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**The Gospel Of
Matthew:
The Unfolding of
Missions**

by

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The above title suggests a number of things about the study at hand. It, first of all, indicates that the canonical gospel of Matthew is to be considered. Second, it shows that the topic of missions will be considered from the perspective of Matthew. The great debate about whether we should talk about mission (in the singular) or missions (in the plural) will not be taken up. The writer's position is that "mission" refers to everything the Church does under the authority of Christ, whereas "missions" indicates the intentional and cross-cultural making of disciples in obedience to the Great Commission. It is the latter concept that we wish to firmly establish as present throughout Matthew's gospel and the earthly ministry of Christ, but also as unfolding with an ever-increasing clarity until it is encapsulated in the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20.

Method and the Mandate

It was not unusual in the first half of the 20th Century for a missiologist to sense a need to establish that the Great Commission was not something added on to the gospels by the author at the last moment, that in fact the universality of the Gospel permeates the gospels.¹ The idea being combated was that the

¹ For example Zwemer, writing in 1942, presented chapters both on "The Universality of Jesus" (43-55), and "The Authenticity and Genuineness of the Great Commission" (57-67).

universality of the gospel was something not taught or anticipated by Jesus; or that the Great Commission was a great surprise that Jesus introduced at the last minute after the resurrection; or that the Commission (to one degree or another) was the invention of the gospel writers.

The present day discussions of the teachings of the gospels have been dominated by source, form, and redaction criticism. These approaches seek out the sources of the gospel writers' information and understanding about Jesus and his teachings. The evidence from the text, many of these scholars claim, is that the writers were not eyewitnesses but made use of previously existing sources. This is in spite of the fact that there are no extant documents confirming the existence of those sources in written form.

These areas of New Testament study are mentioned only because it must be recognized that they exist. Even missiologist and New Testament scholar David Bosch went so far as to say:

Our views are always only *interpretations* of what we consider to be divine revelation, not divine revelation itself (and these interpretations are profoundly shaped by our self-understandings). I have argued in the preceding chapters that not even the biblical books we have surveyed are, as such, records of divine revelation; they are interpretations of that revelation. (182)

Still, many, if not most, scholars in the more recent movement have seen the pervading presences of mission(s) in the New Testament. Bosch himself says of Matthew in particular, "The gospel of Matthew reflects an important and distinct sub-paradigm of the early church's interpretation and experience of mission" (56). And he further states, "Today scholars agree that the entire gospel points to these final verses [the Great Commission]: all the threads woven into the fabric of Matthew, from chapter 1 onward, draw together here" (57).

This question then remains, "Is the view of mission(s) presented in Matthew and consistently 'woven into the fabric' of the book an authentic teaching of Christ, or is it simply consistent because of the author's consistency and skill in writing?" This is essentially an unanswerable question, because, as noted above, we do not have copies of Matthew's sources.

The conjectural nature of source, form, and redaction criticism leaves us with a great deal of uncertainty. What is certain is that we have the gospels as handed down to us. These are reliable documents, with early attestation, and are finished literary works by anyone's standards. Their study does not require the exercise of these kinds of criticism. They are documents written in the language and the social and historical contexts of their times. Therefore, they can be studied and interpreted using the normal grammatical and literary rules for studying literature, taking into account the social and historical setting.

Presuppositions

In this study, the following presuppositions are recognized: (1) The use of other sources by Matthew cannot be ruled out, but his integrity in using them is assumed. (2) The differences between the various gospels in language and reporting of events and sayings are as likely due to selectivity, rather than independent interpretation or creativity on the part of Matthew or any of the other writers of the gospels. (Different eyewitnesses may emphasize certain details and omit others. Individual hearers of a message may focus on differing vocabulary because a certain word may strike home to them. Witnesses may paraphrase the same sayings in varying ways without doing violence to the original intended meanings.) (3) The essential historicity of Matthew and the other gospel accounts is, therefore, also assumed.²

² For an excellent discussion on the historicity of the gospels, see Craig L. Blomberg, "Gospels (Historical Reliability)," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992), 291-297.

Methodology

The approach to this study will be to examine the content of the gospel according to Matthew in search of evidence for the intentional, cross-cultural nature of the Gospel (its universality) that is finally and unmistakably expressed in the Great Commission. The study will not be exhaustive, but representative, focusing on the most obvious expressions. It will also note the progressive revelation of the cross-cultural nature of the Gospel, how Jesus communicated this message, and how he prepared his disciples to carry out the Great Commission.

The outline of Matthew offered by McKnight will be utilized to give some structure to the study. It consists of the following major sections:

Prologue (1:1 – 2:23)

Introduction (3:1 – 4:11)

1. The Messiah confronts Israel in His Galilean Ministry (4:12-11:1)

...

2. The Responses to the Messiah: Rejection and Acceptance from Galilee to Jerusalem (11:2 – 20:34) ...

3. The Messiah Inaugurates the Kingdom of Heaven through Rejection and Vindication: Jesus the Messiah Confronts Jerusalem (21:1 – 28:20)

(531)

The study will be based on the *New International Version of the Bible*³, and biblical quotations will be from that version unless otherwise noted.

Prologue and Introduction

(Matthew 1:1 – 4:11)

These two sections will be taken together because they deal with the background of the ministry of Christ. They, therefore, will be considered the first division of the book.

³1984, Colorado Springs, CO: International Bible Society.

Prologue

The prologue (1:1 – 2:23) consists of the genealogy of Christ; the account of the birth of Christ and the statement of the salvation he will provide (“He will save his people from their sins”); the visit of the Magi; and the flight to Egypt, with the subsequent return to Nazareth. Only the genealogy and the visit of the Magi are pertinent to our discussion.

Genealogy

The universality of the Gospel is first seen in this section in the genealogy of Christ. The genealogy makes specific reference of three Gentiles (all women) who are found in the direct lineage of Christ. A fourth woman is mentioned, namely Bathsheba, but she is identified as having been “Uriah’s wife” rather than by name. She was of Hebrew descent, but it is thought by some that she is classified here with the Gentiles due to her first marriage to a Hittite and the circumstances of her relationship with and marriage to David.⁴

While these references are facts of history and a matter of record they might have been omitted if a mission only to the Jews were understood. While Tamar (1:3) apparently lived apart from the clan part of the time (Gen 38), her sons were reared within it and eventually went to Egypt with the extended family. Rahab (1:5) and Ruth (1:5) became a part of the community of Israel in their time (see Josh 6:25 and Ruth 4:13ff respectively). If a mission only to Israel were envisioned there would be no reason to call attention to these Gentile ancestors in the genealogy.

The account of the birth of Christ and statement about the salvation from sins that he will bring to his people (1:18-25) set forth the essence of the message that will be central to the Great Commission. Goldsmith is of the opinion that “his people” reaches beyond Israel: “No longer will the ‘people’ be limited to the blood children of Abraham, to the people of Israel. Now it will be open to all who follow Jesus and know his salvation” (14). In the same vein, Carson sees “his people” as coming to

⁴It is sometimes argued that Uriah was a convert to the Hebrew religion because his names means “Yahweh is my light,” and because of his high level of loyalty and integrity. At any rate, he was not an Israelite by birth.

mean Messiah's people including Gentiles, (76) and Hagner sees a correlation between "people" (*laos*) and the later use of "church" (*ekklesia*) that includes Gentiles (19-20).⁵ This writer believes that the above is true, but that it is not an explicit teaching of the passage under consideration. However, the idea of a multiethnic "people" may be implied, and the passage is not clearly restrictive in limiting his people to the Jews (especially in the light of the preceding genealogy). The salvation from their sins of all who come to be "his people" is a concept in germinal form that is progressively clarified as revelation continues. By the time the Great Commission is given the fuller implications of this truth can be seen.

The Visit of the Magi

The visit of the Magi (2:1-12) shows God at work among these Gentiles in spite of their imperfect knowledge of him, to bring them to visit, worship, and present gifts to the King of the Jews. While their knowledge of the salvation Christ was to bring remained imperfect (at least for the time being), the responsiveness and simple obedience of the Magi is clearly recorded for us. Further, we see the providential working of God to bring Gentiles to himself, even though the ministry of Christ may seem restricted to the Jews at first glance.

Introduction

The introduction (3:1 – 4:11) is comprised of a summary of: the ministry of John the Baptist (3:1-12); the baptism of Jesus (3:13-17); and the temptation of Jesus (4:1-11).

Within Matthew there is no indication that John's ministry extended beyond the Israelite community.⁶ Nor is there a clear indication of missions in the baptism of Jesus (though we theologize and say that it was among other things an act of identification with sinners without distinguishing ethnic background).

⁵This is in full agreement with the teaching of 1Pet 2:10 where Gentile converts are told that they are now "the people of God" having received mercy.

⁶Luke may hint at a Gentile response. The soldiers who inquired as to what they were to do (Lk 3:14) were in all likelihood Gentiles.

There is a hint, however, in the temptation of Jesus that his Kingdom would extend beyond Israel. Satan offered Jesus “all the kingdoms of the world” in exchange for bowing down and worshiping him (Mt 4:8-9). Could it be that Satan somehow understood that Jesus’ mission was worldwide in its extent? Matthew will show that the mission was (and is) worldwide, but that the crown is gained by submitting to the cross.

1. The Messiah Confronts Israel in His Galilean Ministry (Matthew 4:12-11:1)

It is worthwhile noting that the book of Matthew is structured in such a way that there are alternating sections of narrative and teaching. In a sense, the material that is presented from Matthew 1:18 to 4:25 is narrative (although it has been in part called “Introduction” in this study). As we approach this division of the book, then, it is important to note that first there is a short narrative section that summarizes the early Galilean ministry of Jesus and the calling of the first disciples (4:12-25). Second, is a large didactic (teaching) section commonly called the Sermon on the Mount (4-7). Third, we find a narrative section giving more detail of Jesus’ Galilean ministry. Fourth, there is a didactic section giving Jesus’ instructions to the Twelve for their immediate mission and beyond.

Early Galilean Ministry

The Prophecy of Isaiah

Matthew cites this prophecy in 4:14-16. Of these, verse 15 is of greatest interest. The place of the Messiah’s ministry is identified as the land of Zebulun and Naphtali—Galilee of the Gentiles. Of this Filson states:

In Matt. meaning is seen in this fact; while Jesus ministers almost entirely to Jews, several such fleeting suggestions forecast that the gospel will reach the Gentiles. (73)

Blomberg further observes:

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From Isaiah's day on, many foreigners had lived in Galilee; in the first century more than half the population was Gentile. So Matthew no doubt sees here a foreshadowing of Christian ministry to those who were not Jews.... (1992b, 88)

The Calling of the First Disciples

The calling of the first disciples (4:18-22) does not define the scope of their future ministry. Rather, it is more concerned with what Jesus promises to make of them, "fishers of men" (4:19). A. B. Bruce states:

These words ...show that the great Founder of the faith desired not only to have disciples, but to have about Him men whom He might train to make disciples of others: to cast the net of divine truth into the sea of the world, and to land on the shores of the divine kingdom a great multitude of believing souls. (13)

It is important to note at this point that the disciples' ministry was to involve people, and that they were to learn how to do it from Christ. But there is more. Here we find the first evidence that Christ will share his ministry with his disciples. The future delegation of Christ's mission that will take place in the Great Commission is already obvious in what he plans to make of his disciples.

Origins of the First Crowds

Matthew 4:25 reads, "Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region beyond Jordan followed him." Filson gives us a geographical orientation.

News of this spread north throughout non-Jewish Syria; to all parts of Galilee; east to Transjordan, including Decapolis, a league of Hellenistic cities, originally ten, and all but one located east of the Sea of Galilee and the Jordan River, and south to Jerusalem and Judea. (74)

Syria and Decapolis are of particular interest to us.⁷ These were Gentile territories although there were no doubt Jews living in them. In fact, Keener points out that “The Decapolis ...was a Gentile area that included a large Jewish population” (55). Whether or not the crowds that followed Jesus had Gentiles in them is not stated. To argue the matter one way or another is to argue from silence. Therefore, the possibility of the presence of at least some Gentiles must be allowed because it cannot be disproved.

The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7)

The Sermon on the Mount⁸ is one of the most highly revered passages of the New Testament. It has the respect of both Christians and adherents to other religions. Even some Jews hold it in high regard due to its lofty ethical teachings based upon the Old Testament scriptures.

However, it has been subjected to extensive debate regarding both its present literary form and its intended application. The first question is, “Did Jesus really preach the sermon in its present form on a single occasion?” The second asks: “When, where, and how did Jesus expect the lofty ethics set forth in the Sermon to be lived out?” “Is it really for today, as it appears to be?” Bosch summarizes the present day understanding.

Today ...most scholars agree...that there is no getting around the fact that, in Matthew’s view, Jesus actually expected all his followers to live according to these norms always and under all circumstances.... (69)

Literary criticism has also raised a number of issues. Blomberg summarizes the result of such scrutiny.

⁷Blomberg points out the interesting fact that all the regions around Galilee are mentioned except Samaria. 1992b, 92.

⁸This is the first of five major discourses recorded by Matthew.

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Form and redaction criticism have regularly viewed this arrangement of material, like that of the other four major discourses of Jesus in Matthew, as a composite product, a collection of shorter sayings of Jesus from various original contexts. ...But 7:28 seems to suggest that Matthew believed Jesus spoke the sermon on one particular occasion. (1992b, 96).

This study will assume that the Sermon was given on a single occasion to the audience indicated, but that it was perhaps longer and was abbreviated by Matthew.⁹ It will also assume, without considering the extensive arguments pro and con, that the Sermon was intended for the disciples of Christ in all times and contexts. This is not to ignore the original first century Jewish context that is evident in both the gospel and the Sermon. Both are replete with references to the Old Testament scriptures and to the contemporary Jewish religious practices and beliefs. It is simply assumed that its precepts can be faithfully expressed and practiced in other temporal and cultural contexts.

Stott analyzes the content of the Sermon in a clear and concise way. He says it sets forth a Christian's character, influence, righteousness, religion, prayer, ambition, relationships, and commitment (see Stott, 7). This itemization quickly shows us that the focus of the sermon is on ethical, spiritual, and relational issues. There is no major clear statement about making of disciples either within or outside the boundaries of Palestine. But, there are two matters that are worth noting in relation to making disciples of all nations: The Christian's influence as salt and light (5:13-16), and the authority with which Jesus taught (7:28-29).

Salt and Light

"You are the salt of the earth" (5:13a). "You are the light of the world" (5:14a). At least the following interpretative questions are prompted by the verses cited. "What is meant by 'salt' and 'light'?" and "What is meant by the 'earth' and the 'world'?" Interestingly, few commentators

⁹See Blomberg, 1992b, 96 for the practice of excerpting of longer material by ancient writers.

ask or attempt to answer the question about the “earth” and the “world.” Stott is not so timid.

...Jesus referred to that handful of Palestinian peasants as the salt of *the earth* and the light of *the world*, so far-reaching was their influence to be. It is also a remarkable providence of God that in this most Jewish of the four Gospels there should be such an allusion to the whole earth, to the world-wide power for good of Christ’s followers. (Stott, 58)

Thus, the disciples were not to be salt and light to just their immediate context, they were to be salt and light in the “world” in the sense of the habitable world, and in the “world” in the sense of the “ethical order in which human responsibility and human sinfulness stand in [a negative, corrupted, and antagonistic] relationship with God” (Muller, in Bromiley, Vol. 4, 1114.) This is the world that stands in opposition to God, and that is in bondage to Satan and sin having been corrupted by the same.

What are salt and light to do in this context? Carson answers as follows:

...the kingdom norms (vv.3-12) work out in the lives of the kingdom’s heirs as to produce the kingdom witness (vv.13-16). If salt (v.13) exercises the negative function of delaying decay and warns the disciples of the danger of compromise and conformity to the world, the light (vv.14-16) speaks positively of illuminating a sin-darkened world and warns against a withdrawal from the world that does not lead others to glorify the Father in heaven. (140)

These principles could be applied at once in the immediate context. At the same time, there is nothing in the statements to rule out a later universal application. Thus, Stott is not in error by making a universal application. Furthermore, his view is that here we find the basis for the proper relation between evangelism and social action.

Putting the two metaphors together, it seems legitimate to discern in them the proper relation between evangelism and social action in the total mission of Christ in the world—a relationship which perplexes

many believers today. We are called to be both salt and light to the secular community. (65)

It is also important to note that this passage emphasizes the necessary relationship between being and doing. Salt can do what it does because it is salt; light can shine because it is light. Thus, Christian presence and practice are directly related to the proclamation of the Gospel.¹⁰

While the salt and light metaphors may not immediately call to mind the worldwide mandate of Christ, they set the framework for it. The original understanding of the hearers cannot limit the metaphors, because the various meanings of “earth” and “world” leave open the possibility of a worldwide (universal) application. And, there is a plausible basis in the metaphors for the proper relationship between social work and evangelism.

The Authority Issue

Here, the final words of comment about the Sermon on the Mount must be noted. “...the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority...” (7:28b-29a). The word for authority is *exousia*, and will recur at critical points later in the book. The authority of Christ will also be challenged at certain junctures without using this word. Ultimately, the concept of authority is important because Jesus bases the Great Commission on the fact that he has been given “all authority in heaven and on earth” (28:18). This is the first point of the recognition of that authority in Matthew.

Galilean Ministry (More Detail)

Matthew 8 and 9 give more details of the Galilean ministry of Christ after the Sermon on the Mount, and leading up to the sending out of the Twelve in chapter 10. This sending can be viewed as an extension of the ministry of Christ, in response to his command to “ask the Lord of the harvest...to send out workers into his harvest field” (9:35).

¹⁰ See Seamands, 38-40 for a brief discussion of the terms presence, practice, proclamation, and persuasion.

This narrative material in Matthew 8-9 provides some evidence for a universal, cross-cultural mission. In these chapters the disciples were going about with Jesus observing his practice in ministry, and perhaps minimally participating in it. These chapters are largely composed of healing miracles, with only a small amount of recorded teaching. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the summary statement of his ministry mentions both teaching and preaching in addition to healing. "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"(9:35).

The evidence for a future worldwide, cross-cultural mission is found in relation to two of the miracles that were recorded. Further, a brief statement regarding the authority of Christ should be noted as cumulative evidence regarding that theme. Finally, the appeal by Christ to his disciples to "ask the Lord of the harvest ...to send forth workers....." provides further evidence that Christ will share his mission with, or entrust it to, others.

The Centurion's Faith

Matthew 8:5-13 tells the story of a centurion (a Gentile) who requested healing for his servant. Rather than having Jesus come to heal the servant (as he said he would do), the centurion expressed great faith by requesting that Jesus only speak the word to accomplish the miracle. In so doing, he recognized Jesus authority (8:9). In response, Jesus was astonished, commended the man's faith, and made the following prophecy: "I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven" (8:11). This is a clear indication of the universality of the Kingdom and its message. It also shows that while Jesus' ministry focused on the Jewish people, Gentiles (both this one and others) would be accepted in its broader scope.

The Healing of Two Demon-Possessed Men

This account is recorded in Matthew 8:28-34. Here, following a storm on the Sea of Galilee, Jesus and his disciples land in the Gadarenes.

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“This region lay in the predominantly Gentile territory of the Decapolis...; the presence of the pigs (v.30), inconceivable in a Jewish milieu, points to its Gentile background” (Carson, 217).

The point of this is that the demoniacs were very possibly Gentiles. This reinforces the idea noted above that while the focus of Jesus’ ministry was on the people of Israel, Gentiles were not outside of its scope or field.

The Authority Issue Again

In the midst of healing a lame man in Capernaum (“his own town”), Jesus pronounced the forgiveness of the man’s sins (9:2). He was promptly criticized for this. In answering his critics, he claimed the authority to do so (9:6). Up to this point, his authoritative teaching had been noted by the crowds (7:29), and he had previously shown authority by casting out demons. But now he himself claimed the authority to forgive sins.

The Shared Mission

In Matthew 4: 18-22 Jesus called four disciples and in 9:9 he called Matthew. It is not certain when the Twelve were selected in Matthew’s gospel. Just before they were mentioned by name in Matthew 10:2-4, we read, “He called his twelve disciples to him....” That language suggests that they had already been selected.

The passage underscores the fact that the disciples of Jesus were not just to be intellectual learners: they were to be doers. This was already indicated in the final teachings in the Sermon on the Mount: “...everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice....”

The sending of multiple workers into the harvest field was anticipated in Matthew 9:36. Thus Jesus will not continue to work alone in the harvest field—others will be commissioned. It should be noted further that the disciples were called to Jesus (9:37 and 10:1), but they were called apostles (“sent ones”) upon being sent out (10:2). Also, the universal scope of the disciple-making mission will be hinted at in Matthew 10, even though the focus of the current mission will be limited to Israel (10:6).

The Mission of the Twelve and Beyond Matthew 10

Matthew 10 is the second block of the teaching of Jesus recorded in Matthew. The section includes the entire chapter plus Matthew 11:1 as designated by McKnight's outline (531). There has been some disagreement about the chapter, because of the limitation of the mission to the "lost sheep of the house of Israel" (10:6), and the reference to being brought before governors, kings, and Gentiles (10:18). This is, of course, viewed as conflicting by certain scholars. We shall see that the apparent conflict is not insurmountable.

One solution is that of assuming that we have here a collection of teachings that were given originally on several occasions (as some view the other didactic sections). Matthew 11:1 states "After Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on to teach and preach in the towns of Galilee." It appears to this writer that such a statement indicates that the teaching was given together. Blomberg thinks that the verse is introductory to the next section (1992b, 184). Likely, it is a transitional verse and serves both purposes.

It is generally conceded that the instructions (10:5-42) are divided into sections. Some commentators opt for two divisions, while others see three. Goldsmith notes a literary structure in favor of three divisions, each ending with a statement introduced by the words "I tell you the truth" (93). This phrase occurs in verses 15, 23, and 42, creating the following subsections: Matthew 10:5-15, 16-23, and 24-42.

The Authority for the Mission

Jesus acts authoritatively (assuming and exercising authority for initiating the mission) rather than claiming it. He gave his disciples authority (10:1).

The Method of the Mission

The majority of the chapter is taken up with instructions about the method of carrying out various aspects of the mission. The instructions in

Matthew 10:7-8 closely parallel the summary of Christ's ministry that is found in Matthew 9:35. Thus, the Twelve are now being required to reproduce the ministry that has been modeled to them by Christ.

The instructions in the first section (10:5-15) seem to have to do with the mission at hand—the mission to the lost sheep of the house of Israel—although there may be some present day application (see Culver, 10-19). The second set of instructions (10:16-23), Culver sees as instruction for today (20-29). The same author sees the remaining verses (10:24-42) as applying to the age-long mission (Culver, 30ff).

The detail of the method of the mission prescribed by Jesus will not be considered here. We are more concerned with the fact of the world-wide mandate in Matthew than we are with the method(s) of carrying it out. However, the instructions regarding the method of the mission given by Christ here are far more detailed than the summary statement of "going, baptizing, and teaching to obey" of Matthew 28:19-20. Thus, they merit careful study by anyone seeking to be obedient to the Great Commission.

The Extent of the Mission

The apparent conflict regarding the extent of the mission requires some comment. Which did Jesus command at this point in his ministry, a mission to only the Jews, or a world-wide mission? Or is Matthew showing his confusion at this point? It is obvious that if we take the passage as a whole, the instructions go far beyond the immediate need. Did Jesus give such a set of instructions all at once? Let us assume for the sake of argument (and literary unity) that he did.

Why then would he make a particularistic statement limiting the mission to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" in Matthew 10:5, and then talk about being brought before kings, governors, and Gentiles in verse 18? Why would it be necessary to be so specific as to say, "Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans"?

There are five possible answers that are mutually supportive. (1) Jesus had already gone to Samaria (Jn 4), just before the beginning of his Galilean ministry, and was well-received.¹¹ (2) There may have already been a response among some Gentiles from Syria and Decapolis (4:25).

¹¹See A. T. Robertson, 27-29, for a reasonable harmonization of John 4 with the Synoptics.

(3) In Matthew 8:5ff the faith of the Centurion was recognized and a prophecy was made about Gentile entrance into the kingdom, and two demon-possessed men (possibly Gentiles) were healed in Matthew 8:28ff. (4) The negative reaction to Jesus by some Pharisees and teachers of the law could be avoided by going outside of Israel (9:3, 34). (5) If the whole discourse was pronounced at the same time, great clarity would be required to ensure a correct understanding of the immediate task.

So, was the mission to Israel or to the Gentile nations as well? The simple answer is that the immediate mission was to Israel, but a future mission to all nations is envisioned. These missions are neither mutually exclusive nor necessarily contradictory.

Bruce sees this limited mission in part as a component in Jesus' training of the disciples (99). He questions whether the Twelve were ready for any other mission.

The twelve, at the period of their first trial mission, were not fit to preach the gospel, or to do good works, either among Samaritans or Gentiles. Their hearts were too narrow, their prejudices too strong: there was too much of the Jew, too little of the Christian, in their character. (101)

Culver points out that the mission was not ultimately limited by these instructions.

God was in no way limiting the *field* [emphasis mine] of the mission to the Jewish people; He was only putting them on the schedule first by way of pledge to their ancestors, by way of sovereign choice, and by historical necessity. Paul's missionary party customarily gave attention to the scattered Jewish communities before turning to Gentiles (Acts 13:5, 14; Rom. 1:17). The same precedence of Jewish evangelism prevailed throughout the book of Acts. (12-13)

It may be helpful to think, therefore, of missions in terms of *field* and *focus*. The mission in Matthew 10 focused for the time being on the Jewish people (vv. 5-15), but the field ultimately would be the whole of humanity (v. 18). In fact, it might be argued that the focus would eventually shift to the Gentile mission, but that the field would remain the

same leaving it open for the mission to the Jews. The point of focus is one that every missionary must take into account in his/her ministry, because the field is the world and no human being can minister in all of it at once. Priorities must be set under Christ's direction.

2. Responses to the Messiah:

Rejection and Acceptance from Galilee to Jerusalem

(Matthew 11:2 – 20:34)

The interweaving of narrative and discourse in this division of Matthew is as follows: Narrative (11, 12); Discourse—parables (13:1-52); Narrative (13:53 – 17:27); Discourse—teachings and parables (18); and Narrative (19 – 20). These will be examined in turn in search of the threads of tapestry of mission(s) in Matthew.

The Narrative Block of Matthew 11 – 12

The events of this block contribute little to the ongoing development of the idea of mission(s) in Matthew. We see Jesus continuing in his ministry in Galilee in spite of rising opposition and rejection. There is, however, a notable quotation by Matthew (13:18-21, citing Isa 42:1-4) that shows his understanding of a mission to all nations: "In his name the nations will put their hope" (12:21).

The authority issue continues in this block as the source of Jesus' authority in driving out demons was questioned. The Pharisees attributed his authority to Beelzebul (12:24). To this Jesus indirectly replied that he drove the demons out by the Spirit of God, and that this was evidence of the coming of the kingdom of God (12:28ff.).

Parables of the Kingdom

Matthew 13:1-52

These parables¹² are primarily concerned with the nature of the Kingdom of Heaven, rather than the extent of it. They were addressed to first century Jews in Palestine, and must be understood in that context, but their application is universal. The parables are: The Sower (13:3-9, interpreted in 13: 18-23); The Tares/Weeds (13:24-30, interpreted in 13:37-43); The Mustard Seed and the Yeast (13:31-33); The Hidden Treasure and the Pearl (13:44-45); and The Net (13: 47-50).

In a sense, all these parables have to do with a mixed response to the message of the Kingdom (though the Hidden Treasure and the Pearl are totally positive). However, there is a statement in the interpretation of the parable of the Tares that some have seen to point toward the universality of the Kingdom and its mission, "The field is the world..." (13:38a). How "world" would have been understood by the disciples is open to conjecture. Hagner sees it as pointing to "the worldwide mission of the Church in the spread of the gospel (cf. 24:14; 28:19)" (1993, 393).

The parables of the Mustard Seed and the Yeast (13:31-33) merit some attention as well. These parables show the Kingdom of Heaven as an entity that begins with something apparently small and insignificant, but that grows into something large and of great significance. They, therefore, prefigure the growth of the Kingdom (and the Church as its product and agent). Although its extension to all nations is not specified, neither is it precluded.

¹² This is the third of five major discourses recorded by Matthew.

Runyon: Matthew: The Unfolding of Missions

These parables of the Kingdom, therefore, do not directly teach the universality of the mission of the Church. However, they may well imply it. They further provide an understanding of the Kingdom that is of vital importance to all of its messengers wherever they seek to advance it. The better the messenger understands the Kingdom and its dynamics, the more wisely s/he will work for its advancement.

The Narrative Block of Matthew 14 - 17

The second narrative block in this division of Matthew portrays Jesus as ministering in Galilee, but making journeys into Gentile territory—namely, Syria and the Decapolis. Events in those journeys make the goal of making disciples of all nations more visible, although it will be noted that this was not the main objective of the journeys themselves. First, most commentators see significance for the Gentile mission in the account of the Canaanite woman (15:21-16). Second, the feeding of the 4,000 (15:29-39) was in the area of the Decapolis—Gentile territory. Third, sometimes the writer has heard some importance attached to the fact that Peter’s confession of Christ (16:13-20) took place in Caesarea Philippi (north of Galilee in Gentile territory), though he has not found where this opinion has been put in print.

The Canaanite Woman

Matthew records the account of the faith of the Canaanite woman in 15:21-28, whom Jesus encountered in the area of Tyre and Sidon. Jesus had retired to this Gentile region for reasons not stated—perhaps to escape the crowds and the skeptics, and to be able to dedicate quality time to the Twelve. The woman came to the Lord to find healing from demon possession for her daughter. Jesus first ignored her and then said to her: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel” (15:24). Jesus continued to put her off, but that action only further demonstrated her faith for which he commended her. The daughter was healed, and once again Gentiles are found within the field of the mission of Christ. The point here is that these Gentiles were not excluded, even though Christ’s stated focus was on the Jews at that time.

The Feeding of the Four Thousand

Matthew places this event on a mountainside, near the Sea of Galilee (15:29). Mark, however, more specifically locates Jesus' ministry at this time in the Decapolis (Mk 7:31). Whether he was there seeking the lost sheep of Israel who lived among the Gentiles, or whether he was now focusing on the Gentiles, or whether he was seeking a place of retreat is not stated. But the mere fact that he was there leads the majority of commentators to suggest that the 4,000, or a significant number of them, were Gentiles. The evidence for this is circumstantial, for neither Matthew nor Mark mentions the make-up of the crowd. Nevertheless, the location of the ministry would once again indicate that the Gentiles were within the field of the mission of Christ.

Peter's Confession in Caesarea Philippi

To use the geographical location of Peter's confession of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God" (16:13-20) to build a case for the universalistic focus of the mission of the Church seems unwarranted to this writer. Bruce hypothesizes the following scenario that has greater credibility.

Away in that remote secluded region, Jesus occupied Himself for a season in secret prayer, and in confidential conversations with His disciples on topics of deepest interest. One of these conversations had reference to His Own Person. (163)

...He deemed it good to draw forth from them such a profession at this time, because He was about to make communications to them on another subject, viz. His sufferings, which He knew would sorely try their faith. He wished them to be fairly committed to the doctrine of His *Messiahship* before proceeding to speak in plain terms on the unwelcome topic of his *death*. (164)

It should be apparent from this passage that Matthew was not writing an apologetic for missions. He, rather, was writing to present Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God, the Messiah, who fulfilled the Scriptures, and brought salvation from sins.

Matthew was a disciple—a convinced man as to who Jesus was and what he did. And, as a disciple, he was a committed man careful to do everything his teacher commanded—including fulfilling the mission to all nations. This confession is central to the message of the mission to all nations, although it does not identify the mission or its extent.

The Discourse of Matthew 18

This discourse¹³ contains essential teachings about some of the principles of conduct for citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven, and as such is essential to the message of Christ. However, it does not contribute to the development of the mission to the nations in Matthew.

The Narrative of Matthew 19 – 20

These narratives continue the story of the ministry of Christ, and also contain a significant amount of teaching (although it is sufficiently mixed with narrative to warrant calling this a narrative section). There is, however, no teaching regarding the ultimate mission of the disciples.

**3. The Messiah Inaugurates the Kingdom of Heaven
through Rejection and Vindication**
(Matthew 21:1 – 28:20)

This final division of Matthew falls roughly into three categories: (1) the narrative section recounts Jesus' last public appearances (chapters 21 – 22), (2) a series of pre-crucifixion discourses (chapters 23 – 25), (3) a narrative section detailing with the crucifixion and resurrection (chapters 26 – 28).

The Last Public Appearances

In a sense, these chapters (21-22) continue a narrative that began in Matthew 19. What has changed is the location. Here Jerusalem is clearly identified. The events and accompanying teachings that most directly

¹³ This is the fourth of five major discourses recorded by Matthew.

contribute to the growing evidence for the mission to all nations are: the cleansing of the temple (21:12-17), and the challenge to his authority related to that event (21:23-27); the parable of The Tenants (21:33-46); and, to a lesser extent, the parable of the Wedding Banquet (22:1-14).

The Temple: Cleansing and Challenge

The Cleansing

The cleansing of the temple involved ridding it of buyers, sellers, money changers, and merchandise. At first glance, this might be considered to have no relation to the mission to all nations. Nevertheless, opinion is unanimous (or nearly so) that the area where the commerce was taking place was the Court of the Gentiles—the only place where Gentiles were allowed to come and worship. This is underscored by Jesus' words "It is written...my house will be called a house of prayer, but you are making it a den of robbers" (21:13). These words are taken from two Old Testament passages: the first part from Isaiah 56:7, and the second from Jeremiah 7:11. Significantly, Mark includes the words "a house of prayer for all nations" (Mk 11:17). This actually is a more complete quotation of the Isaiah passage. While Matthew did not give the full quotation, these words cannot have been far from the mind of one who knew the Scriptures so well. No wonder then that this event is often cited as evidence of the forthcoming mission to all nations.

The Challenge

Jesus was later challenged by the chief priests and elders regarding his authority to do these things (21:23-27). This we note in passing because it is obvious that Jesus assumed the authority for what he did. Further, having discerned the attitude of the rulers, he refused to give a direct answer to the rulers for his action. In the end he would identify the source of his authority, but only to his disciples.

The Parables

As was noted above, the first of these two parables is more obvious than the second in its teaching that the kingdom will be given to another people.

The Tenants

The parable will not be recounted here, but the concluding remark by Jesus is too important to omit. "Therefore, I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit" (21:43). The interpretative problems center around two concepts: the plural word "you," and the phrase "a people who will produce its fruit." Who are these people? Carson is of the opinion that the Kingdom is to be taken from the current religious leaders, and given to other leaders (454). Filson gives several options and prefers "faithful people from the east and west," but he gives no reason for his preference (230). Hagner (1995, 623) and Blomberg (1992b, 325) agree that since the word *ethnos* ("people," "nation", but often "Gentiles") is used in the passage, that the mission to the Gentiles is envisioned. This writer finds the argument convincing.

The Wedding Banquet

This parable found in Matthew 22:1-14 describes a situation where the persons originally invited refused to attend for inadequate personal reasons. The king, therefore, sent his servants to the streets to invite others, and the wedding hall was filled with guests. The interpretative question is, "Does this invitation of people from the streets represent a mission to the Gentiles?" Hagner argues that since the "good and bad" were gathered what is envisioned is an ingathering of the unrighteous (e.g. tax collectors and harlots), and that Gentiles are included as well (1995, 631). Blomberg points out that the language is not explicit, but thinks that the invitation of outcasts may be transitional to the mission to the Gentiles (1992b, 328). Since the language here is not specific, one cannot be dogmatic, but the above position seems to be within the realm of possibility.

The Last Discourse—Matthew 23 – 25

There are actually at least three pre-crucifixion discourses here that chronologically follow one after the other. Each chapter more or less forms a separate unit (although the break between vv. 24 and 25 is not as clean as the one between 23 and 24). Chapter 23 is a series of seven “woes” pronounced upon or against the scribes and Pharisees. They focus on their just condemnation, but show no transition of the Gospel to the Gentiles. Chapter 24 talks of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, of end-times events, and of the intervening time. It contains a key statement regarding the preaching of the gospel “in the whole world” and “to all nations” (24:14). Chapter 25 is comprised of a series of three parables urging preparedness for the second coming of Christ.

Only the prophetic statement of Matthew 24:14 will be considered here. This statement comes at the end of a paragraph (24: 9-14) predicting persecution, martyrdom, hatred by all nations, apostasy, betrayal, false prophets, and a lukewarm condition on the part of many. None of these can stop the Gospel of the Kingdom. Jesus said, “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” (24:14).

Not only the content of the Gospel (“of the kingdom”) is clear in this passage; the extent of its mission cannot be mistaken. Filson reminds us that the word for “world” used here is *oikoumenē* that indicates the “inhabited earth” (254). “All nations” is the *panta ta ethnē* of 28:19, so the fulfillment of the Great Commission is foreseen and prophesied here, sometime in the week before the crucifixion. Thus, the Commission in its final form was not a new and surprising concept when it was given.

The Last Narrative Section—Matthew 26 – 28

Matthew 26:1-46 portrays the last events in the life and ministry of Jesus up until his arrest. His arrest, trial, crucifixion, and burial are recounted in Matthew 26:47 – 27:66. The resurrection and Great Commission are the topics of chapter 28. There are three texts that bear

examination. (1) Jesus made a declaration in Matthew 26:13 that contained a prophecy of the preaching of the Gospel throughout the world. (2) The Roman centurion and those with him (probably all Gentiles) at the crucifixion exclaimed, "Surely he was the Son of God" (27:54). (3) The Great Commission is the final note in chapter 28, and the book (28:18-20).

The Anointing in Bethany

There is little to comment here. While at the home of Simon the Leper in Bethany, a woman (identified as Mary the sister of Lazarus in Jn 12:3) anointed his feet with expensive perfume. This produced a controversy prompted by Judas Iscariot (Jn 12:4). Jesus spoke in the woman's defense and said: "I tell you the truth, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her" (26:13). The words indicating the arena of the proclamation of the gospel are "in the whole world" (NASB¹⁴). This literal translation of the Greek (*en holō tō kosmō*) clearly indicates the geographic extent of the mission.

The Confession of the Centurion

His words are simply: "Surely he was the Son of God" (27:54). Whether these words were spoken with knowledge may be debated. However, Matthew (as well as Mark—cf. Mk 15:39) records these words,¹⁵ and they at least show a greater receptivity of Christ by these Gentiles than was typical of the Jewish leaders. And Matthew again presents us with the Christ, the Son of God.

¹⁴ NASB refers to the New American Standard Bible.

¹⁵ Luke quotes the words: "Surely this was a righteous man" (Lk. 23:47). Both could have been spoken.

The Great Commission—Matthew 28:18-20

The Great Commission cannot be commented upon at length for that is not our purpose. Rather, it will be related to themes that we have observed developing.

1. It is based on Christ's authority-- "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." Filson says:

He has full **authority** to claim their lifelong active service. The authority embodied in his words (vii:29), mighty deeds (viii:8f.), and forgiveness of sins (ix:6) was recognized during his ministry, and he had asserted sweeping authority in xi:27. But now he claims more complete authority. This authority (1) rests upon his ministry, death, and resurrection; (2) is universal, extending over all people and all of God's creatures in heaven; and so (3) excludes any rival lord. (305)

He only neglects to say that the source of the authority is God the Father, as indicated by the passive voice of "has been given unto me."

2. The command is to go and make disciples. It has often been observed that the only imperative verb in the Great Commission is "make disciples." The other key terms, "go", "baptize", and "teach", are participles. What scholars make of that observation differs greatly. Carson notes, however, that a participle *preceding* the main verb that is imperative carries the weight of the imperative (see 597). Thus, the "go" that precedes "make disciples" may be considered imperative, while the "baptizing" and "teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" characterize the process (Carson, 597).

It should be further noted that the word for "go" used here (a form of *poreuomai*) is the same one used when Jesus sent the Twelve on their first mission (10:6).

3. The target audience is *panta ta ethne*, "all nations". Some would see this as all the Gentile nations, excluding the Jews. Carson cites evidence from Matthew against this idea, and concludes, "They refer to all people, including Israel..." (596). This understanding is consistent with the observation that while the Jews were the focus of Christ's ministry in

Matthew, Gentiles were always in the field of his ministry and received its benefits. Perhaps now the focus is on the Gentile mission, but the Jews are still within the field of the overall mission to the world.

4. The mission is self-perpetuating as each generation of disciples learns to obey everything the Lord has commanded, including this mandate to make disciples of all nations.

5. The temporal extent of the mission is until the end of the age (28:20)—or the return of Christ (cf. 24:3). This is consistent with the prophecy of Matthew 24:14 as well.

6. The risen Lord, promised to be with the disciples for as long as the mission takes (28:20). "Immanuel" (1:23) will continue to be with them.

CONCLUSIONS

1. The theme of the mission to the nations (missions) as expressed in the Great Commission is traceable throughout the book of Matthew and should not be viewed as an addendum, shift, or surprise at the end of the book.

2. A traceable theme does not necessarily dominate, but it is never far away. Therefore, Gentiles are seen first in the ancestors of Christ, and last seen confessing that Jesus was the Son of God at the cross.

3. Matthew wrote as a person convinced of the mandate to make disciples of all nations. Because of that conviction he cited two "fulfillment" passages relating them to the ministry of Christ (4:15-16; and 12:18-21). These two passages, however, are a minority of such passages in Matthew. Hagner accounts for twelve fulfillment statements (in Bromiley 1986, 284), so while these fulfillments are important, they are not Matthew's only concern.

4. The Sermon on the Mount (5-7) may make minimal reference to a disciple-making mission ("salt of the earth," "light of the world" in 5:13-16), but the principles set forth are applicable to disciples in any time and place.

5. A statement similar to the one about the Sermon on the Mount may be made about the parables of the Kingdom (13).

6. Throughout the ministry of Christ his focus was on the lost sheep of the house of Israel, but Gentiles were never outside his field of ministry. Some Gentiles were even commended for their faith (e.g. 8:10, 15: 28).

7. The instructions to the Twelve on their mission show a present particularization or limiting of the mission to Israel, but a future universalization or extension of it to include the Gentiles. It was also a part of Jesus programme to train disciple-makers (a process that would be repeatable with their disciples).¹⁶

8. The authority of Jesus that is expressed in the Great Commission is also an unfolding realization. People recognized his authority (e.g. 7:29, 8:8-9), and the religious leaders challenged it (e.g. 24:23ff.). However, he claimed authority only in 9:6 (to forgive sins) and in the Great Commission (28:18) where he said it was given to him (not achieved or seized by him).

9. Jesus himself, on three occasions, prophesied the global extension of his Kingdom

(8:11, 24:14, and 26:13). He alluded strongly to it and/or to the inclusion of Gentiles on other occasions (e.g. 10:18; 21:43; 22:8-9).

¹⁶Robert Coleman demonstrates this process clearly and concisely in his little book *The Master Plan of Evangelism*.

10. The extension of the mission to make disciples of all nations becomes clearer in the last phase of the ministry of Christ. The clearest statements are found in Matthew 21:43, 24:14, 26:13; and 28:18-20.

11. To make a Matthew an apology for the mission to make disciples of all nations is a mistake. If it were, every chapter would revolve around that theme. The mission to all nations is an important theological theme of the book, but it is only part of a cluster of truths surrounding Matthew's presentation of the salvific life and ministry of Jesus "the Christ, the Son of the living God" (16:16).

12. It remains then that Matthew's primary concern is to show Jesus as the Messiah of both Israel and the Gentile nations, in fulfillment of God's promises in the Scriptures. As Messiah, he saves all his people from their sins. The focus of the mission may have shifted from the lost sheep of Israel to all nations during the course of the book. Nevertheless, the field of the mission is the same throughout: All nations (*panta ta ethnē*), including both Jews and Gentiles.

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