a result of his ministry among them of preaching,

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Jesus' work as portrayed by Matthew includes teaching in the synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing people. It is by these that the "harassed and helpless" are harvested. Jesus' healings include expulsion of demons, as seen in the story of the healing of the mute demoniac (9:32–34) told immediately before the report of Jesus' ministry and his charge to his disciples. People feel swallowed up by sin and by the hurts of life. Jesus calls his followers to release and heal them.

> *From my many years' experience I can unhesitatingly say that the cross bears those who bear the cross.*
>
> Sadhu Sundar Singh
> (Harrison 1967, 49)

The Christian's part in the drama is not simply to watch Jesus from the audience. He commands the disciples to petition God to send out laborers into the harvest. Then, as now, the laborers are few, while the crop to be harvested is huge. The source of the problem is not that the crop is huge, but that harvesters are lacking. Jesus not only commands the disciples to pray that God would raise up more harvesters, but also sends them out to show how serious he is (10:1–23). They themselves are an answer to the prayer that they are commanded to pray.

Christ's command has an urgency not usually captured in today's translations. First, the harvest often was a metaphor for the end times, and every farmer knew the importance of getting a harvest in once it

was ready. Second, the Greek word translated as "send out" means to thrust violently (it is also used for expelling demons from people). A farmer who hired laborers to harvest the crop, knowing the importance of gathering in the harvest before it rots, might not be gentle in getting lackadaisical workers out into the field.

The fact that two thousand years have intervened since this event took place does not lessen the urgency. Today's Christians are still to pray that God would "expel" laborers—and be ready to be sent themselves.

MATTHEW 24:14

> And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come. (Matt. 24:14)

This second exemplar text expresses the scope of the gospel. Today, the influence of religious pluralism has resulted in calls from many to curtail Christian evangelistic activities. "Since all religions ultimately are expressing the same truth," many people reason, "why go and antagonize people by telling them that their religion is false?" In sharp contrast, the statement of Jesus stands as a beacon to those who follow him: Christians must preach the good news of Jesus to the whole world. No other option is available for those who claim to follow Christ.

Jesus' statement intimately links Christians reaching all nations with his return. Theologian George Ladd explains the core issues in preaching about Jesus among all people as a central theme in God's view of contemporary history:

> The ultimate meaning of history between the Ascension of our Lord and His return in glory is found in the extension and working of the Gospel in the world. . . . The divine purpose in the nineteen hundred years since our Lord lived on earth is found in the history of the Gospel of the Kingdom. The thread of meaning is woven into the missionary program of the Church. (Ladd 1974, 133)

How does the church know when it has accomplished what Jesus expects? What does he mean by saying that the gospel will be preached as a testimony to "all nations"?

The Greek words translated as "all nations" have a variety of possible interpretations. The one typically used in mission over the past thirty years among evangelical missionaries is "people groups." This orientation has given rise to the current "Adopt-A-People" campaign and has guided most evangelical missionary strategy during that time. We explore this further in sidebar 3.1.

MATTHEW 28:16–20

> Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go 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 I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matt. 28:16–20)

The third exemplar text is Matthew's report of the Great Commission. In mission circles this certainly is the most widely used version of Jesus' commission to his followers (cf. Mark 16:14–18; Luke 24:36–49; John 20:19–23), and it merits close attention.

Before discussing the passage itself, we should point out that the church by and large did not use it as a motivation for mission prior to 1792, when William Carey published *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens*. In this booklet Carey laid the foundation for contemporary mission societies. His ideas were so influential that many call him the "father of modern Protestant missions," even though Protestant missions (and mission societies) had been founded long before his work was published (as we will see in chapter 7).

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SIDEBAR 3.1
THE MEANING OF "ALL NATIONS"

In recent years proponents of church growth have advocated that the evangelical church generally has misunderstood "all nations" in a modern sense rather than grasping the original one (see, e.g., McGavran 1970, 62). This assumption is in the background of mission strategizing today, and uncovering it is critical to understanding current mission strategies and interests. For the most thorough explanation and defense of this idea, see John Piper's *Let the Nations Be Glad!* (1993, 167–218).

Essentially, the term used by Jesus has a range of possible meanings. The main options include:

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The great Reformers in Europe had largely understood this passage to be limited to the twelve apostles (Bosch 1983, 218; Culver 1984, ix–xvi). It was Carey's thinking on the Great Commission, made concrete by his visionary work, that launched what eventually became today's missionary societies and agencies.

The first distinction of Matthew's version of the Great Commission is the fact that all authority has been given to Jesus. *All* is a key word in this passage, being used four times: Jesus has been given *all* authority; the disciples must go to *all* the nations; the disciples must teach them to obey *all* things; Jesus is with the disciples *all* the days (for discussion, see Bosch 1983, 229).

First, Jesus has all authority in heaven over angels, demons, Satan, and any rulers and authorities in heavenly places. He also

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1. *All the non-Jews*, which would be momentous for the early disciples. That salvation was for all was a new concept for them, extending into Acts and brought to a head at the Jerusalem council (Acts 15).
2. *Nation-states* as they were understood at the time of the writing of the New Testament. Essentially, they were somewhat fluid geographic spheres of influence rather than the sharply bounded political states of today.
3. *Ethnic groups* (the Greek word translated "nations" is *ethnē*). The primary idea is that of ethnic (or ethnolinguistic) groups, and all the "nations" refers to all the ethnolinguistic groups in the world.
4. *The whole of humanity in a general sense*. Advocates of this view say that to force the text to undergird a sociological "people group" strategy to fulfill the Great Commission is to take it beyond its intended meaning (see Verkuyl 1978, 106; Carson 1984, 596; Bosch 1983, 235–40).

REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Discuss how understanding the Great Commission through each of these options would impact the mission of the church.
2. How does one choose from among the options?
3. Which option do you think is the appropriate interpretation? Why?

SIDEBAR 3.2
DOES DISCIPLESHIP INCLUDE JUSTICE?

Through much of the twentieth century evangelicals tended to think of discipleship in terms of personal piety and evangelistic zeal. South African missiologist David Bosch, in agreement with this, writes that the core of what Jesus taught is summarized in the command to love God and people (Matt. 19:16–26). However, he interprets this in a way that challenges our thinking. "But Jesus radicalizes these commandments in a specific direction: To love one's neighbors means to have compassion on them . . . and to see that justice is done" (Bosch 1983, 234). Bosch proposes, "To become a disciple is to be incorporated into God's new community through baptism *and to side with the poor and the oppressed.* To put it differently, it is to love God and our neighbor" (Bosch 1983, 235 [emphasis ours]).

REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Do you agree with Bosch? Why or why not? Support your position by drawing on Scripture and theological reflection.
2. If Bosch is right, what are the implications for Christian mission?

has all authority on earth over kings, rulers, leaders, and all people. This gives him the divine right, as ruler over all, to give all Christians their marching orders.

His use of *therefore* shows the connection between the authority and the order. In this is seen the "dawning of the new age of messianic authority" (Carson 1984, 595). The risen Jesus is completely qualified to give orders. He can impel (or expel, as we saw in Matt. 9:35–38) his disciples into the harvest fields.

Despite the impression often given in the English translations of the New Testament, the foundational command of Matthew's Great Commission is not "go" but "make disciples." A legitimate question to ask is, What is a disciple? In the Bible the central idea of discipling is that of learning in the context of a relationship. Throughout the New Testament discipleship always involves attachment to a person, and most often that person was Jesus. In its most technical sense it is applied to the twelve apostles (Matt. 10:1). More broadly it is used of those who follow him during his earthly ministry (John 6:60–66) and of Christians in general (Acts 14:28; 15:10, 19).

In terms that make the best sense of Jesus' Commission, disciples are people who have a deep, abiding commitment to a person (Christ), not simply a philosophy. They hold to Jesus' teaching (John 8:31–32); they love one another (John 13:35) and help each other (Matt. 10:42); they bear fruit for Christ (John 15:8) and are partners with him in service (Luke 5:1–11). All of these, when done in godly fashion, are acts of worship that glorify God the creator.

Disciples are the family of Jesus (Matt. 12:46–50), putting him ahead of all other earthly commitments (Matt. 8:21–22; Luke 14:26–27) to the extent that they are willing to suffer for the sake of the gospel (Matt. 10:17–23). Michael Wilkins clearly expresses what discipleship involves:

> Jesus declared that to be a disciple is to become like the master (Matt. 10:24–25; Luke 6:40). Becoming like Jesus includes going out with the same message, ministry, and compassion (Matt. 10:5ff.), practicing the same religious and social traditions (Matt. 12:1–8; Mark 2:18–22), belonging to the same family of obedience (Matt. 12:46–49), exercising the same servanthood (Matt. 20:26–28; Mark 10:42–45; John 13:12–17), experiencing the same suffering (Matt. 10:16–25; Mark 10:38–39), and being sent in the same way to the same world (John 20:21). (Wilkins 2000)

From a missionary perspective, an intriguing element of making disciples of all nations is the implied demand of crossing cultures and discipling those who are different from us. We will return to the implications of this in later chapters.

Three auxiliary or attendant activities are attached to the command to make disciples: going, baptizing, and teaching to obey. "Going" sometimes is seen as a command, with some justification (see Carson 1984, 595; Bosch 1983, 229–30; O'Brien 1976, 72–73; Culver 1984, 150–52). Even if "going" is not technically a command, Christians certainly are not simply to sit and wait for people to come to them. A natural part of making disciples is going to new places where there are no disciples. This is an overt shift from what the disciples thought about letting the nations come to Israel and learn of God. Today, there can be no doubt that Christians are to take the

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> *Sent by the one who has all authority, who enables them to overcome any obstacle, and who is always present with them, Jesus' followers are to make disciples of all the nations, disciples who are obedient in carrying out the task entrusted to them.*
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Having gone (in the specific use of Matthew's Great Commission), those who are sent use, as the means of making disciples, baptizing and teaching to obey. But do not think that these two are the only elements of discipleship, for the grammar will not sustain this (see sidebar 3.2). Though these are not the sole means, they do characterize the discipleship process (Carson 1984, 597).

The basic thrust in baptizing is to initiate people into the Christian faith. Although Matthew's formula is Trinitarian, all of the baptisms in Acts are performed only in Jesus' name. Matthew's intention through Jesus' words is not to set a rigid rule for the means of baptism (such rules too easily move toward legalism), but to ground the need for baptism as the appropriate Christian ritual that embodies repentance from sin and entrance into allegiance to Christ.

Finally, making disciples includes teaching them to obey all the things that Jesus commanded. Don Williams comments,

> And what is it that Jesus commands? In sum, in the context of Matthew, it is to preach the gospel of the kingdom, cast out demons, and heal the sick. To be a disciple of Jesus is to bear his message and continue his ministry. Nothing less will do. (Williams 1989, 131)

These commands are universal, applying to all cultures and times. They were relevant to the first disciples, they remain relevant today, and they will be relevant until Christ returns.

Christians are not simply to teach, but to teach to obey. Memorizing Scripture and being able to argue the finer points of

theology are not enough. Christ's followers must obey what they know and teach others to do the same. The form of this command sets in motion a generational effect. Every generation of disciples has the holy obligation to teach the next generation to obey the teachings of Jesus.

Finally, Jesus attaches the promise of being with his disciples to the end of the age. The original, translated literally, says, "I will be with you the whole of every day" (Moule 1959, 34). He is with his followers to protect them, encourage them, and watch them as they engage in the process of discipling others.

Mark

Mark's Gospel is perhaps the least Gentile-focused of the four (see discussion in Köstenberger and O'Brien 2001). However, the contributions he brings to the divine drama of mission are the realities of discipleship failure together with persecution and suffering.

Suffering is interwoven throughout Mark's Gospel (e.g., 8:31, 34; 9:49; 13:9–13; 14:36). He vividly portrays the fact that mission takes place in a hostile world (Williams 1998, 137). It is in this light that the passion and death of Jesus give meaning to all the other traditions about him—his death is an "enacted rite of salvation" (Dyrness 1983, 139). That it was a Gentile who acknowledges Jesus as the Son of God (15:39) shows that the ransom Jesus paid for many (10:45) was acknowledged by them and that his death and the preaching of the good news in the whole world belong together (Hahn 1965, 118).

Although the version of the Great Commission commonly noted in Mark (16:14–18) is not found in the oldest manuscripts, it is congruent with the character of the rest of Mark's Gospel. In it the focus is on Jesus' power over those that are hostile toward God as a vehicle for preaching the good news to all creation (or all the nations [13:10]).

That power, however, does not mean that mission will go forth without suffering, as Joel Williams notes:

> In our own time the mission of the church is presented on occasion in triumphant terms, in which Christian soldiers march ever onward and God's kingdom swiftly spreads from shore to shore. . . . The teaching of Mark's gospel on mission can serve as a corrective to an unrealistic optimism. The witness of believers may occur in a world that is indifferent or even openly hostile, and the proclamation of the gospel may take place in the context of difficulty and persecution. Instead of offering more effective or successful methods, Mark points to the way of the cross, the path of self-sacrifice and humble service. (Williams 1998, 150)

Another crucial facet of Mark's Gospel account is that he vividly illuminates the persistent failures of the disciples: "Jesus' disciples, far from being a potent missionary force during Jesus' earthly ministry, are consistently shown to fail in their efforts to understand the true nature of Jesus' identity, the meaning of the cross and the thrust of his mission" (Köstenberger and O'Brien 2001, 86).

There is good news, however: even though the disciples struggle and fail to consistently recognize Jesus for who he is, he still drafts them into full partnership with him (Köstenberger and O'Brien 2001, 83). Perhaps this theme reflects Mark's feelings about his own failure as a missionary (see Acts 15:37–38).

p.46

Whether or not this is true, it expresses the truth that God does continue to use failures to accomplish his purposes. This message of discipleship failure, then, is one of encouragement. If God could use people who time and again failed to understand and believe Jesus to turn the world upside down, then there is hope that God can use you and me. Our role in the divine drama of mission does not end with a single failure or even a series of failures, for God is bigger than our failures and can use them for his purposes. This is truly good news for missionaries.

Luke

In Luke's carefully researched account Jesus fulfills the Old Testament promises and offers salvation to the lowly (Dyrness 1983, 150). Together with Acts, the Gospel of Luke provides the most clearly delineated picture of mission in the Bible (Köstenberger and O'Brien 2001, 111). The fact that Luke's Gospel was written to Theophilus (a Greek name) is an indication of Luke's personal commitment to going beyond the house of Israel and bringing Christ to the nations.

In Luke, Jesus is not only the sent one, but also the sender of others. This is clearly portrayed in two key passages: Luke 4:18–19 and 24:46–48.

JESUS THE SENT ONE

> The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (Luke 4:18–19)

Possibly the most discussed passage in Luke in contemporary mission is Jesus'

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Whether or not this is true, it expresses the truth that God does continue to use failures to accomplish his purposes. This message of discipleship failure, then, is one of encouragement. If God could use people who time and again failed to understand and believe Jesus to turn the world upside down, then there is hope that God can use you and me. Our role in the divine drama of mission does not end with a single failure or even a series of failures, for God is bigger than our failures and can use them for his purposes. This is truly good news for missionaries.

Luke

In Luke's carefully researched account Jesus fulfills the Old Testament promises and offers salvation to the lowly (Dyrness 1983, 150). Together with Acts, the Gospel of Luke provides the most clearly delineated picture of mission in the Bible (Köstenberger and O'Brien 2001, 111). The fact that Luke's Gospel was written to Theophilus (a Greek name) is an indication of Luke's personal commitment to going beyond the house of Israel and bringing Christ to the nations.

In Luke, Jesus is not only the sent one, but also the sender of others. This is clearly portrayed in two key passages: Luke 4:18–19 and 24:46–48.

> Jesus the Sent One
>
> The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (Luke 4:18–19)

Possibly the most discussed passage in Luke in contemporary mission is Jesus' disclosure of his task as the sent one in 4:18–19. Central to Jesus' understanding is that it is the Spirit on him and anointing him to carry out his mission. Thus, mission comes out of the anointing and sending of the Spirit, not our own initiative.

Jesus' use of words from the Book of Isaiah in this declaration incorporates four infinitives to mark the nature of what he was sent to do: *to preach* good news to the poor, *to proclaim* freedom to the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, *to release* the oppressed, and *to proclaim* the year of God's favor. That three of the four are related to preaching is an indication of the thrust of the means of Jesus accomplishing his mission, and yet, "For Luke the spiritual is primary, yet the liberation it brings is holistic" (Larkin 1998, 160).

First, Jesus was sent to preach good news to the poor, "the people who are most in need of divine help and who wait upon God to hear his word" (Marshall 1978, 183). Most contemporary scholars limit discussion to those who are in a state of economic destitution (see Green 1994, 60–65), but in the context of Isaiah the reference is to "the eschatological community, the suffering exiles or faithful in Israel who have been spiritually oppressed" (Köstenberger and O'Brien 2001, 117).

Second, Jesus was sent to proclaim freedom to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind. Is this freedom physical, sociopolitical (political, economic, and social liberation), spiritual (release from sin, demons), or in some sense all three? "Prisoners" are literally captives of war (see Luke 21:24). In favor of not limiting the interpretation to the literal is that the audience to whom Jesus declared Isaiah's prophecy to be fulfilled were not themselves in captivity. The term is also

used in the New Testament as a metaphor for being dominated (e.g., by the power of sin in Rom. 7:23, and by Christ in Eph. 4:8). Luke nowhere presents a literal war captive being freed by Jesus. Thus, Jesus' intention most likely was metaphorical, and the liberation envisioned is freeing "people who were captives to guilt (see 7:41–50), to the crushing and bruising power of Satan (see 8:26–39), to the love of money (e.g., 19:1–10) and so forth" (Gooding 1987, 82).

Jesus' proclaiming work also included recovery of sight to the blind, a miracle he literally accomplished (Luke 7:21–22; 18:35–43). This also figuratively means to forgive, and Luke later recorded that Jesus commissioned Paul to open the eyes of Gentiles so that they would receive forgiveness (Acts 26:15–18; see Gooding 1987, 82–83), so it is not limited to the physical recovery of sight (Marshall 1978, 184).

Third, Jesus was sent to release the oppressed. Since the poor, the captives, and the blind are all in the category of the oppressed, this does not add new meaning to the message, but encapsulates the emphasis of the whole. Luke 7:22–23 cites several ways that Jesus actually fulfilled this mission (Liefeld 1984, 867).

Fourth, Jesus was sent to proclaim the year of God's favor. Release has come today in the person of Jesus. It is not limited to the end times, though the final outworking of the "Year of Jubilee" (see Lev. 25:13) will come then.

Isaiah's original statement also declared that the sent one would proclaim "the day of vengeance of our God," which Jesus omits in his recitation. The omission was startling to his audience, for the Jews familiar with this passage expected not only their own release, but also the destruction of their enemies. Contemporaries of Jesus promised a Jubilee (an economic event in which all debts were forgiven) as a rallying cry to call people to the day of God's vengeance, which was to be exacted by overthrowing the occupying powers (Larkin 1998, 161).

By omitting the reference to God's vengeance, however, Jesus indicates that his Jubilee Year focuses on reconciliation rather than revenge, and this reconciliation is extended even to God's enemies (Bosch 1991, 110–11).

JESUS THE SENDING ONE

Luke portrays Jesus not only as the sent one, but also as the sending one. During his earthly ministry he sent the disciples out twice to the house of Israel (9:1–6; 10:1–16). The symbolic nature of sending out seventy disciples should not be overlooked. In Jewish tradition humankind was thought to encompass seventy nations and seventy languages in the world, and "the sending of the seventy emissaries is an implicit claim that Jesus' message must be heard not only by Israel but by all men" (Ladd 1974, 114; see also Liefeld 1984, 940). After his death and resurrection, Jesus, in Luke's version of the Great Commission, tells the disciples that they will be his witnesses to the whole world (see Larkin 1998, 165):

> He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. (Luke 24:46–48)

In contrast to Matthew, Luke presents Jesus' commission as a statement of fact and promise rather than a command. It sets forth "in a nutshell, Luke's entire understanding of Christian mission" (Bosch 1991, 91). At least six elements are included: (1) Jesus' life, death, and resurrection come to fulfill Scripture so that (2) the message of forgiveness and repentance will be preached (3) to all nations, (4) beginning in Jerusalem; (5) and the disciples themselves will become Jesus' witnesses (6) after they receive the promised power from God. This whole framework resurfaces in Acts 1:8, which outlines the book that serves as the sequel to Luke (Bosch 1991, 91).

Luke shows why Jesus was sent. He also shows the connection between Jesus' sending and ours. Christians are now the sent ones, with the explicit obligation to be witnesses to the life, death, and resurrection of Christ and to the need for repentance and the possibility of forgiveness of sin. This message is to go to all nations in God's power. That, for Luke, is Christian mission.

John

In John's Gospel God is the center of mission; it is he who so loved the world that he sent his unique son (3:16). Some argue that the book itself is primarily an evangelistic treatise (Erdmann 1998, 206–8). If so, it certainly follows that there would be a strong mission theme in the Fourth Gospel.

While God is the center of mission, Jesus is the focus of mission (Köstenberger and O'Brien 2001, 203). He is the sent one—the unique one who shares deity with God (1:1), came from the Father (1:18), does what he was sent to do (5:36) and thus glorifies God (1:14; 13:31–32), returns to the father (13:1), and now sends those who follow him to continue his work (20:21).

In John's Gospel the mission of Jesus' followers is seen only through the lens of

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In John's Gospel the mission of Jesus' followers is seen only through the lens of his mission. John's version of the commission thus is founded on a striking parallel: as Jesus was sent, so he sends us (20:21; cf. 17:18).

John Stott notes, "If then, we are to understand the nature of the church's mission, we have to understand the nature of the Son's!" (Stott 1975a, 68). What, then, was Jesus sent to do?

John's Gospel is rich in the vocabulary of *send*—the term and its derivatives appear almost sixty times in twenty chapters. A quick look at the passages shows that John's perspective on why Jesus was sent is clear: to save the world (3:17); to do God's will (4:34); to finish God's work (5:36; 9:4), which includes believing in the one whom God sent (6:29); to work for the honor of the one who sent him (7:18); to tell what he heard from God to the whole world (8:26; 12:47–50) and in that way make God known to the world (17:25–26).

In his prayer for the disciples Jesus notes that because they believed the words he brought, they knew that God indeed had sent him (17:8). In that sense, Jesus sends the disciples out as he was sent. Their task is also clear: to make God known to the world in the same way Jesus did, glorifying God and telling the world what they learned through the one who sent them. That remains our task today.

Conclusion

In all four Gospels, then, the themes of the sending of Jesus and his subsequent sending of Christians are clear. Today's world is filled with pain. That pain finds its ultimate source in our sin and separation from God, as a species and as individuals. Jesus was sent to effect reconciliation between God and humanity, offering hope

CASE STUDY: LILY LIU'S BAPTISM

James Chuang
(Hiebert and Hiebert 1987, 152–54 [used with permission])

"What do they know about baptism? How can I bend God's command in order to please them?" Reverend Smith asked himself. As a young missionary to Taiwan, he had been looking forward to his first baptism in the small Baptist church outside Taipei when Lily's parents had come to his home, furious and demanding that he not baptize their daughter, Lily, the next day.

Reverend Smith thought back to what he knew of the bright young woman. Lily had grown up in a Buddhist home, seeing idols and smelling incense all her life. She first heard of Christianity from the Smiths when they moved in next door. They soon became friends. Not only Lily but also her entire family welcomed the new neighbors. After four years of fighting doubts and opposition, Lily made a solid decision for Christ. Her testimony was so dynamic that the youth group elected her to be their first woman president.

Mr. Liu was a faithful Buddhist who checked each evening upon his return from work to see whether the incense before the images was lit. As a bus driver, he did not want to offend his ancestors lest they cause him to have an accident. Like other bus drivers he also scattered paper money along the road when he drove over dangerous mountain roads in order to protect himself from the spirits of those who had died there in past accidents. Mrs. Liu, too, took their religion seriously. She was a loving mother who cooked, washed, cleaned, and said prayers for her children. Once she refused to allow a worker sent by the telephone company to put up a pole in front of her house because, she said, it might block the passage of her gods.

Although neither Mr. nor Mrs. Liu were Christians, they attended the church services on occasion. They also allowed Lily to participate freely in church activities. But they drew the line at baptism. Mr. Liu told Pastor Smith, "I like what you teach, but what do you think my ancestors will say if I accept your religion? They would be very upset, and how can I do anything to displease my ancestors?" He likewise refused to allow Lily to violate family tradition. Moreover, he needed her to worship his spirit after his death so that he would be cared for in his afterlife. Mrs. Liu's opposition to the baptism centered around Lily's marriage. Only two percent of Taiwan's population were Christians, and it would be much harder to find Lily a husband if she were a Christian.

Reverend Smith pondered the situation, for he knew that Lily would arrive shortly to seek his direction. Should he advise her to ignore her parents' orders? This would surely destroy the relationships he and his wife had so carefully cultivated with Mr. and Mrs. Liu and the other neighbors. Or should he suggest that she wait, thus denying her the opportunity to give a public testimony of her faith in Christ?

of eternal life through the forgiveness of sins. People receive that hope by repenting, committing themselves to Christ, and being baptized in his name. Having been forgiven, they are in turn sent to proclaim that good news to others, preaching to all the peoples of the world the opportunity to be reconciled with God through Christ. Those who respond are to glorify the King of kings through living worshipful lives—lives that are in tune with God and his will for the world. That, at the core, is the mission of the church. In the next act of the divine drama mission is enacted as the church brings the good news to a hurting world.

"Lily Liu's Baptism," the case study for this chapter, illustrates a central issue in the New Testament story of a person coming to Christ. In many parts of the world baptism is rightly seen as a watershed event. Christians recognize it as a crucial part of incorporation into the body of Christ. In areas where other religions dominate, especially Islam and Hinduism, however, it

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