QUESTIONS 9: WHERE IS MISSION IN THE BIBLE?

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Category: Observations

This has to be one of the most fundamental questions that we can ask about mission. The answer that we give is likely to depend on how exactly we define mission. Those who describe the mission in different ways will look to different biblical passages to justify their definitions, and herein lies a problem. The thing is, mission is everywhere and nowhere in the Bible. Let me start with the latter.

Mission is nowhere in the Bible because mission as a separate category simply doesn't exist in Scripture. This isn't to say that it is unbiblical, far from it. However, as MichaelÂ Stroope demonstrates in his excellent book Transcending Mission, the term mission an anglicisation of a Latin term that describes at least two Greek words and our use of it owes more to modern tradition than any careful biblical exegesis. A lot of the differences in understanding of mission are derived from this problem.

So mission is nowhere in the Bible, how come it is also everywhere?

Well, let's start at the point that many people use as the stepping off point for their definition of mission; the end of Matthew's Gospel.

> *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.â€*

This is the so-called Great Commission passage from Matthew 28. Jesus commands his followers to make disciples, baptizing them and "*teaching them to obey everything to obey everything I have commanded you".Â* In other words, this command to make disciples is predicated on everything else that Jesus taught. In other words, the Great Commission must be read in the context of the whole of Matthew's Gospel (and the other three canonical Gospels, come to that). This is where attempts to use this passage to justify the idea that missionÂ involves nothing more than evangelism run into problems. If we are to teach people to obey everything Jesus taught, then we simply cannot ignore Jesus calls to feed and clothe the stranger from Matthew 25. Social action is woven into the fabric of the Gospels and despite the efforts of some preachers and commentators, we cannot remove it.

So, if we start by saying that mission is found in the Great Commission, we cannot avoid extending our source to cover the whole of Matthew (Mark, Luke and John). However, even a cursory glance at Matthew's Gospel shows that it is imbued with allusions to the Old Testament, you cannot read and understand Matthew without getting to grips with its Old Testament background. If we have to read the Great Commission in the context of the whole of Matthew's Gospel, then we have to read the Gospel in its Old Testament context, too. You cannot simply extract a couple of verses from one of the Gospels and build a whole edifice on them, those verses have to be read in their full context and ultimately this will lead us to the whole Bible.

The international dimension of mission first appears in Genesis 12 (arguably earlier than that), not in

Matthew 28 and the Old Testament provides a clear and distinct moral and ethical framework by which the people of God are to live and to demonstrate his character to the surrounding nations. God's people "to act justly, love mercy and to walk humbly with their God". These are essential characteristics of Christian mission.

It is a feature of modern western church life that we have compartmentalised things that naturally belong together. For historical reasons, we have separated church and mission (and divided mission into home missions and foreign missions, for good measure). Based more on Englightenment views than Scripture, we distinguish between sacred (evangelism) and secular (social action) rather than seeing the Church's calling in a holistic (and biblical) light. A whole-Bible reading of mission will help us to draw together these things which man has putÂ asunder.

In a whole-Bible view, mission is never less than making disciples by bearing witness to Jesus, but it is often far more than this.