

## **The Biblical Mission of the Church in Palo Duro Presbytery Congregations: A Divine Calling**

(This study is excerpted and adapted from resources of the Center for Parish Development: *The Biblical Mission of the Church, The People Called By God, Missional Church Study Guide, and The Center Letter* (Vol. 34, No. 1.)

### **Central questions posed by this study:**

- How does the church (including your congregation) effectively address changing circumstances and lifestyles in a manner which faithfully maintains its distinctive heritage? In a secular society where the church has been pushed to the margins and its ministry often trivialized, many of our congregations are searching for their identity and purpose. What is it that the church has to offer that no other human institution can offer? *Who are we and what are we to be about?*

### **Observations which inform this study:**

- The gospel is always conveyed through the medium of culture. The ministry of the church must be contextual, creative, and responsive—culturally relevant within a specific setting—if the church is to fulfill its mission of proclaiming the life-transforming power of God’s redemptive love for all humanity.
- The modern self is the dominant construct for how people think of themselves within contemporary Western societies. Structured around citizenship, the shaping dynamics include the possession of personal rights, perpetual consumption, the development of a constructed identity, the use of efficient technique, and a search for intense experience.
- The very foundations of society have changed as we move into a “postmodern” period. Some of the characteristics are (a) globalized or consumer capitalism, (b) growing awareness of difference, (c) the rise of feeling or desire and the dethroning of reason, (d) the critical connection between power and knowledge, (e) a condition of virtual reality in which the sign begins to replace the real thing that it is to represent.
- The church is called into being and sent to participate in God’s mission in a context shaped by (a) an emerging secular spirituality, (b) the loss of national identity, (c) ethnic and cultural diversity, (d) an emphasis on the “now” which thrives on surfaces, images, and experiences.
- Our culture’s way of determining truth, defining the self, and shaping society present to the church both critical challenges and significant opportunities.

### **Introduction and background material (i.e., why are we engaging in this Bible study?):**

The church differs from other human social institutions in that it has a divine calling, a purpose which transcends its own worldly status, accomplishment, or significance. The church is called to a unique and profound vocation: to discern and participate in God’s mission (*missio Dei*): “God’s self-revelation as the One who loves the world, God’s involvement in and with the world, the nature and activity of God, which embraces both the church and the world, and in which the church is privileged to participate” (David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, p. 10). How do we know what God’s mission is? How do we identify God’s missional purposes and activity? As Christians we declare that the character of God’s mission is defined by the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, God’s beloved Son. And further, what we know of Jesus is to be found within the narratives and teachings of Scripture as discerned through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit within the

community of faith. The Holy Spirit is God's active presence in the midst of God's people who enables the witness of the biblical communities to enlighten the vision of contemporary communities. Thus the search for the meaning of *missio Dei* and the implications for the mission of the church leads to intentional communal Bible study.

One of the distinctive features of Christianity is that we have four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) which express the one gospel (the good news of God's saving work in Jesus Christ.) The witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ by each of the four evangelists was created in a concrete Christian community and was called forth to meet the needs of that community, shaped in response to the circumstances of a particular group of people in a specific historical and religious context. Embracing the variety of interpretations of the gospel can enlighten and inform our own contemporary search to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ.

Quite often when people think of the mission of the church, they quote the so-called "Great Commission" of Matthew 28.18-20: "Go therefore and make disciples...." But the exploration of the source, motivation, substance, method, and aim of the church's mission is deepened and enriched when it is recognized that there are at least four accounts of Jesus' final charge to the disciples. Along with Matthew's model of "making disciples," Mortimer Arias (*The Great Commission: Biblical Models for Evangelism*) identifies three other missional perspectives:

1. Mark's description of the commission, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation" (16.15), which involves proclamation, confrontation, and passion discipleship (service, suffering, sacrifice).
2. In Luke, the disciple community is to witness to the liberation, healing, and empowerment brought about by the death and resurrection of the Messiah: "repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations" (24.47).
3. The commission within John offers an incarnational model for mission as Jesus declares: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (John 20.21).

Each of Jesus' last "commissionings" comes in the midst of an experience with the resurrected Lord and is both grounded in as well as transforms the narrative of the life and ministry of the historical Jesus. As we consider the mission of the contemporary church, the study of these various biblical commissions must be understood within the context and content of the full Gospel of which it is the climax. For example, even the "Great Commission" from Matthew is usually quoted and interpreted out of context, with little knowledge or reference to what Matthew understands to be the nature of discipleship.

The mission of the church cannot be understood without reference to the mission of Jesus Christ. The multiplicity of the accounts of Jesus' last commissions does not mean that the church is free to construct its own in whatever way it chooses. It does mean that the church is called to interact in a profound and substantive way with the witness of the New Testament, and, open to and testing the movement of the Holy Spirit in its midst, prayerfully and courageously to take the risk to discern and express its mission within its contemporary context.

The process of this Bible study will be to consider selected passages from each gospel and in that context to interpret afresh the significance of Jesus' final commission for the mission of the church. Each of the gospels will be examined in turn over a series of four presbytery meetings.

## The Mission Theology of Matthew: Making Disciples

(Focus Scriptures: Matthew 22.34-40 and 28.16-20)

A study of the overall themes of the book of Matthew reveals an overriding concern for the life and practice of the church. Biblical scholars have concluded that Matthew's emphasis upon the church is grounded in his attempt to provide guidance to a community in crisis on how it should understand its calling and mission. The entire gospel is *educational* in character and intention. Followers of Christ are called "disciples," with the root meaning "to learn or discern." The gospel itself consists of five discourses or collections of teachings on: (1) discipleship (chs. 5-7), (2) the apostolic mission (ch. 10), (3) how the reign of God comes (ch. 13), (4) church discipline (ch. 18), (5) false teachers and the end (chs. 23-25). Thus when mission is defined in chapter 28 as "teaching them to observe all things," it relates to and must be interpreted by the substance communicated within these discourses.

Discipleship is not simply right doctrine, but right practice, the right way of doing and living and dying. The kingdom of God is not something to learn about theoretically, but involves living and producing. The theme of discipleship is central to Matthew's gospel and to Matthew's understanding of the church and its mission. The way of discipleship is the way of following Jesus and participating in his ministry. As described by Matthew, the "marks" of discipleship include a readiness to:

- suffer (10:17; 16:24ff)
- be poor (19:23ff; 6:19ff)
- be humble (18:1ff)
- love (25.31ff)
- reject worldly honor (23.7ff)
- serve (20:20ff).

Too often the so-called "Great Commission" is quoted and interpreted out of context. When the words are given a life of their own, they can too easily be reduced to a mere slogan or used as a pretext to justify an already-agreed upon agenda. Learning to be followers of Jesus Christ involves participation in a new way of life, a life which bears particular fruit: doing God's will, loving one's enemies, practicing justice, giving and receiving forgiveness, engaging in reconciliation, in sum, living out the teachings of Jesus.

To make this point, some biblical scholars believe that it might be helpful to read Matthew from the ending backwards, that is, to begin with the last commission of Matthew 28.16-20. Reading the entire Gospel from the perspective of Jesus' commissioning of the disciples reinforces Matthew's view of the church: the community of those gathered around Jesus Christ is not called to withdraw from the world into a comfortable and self-satisfied community, but is to be engaged in an intentional life of active and disciplined mission. They are to invite others into relationship with Jesus within the community of his disciples. Discipleship is not simply a matter of individual salvation, but of participation in Jesus' mission to "make disciples of all nations" (28.19).

Possible format for area meetings:

- Note the limited time frame available and ask everyone's cooperation in framing concise responses, so that as many people as desire can contribute to the discussion
- Open the study time with prayer

- Summarize as concisely as possible in your own words the *observations which inform the study* and the *introductory material*
- Distribute the question sheet and allow sufficient time for one or two persons to read the focus scriptures aloud (ask for volunteers, or read them yourself)
- Discussion time; watch out for “monopolizers” and courteously move along to others if needed
- You may need to watch the clock and allot a specific amount of time to each question; the final question is the summary question and needs to be addressed even if discussion of the other questions must be curtailed
- Close with prayer (ask for a volunteer)

### **\*Discussion Questions**

#### **The Mission Theology of Matthew: Making Disciples**

Matthew 22.34-40 and 28.16-20

1. Linking the Great Commandment with the last commission connects loving God and neighbor with making disciples. In what way does this connection inform your understanding of the church’s mission?
2. The way or method of making disciples is described in Matthew 28 in terms of baptism and teaching. If discipleship were at the heart of the teaching ministry of the church, what would change?
3. If the church were to adopt Matthew’s model of mission, what would be different in the life and practice of *your* congregation?

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