



## **CO-MISSIONED!**

### **A Bible study on becoming a Missional People**

*Missional congregations are called not simply to study Scripture but to be a people whose identity, common life, and shared ministry is shaped by their interaction with the biblical witness to God's "wonderful deeds." (1 Peter 2:9). This Bible study has been created to help congregations discover through Scripture the multifaceted nature of the gospel message and how their congregation can be formed more fully as part of God's mission through Jesus Christ to offer abundant life to the world.*

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# SESSION 1 INTRODUCTION

*The question which has to be put to every local congregation is the question whether it is a credible sign of God's reign of justice and mercy over the whole of life, whether it is an open fellowship whose concerns are as wide as the concerns of humanity, whether it cares for its neighbors in a way which reflects and springs out of God's care for them, whether its common life is recognizable as a foretaste of the blessing which God intends for the whole human family.*

- Lesslie Newbigin, *Sign of the Kingdom*

One of the distinctive features of Christianity is that we have four sources and numerous other writings which express the Good News of God's saving work in Jesus Christ. These include the four gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) and letters to early Christian churches. Written by different people, each was shaped in response to the concrete situation of a particular group of people. Early Christian communities sought to discern and express the unique mission of Jesus for their time and place. This variety of interpretations of Jesus' mission is the focus of this Bible study.

Through this study we will acquaint ourselves afresh with the "great commissions" of Jesus. Quite often when people think of the mission of the church, they quote Matthew 28:18-20: "Go therefore and make disciples..." But along with Matthew's model of "making disciples" there are four other missional perspectives: from the Gospels of Mark, Luke, and John, along with testimony from the Apostle Paul. This study will explore all five perspectives on what the mission of Jesus means for the contemporary community of faith situated in each unique time and place.

Each Bible study session will explore a particular model for understanding and living out the church's God-given mission based on the emphasis of the author:

<b>Mark</b>	A Community Proclaiming the Gospel
<b>Luke</b>	The church as a Sign of the Reign of God
<b>John</b>	A Sent Community
<b>Matthew</b>	A Community of Discipleship
<b>Paul</b>	A Community of Reconciliation

As we begin the study, remember that these biblical writings were not meant only to be a biography of Jesus' life or to provide a set of doctrines to believe. The New Testament authors did not write just to educate their readers. They wrote to awaken their readers to the truth of God's work in the world through Jesus Christ. For those who were not yet followers of Christ, they wrote to invite them to become disciples who can share in the abundant life God made available through Christ. For those who already were disciples of

Jesus Christ, they wrote to help them grow more fully into that life by living according to the teachings of Jesus and sharing in the power of the Holy Spirit.

This invitation was not just for the original readers of the New Testament. It is for us today, too. The authors continue to invite us to share in the abundant life of God made available through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.

As a result of this, the first purpose of this study is not to learn more about Jesus, the church, and its mission, but to recognize ourselves as those who have received the blessings of God's abundant life. Even though we have not experienced this life fully yet, we still can claim ways in which God has blessed us. By reading in the Scriptures about the ways that God moved in the lives of the people of God from a variety of perspectives, we gain insight into how we can discern this in our lives now.

This recognition is not something we do only as individuals. Our congregations can also see where God is active within them. This is because God did not only call individuals but an entire people. God did this first by calling the people of Israel. Later, Jesus extended God's people to anyone who joined his community of disciples. Our congregations are part of this people of God today.

Having recognized ourselves and our congregations as recipients of God's abundant life in Christ, the second purpose of this study is to claim our place as participants in God's mission as we share the abundant life of God with others. As all our New Testament authors make clear, Jesus calls us to this work. This is what the commissioning passages are all about: Jesus empowers us to join him in sharing the good news that God's life available through him. As his people, we are "co-missioned" with Christ, joining him in the work that he has already begun.

At its heart, then, this study is about how Jesus' mission is also ours. Through discussion and reflection together we will be developing the practice of recognizing and interpreting Jesus's mission anew for ourselves and our congregations. We will discover our co-mission with Jesus and with each other for the sake of the world God loves.

### **Questions for reflection and discussion**

1. In English, the word "gospel" is spelled with a lower case "g" when it relates to expressing the core good news of the Christian faith. When referring to one of the biblical books, it is spelled with an upper case "G," such as "the Gospel of Luke." Why do we talk about the gospel of Jesus Christ, but have different ways of expressing and interpreting that gospel, even within scripture (including the four Gospels and in the writings of Paul)?
2. Why is it important to "revisit" the New Testament story of Jesus as you make key decisions about your congregation's future direction?

## SESSION 2 MARK: A Community Proclaiming the Gospel

*Go into the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation.*

- Mark 16:15

Most scholars believe that the Gospel of Mark was the first of the four Gospels to be written. In doing this, he created a new literary form that:

- 1) taught people about Jesus Christ
- 2) in a way that made the most sense for the readers' specific context and
- 3) invited readers to participate in the mission of Jesus by becoming members of Christ's disciple community.

We have already discussed the first and third items in the introduction. The second one is worth some extra explanation now.

None of the books in the New Testament were written to be generic texts that talked about Jesus. Rather, the author of each book had a specific audience in mind. To convey the gospel message as effectively as possible, the author wrote the book in a way that would discuss Jesus and his teachings in a way that engaged with the beliefs, needs, concerns, and questions that the audience had.

This is why we have different Gospels. Each Gospel writer is seeking to convey the truth of the gospel—that God has made abundant life available to all people through Jesus Christ—in a way that makes the most sense to the intended audience who will read that Gospel. In doing this, the Gospel writers sometimes modify the stories slightly so they will make more sense to the audience.

This does *not* mean that the Gospel writers are untruthful! The Gospel writers all agree on the common good news that God has worked through the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ to offer abundant life to all. They also agree that sharing in this life means ordering our intellectual beliefs, moral behavior, and relationships according to the teachings of Jesus. There is no disagreement or diminishment of these core points that are essential to salvation.

It simply means that some of the details of the story (e.g., how many donkeys are present at the Triumphal Entry) may be changed to meet the specific concerns of the audience. This is no different than how Paul expresses himself differently, treating different topics and concerns, in his letters to the churches in the various cities. Paul focuses on what each audience needs to hear, but he is consistent that salvation comes by faith in Jesus Christ throughout all his writings.

The Gospel of Mark was likely to Gentile believers who were not familiar with Jewish traditions, nor were they concerned with how Jesus fulfilled the prophecies as the Jewish Messiah. However, these believers had been formed to believe in the power of the Roman

gods and emperors. For this reason, the proclamation of the gospel requires action. It was not enough for Jesus to announce that God's Kingdom had come (Mark 1:15). Jesus had to show it.

One way the Gospel of Mark conveys the importance of action is through its frequent use of the word "immediately." Jesus does not pause on mountains or beaches to teach about the Kingdom, nor does he enter lengthy conversations with people about the nature of God. Instead, as soon as Jesus finishes demonstrating the power of God to deal with one situation, he is on the move to show God's power in a new way. These acts of power encompass a variety of miracles in which Jesus overcomes all the harmful, death-dealing, and evil things that seek to cut people off from the abundant life of God.

Of course, Mark does not ignore the fact that Jesus taught and cared for people. It is only by presenting the full range of Jesus' activity, including preaching, teaching, healing, exorcising, calling and forming disciples, feeding, comforting, and confronting adversaries, that God's rule is revealed in a way that can awaken Mark's audience to the goodness of the gospel. Through the power of the Spirit, Jesus of Nazareth proclaimed that the redemptive rule of God had drawn near and people could enter it.

Jesus not only proclaimed the gospel, Jesus *was* the gospel. He embodied the good news that the reign of God has come near to overcome any power whatsoever that oppresses or diminishes life. He was not just a prophet performing miracles, he was the very presence of the Kingdom of God in the midst of the people.

But Jesus' ministry also challenged assumptions about the nature and quality of God's Kingdom. Even though he acts with power, Jesus' identity is more closely aligned with servanthood than with a conquering King.

When Jesus predicts his own suffering, death, and resurrection (8:31), he takes to himself not power, but service and sacrifice. Then, as they travel to Jerusalem, Jesus challenges the disciples to join him in death. "Take up [your] cross and follow me" (8:34). Discipleship does not bring prestige and position, but requires following the crucified Jesus. Yet, this very act of service brings about the greatest act of power: the resurrection. The resurrection not only overcomes the death-dealing powers of the world, but death itself.

The Gospel of Mark, then, offers a paradox: the good news of Jesus as pre-eminent over all other powers, and yet Jesus as utterly humble, caring for the most downtrodden of people. Jesus announces a new reality in which children, the poor, the diseased, the oppressed, and the marginalized have central places. The communities of faith at the center of Mark's concern are invited to form themselves in such a way that they represent this new reality. They proclaim the gospel by taking up a life of service, suffering, and sacrifice together.

Perhaps this is why Mark has two endings. The original ending, Mark 16:1-8, heralds the resurrection, but then depicts the women running away frightened and not speaking to

anyone. This depicts the idea that the final victory is one that lives alongside of the day-to-day struggles and fears of life. We are assured that Jesus is risen with all power, and yet we must continue to deal with the other death-dealing powers that still hold sway in our daily lives—just as Mark’s earliest readers would have still needed to deal with the Roman authorities of their day even after becoming disciples of Jesus.

The second ending (Mark 16:9-20), which scholars believe was added later to sum up much of what is described in the Book of Acts, is much more triumphal. Here the disciples are promised that they will be able to operate with the same power that Jesus did, confirming to those they proclaim the gospel to that the message is true through miracles that accompany their words. Here is the assurance that Mark’s original readers will have the capacity to confront and overcome the death-dealing powers that they face.

However, both endings acknowledge that the cross is the model for genuine discipleship. The powerful ministry of Jesus and his challenging call to suffer as the primary means of demonstrating that power must go together. Based on this, the Christian community is called to proclaim the gospel with power by taking up a life of service, suffering, and sacrifice.

### *Bible Study on Mark: Proclaiming the Gospel*

Read Mark 10:32-45. Try to put yourself in the place of the disciples.

- 1) How would you respond to Jesus’ account of what will happen to him?
- 2) How does Jesus’ rejection, suffering and death relate to his proclamation of the kingdom of God?
- 3) What do you think it means to follow a Jesus who was crucified?
- 4) What kind of Messiah do people in your congregation believe in?

Read Mark 16:1-20.

- 1) Which of the two endings (16:1-8 or 16:9-20) makes more sense to you personally? What about your congregation? Why?
- 2) Would the way you explain the gospel message—that God offers us abundant life through Jesus Christ—change based on the ending you choose?
- 3) What role should service, suffering, and sacrifice play within the ministry and mission of today’s churches?
- 4) If your church were to adopt Mark’s model of mission, one that displays the power of God over forces that diminish life, how:
  - a. Would it allow you to meet needs in your context are not being met now?
  - b. Would it change the way that you relate to the people in your context?
  - c. Would it build credibility for the message your church teaches?
  - d. Would it change the way your congregation does its ministry?

## SESSION 3 LUKE: The Church as a Sign of the Reign of God

*Repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations. (24:47)*

The Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles (better known as the Book of Acts) were written by the same author as two volumes of a single history (see the introductions to each Luke 1:1-4 and Acts 1:1-2). The Gospel of Luke provides an overview of the life of Jesus Christ, including his birth, teaching, crucifixion, and resurrection. The Book of Acts details the development and spread of the church in the decades following the ascension of Jesus, including the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, the expansion of the church to include Gentiles, and the missionary travels of Paul and others to establish Christian communities throughout the Roman Empire.

Many scholars believe that Luke traveled with Paul. Notice that in Acts 16:10-17 the pronouns shift from discussing Paul and his companions as “they” to “we” suggesting that Luke was at least briefly part of Paul’s missionary work. This occurs again in Acts 20 and 21. As a result, it is not surprising that these books seem to be addressed primarily to Gentile Christians who had become disciples of Jesus Christ through the evangelistic missionary work of St. Paul. Luke likely knew some of these recipients personally and was invested in making certain that they grew in their new Christian faith.

Even though the church had begun among the Jewish followers of Jesus, the Apostles and other leaders of the church had gathered at the Jerusalem Council (described in Acts 15), where they determined that Gentiles should be fully welcomed as equal followers of Christ without requiring them to follow Jewish traditions, such as circumcision. In doing this, they affirmed that ordering one’s life according to the teachings of Jesus was essential to being a disciple of Jesus Christ. Nothing else was needed. As we will see later, this fits well with Paul’s insistence that salvation comes by faith in Christ.

Likely because Luke was writing to Gentiles who had become members of the church through the missionary efforts and gracious hospitality of the Jewish followers of Christ, there are certain themes that are consistent in Luke’s writing:

- **The church:** The Book of Acts introduces the church as a group of people who grow organically out of the early ministry of Jesus Christ, led by the Apostles, who are comprised of Jesus’ original disciples (except Judas). Acts teaches us that the church is not just a voluntary organization, but people who actively demonstrate the power and presence of God in how they treat one another and how they reach out to those around them. It is based on this witness that what starts as a small gathering of people from the Galilee region of Israel becomes a worldwide faith with hundreds of local congregations in only one generation. This kind of miraculous growth is a sign of the Reign of God which quickly spreads its goodness.

- Including the marginalized: Perhaps because Luke is concerned with how the Gentiles were welcomed into the church, he also emphasizes how other groups that were easily ignored or devalued are honored by Jesus and the church. For example, Luke writes more about the poor and women than any other New Testament author, pointing to how Jesus and the church engaged specifically with each. It is perhaps no surprise, then, that Luke is the only Gospel to include the Parable of the Good Samaritan. This is a sign of the Reign of God in which all people are recognized as made in the image of God and honored as such, contrasted to the way people disregard one another in the world.
- The power of the Holy Spirit: While the Gospel of Mark emphasizes the powerful work of Jesus, Luke emphasizes the powerful work of the Holy Spirit both through Jesus and the followers of Jesus. Acts 1 records Jesus promising the Holy Spirit to empower the Apostles in their witness to the resurrection. Acts 2 describes how the Holy Spirit comes upon all the believers at the Feast of Pentecost in Jerusalem, and how that makes their first evangelistic foray possible. Both the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts are filled with examples of how Jesus and all others who are serving as signs of the Reign of God on earth as it demonstrates its power to heal and reconcile people to God and each other.
- Allegiance to Christ over everything: A consistent point throughout Luke and Acts is the need for followers of Jesus to choose to honor Jesus alone. No other authority, power, or god is acceptable alongside of Jesus. This is shown from the very beginning of the Gospel of Luke through both the Magnificat and the Christmas story. In the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55), Mary sings about how God will overthrow the leaders and powerful people to establish a Reign in which the marginalized are honored. In the Christmas story, the angel provocatively tells the shepherds that they are receiving the good news of the birth of their Lord (Luke 2:10-11). This is exactly the same language that imperial heralds would use to describe the birth of a new Caesar. In the Book of Acts, the Christians consistently run into difficulties because they refuse to bow before the various gods and human authorities that they encounter. This is a sign that the Reign of God does not humble itself before anyone, but requires all else to come into alignment with it.
- Willingness to suffer: This leads to our final point. The fact that the Reign of God is not amenable to the powers of this world means that those in power in this world find it problematic. Those who serve as its witnesses are therefore targets of persecution because they follow a different ethic than the one supported by social norms. However, the capacity to suffer graciously in a way that offers forgiveness and salvation even to those who are causing harm is itself a witness to how powerful God's Reign is.

In writing all this, Luke was doing more than just providing a history for Gentile Christians who had never met Jesus' earliest disciples—or Jesus himself during his earthly ministry—the same way that the Jewish followers of Jesus might have. He was also giving them insight into how they could continue to be a missionary church in the generation after the Apostles. Luke insisted that the Holy Spirit was not just present in the life and ministry of Jesus and later at Pentecost to ordain the original Apostles. Rather, the Spirit remained available to empower the mission of the church. Likewise, suffering as a witness for Christ over and against the imperial powers that denied the lordship of Jesus, and treating all people with dignity, particularly those most marginalized by society, was not just a tactic used to grow the number of people following Jesus. It continued to be necessary. Indeed, the call to live this way was even more critical with the Roman persecution of Christians that began under Emperor Nero in 64 AD.

In some parts of the world, Christians continue to be persecuted today. Even if we are not, there can be strong resistance to trusting in the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit or to making room for people who make us uncomfortable, such as the poor, the homeless, the mentally ill, the addicted, the disabled, and even those who we disagree with politically and socially. We can feel helpless before the social and political structures around us.

We feel like the church has little power compared to governments, the media, corporations, and other forces that seek their own wellbeing, but that do not love their neighbors as themselves. The church can also seem very small contrasted to the vast problems that the world faces today: corruption, severe weather disasters, violence, and general distrust of one another.

The good news of Luke is that God continues to work through the church today, making it a sign of the Reign of God in which all things are set right. This is good news first for those of us who are Christians and wonder if the church is still relevant. It is! The Holy Spirit still offers us wisdom and power to make us effective in demonstrating the not just the ability of God to overcome evil, but a new way of relating to one another as followers of Jesus Christ who love God and neighbor.

Likewise, it is good news for the people of the world who also feel helpless and hopeless as they face the monumental, world-destroying, and death-dealing powers that besiege them. There is an All Powerful God who oversees the universe and who loves them, and this God has sent Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit to teach and empower a people to offer them a sign that the gracious Reign of God is at hand and to invite them to find salvation as participants in it.

### SESSION 3: LUKE

*Bible Study on Luke: Sign of the Reign of God*

Read Luke 4:14-30. When Jesus stood up in the synagogue, he read from the book of Isaiah. Read those words as well: Isaiah 61:1-2.

- 1) What do we learn about who Jesus is and what he will be about in his ministry from his choice of this text?
- 2) Consider those to whom the good news is addressed in this text. If Isaiah were prophesying today, how might he have described the people to whom Jesus was sent?
- 3) What is the message of “good news” your church is giving to these people? If there is no way the message is being proclaimed, what is stopping your church from doing this?
- 4) What supernatural action of the Spirit could you pray for to make it possible for your church to proclaim good news to these people?

Read Luke 24:44-49.

- 1) If your church were to adopt Luke’s model of mission how:
  - a. Would it allow you to meet needs in your context are not being met now?
  - b. Would it change the way that you relate to the people in your context?
  - c. Would it build credibility for the message your church teaches?
  - d. Would it change the way your congregation does its ministry?
- 2) How is “repentance and forgiveness” a sign of the in breaking of the Reign of God?
- 3) How would you like to see your church “practice” forgiveness?

Read Acts 4:1-35.

- 1) Name everything in this passage that would make you uncomfortable if it were expected of your congregation today.
- 2) Is there anything God could do that would make you less uncomfortable?
- 3) Do you think it is possible to make use of any of the practices in this passage without first having a powerful experience of God in your own life?
- 4) What steps might your congregation take to be formed as the church was in this passage?

## SESSION 4 JOHN: A Sent Community

*As the Father has sent me, so I send you. (20:21)*

John was likely the last of the Gospels to be written. Its audience was likely not primarily Jewish or Gentile, but all people who were open to hearing and believing the gospel.

In the Gospel of John, above all else, Jesus' mission is to bring life. Jesus states this clearly in John 10:10, "I came that they might have life and have it abundantly." Following this, the stated purpose of the Gospel of John is "that you [the reader] may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name" (20:31).

This final verse points to the interrelation of two key concepts in the Gospel of John: truth and life. By believing the truth, people are set free to share in God's abundant life. Above all else, this truth is that "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). This well-known verse packs in a great deal of truth: that God loves us, that this love is so intense that God takes the initiative to give us life that lasts eternally, and that this life is made available through God sending the Son to us.

Jesus is not just a subordinate son sent on a mission by his father, though. As Jesus explains, "the Father and I are one" (John 10:30). To receive Jesus is not just to receive a messenger, but to receive the very truth and life of God in human form. As Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me" (John 14:6).

Jesus' insistence on his uniqueness and on people understanding the truth he brings is shown by the structure of the Gospel of John. Rather than presenting the parables and vignettes of Jesus' life as the other Gospels do, the Gospel of John includes extended discourses in which Jesus explains the nature of the Father, the Son, and of the life that they bring.

These discourses are usually with other Jews, who often struggle with Jesus' teachings. Indeed, many people turn away from Jesus because they find his teachings too hard (John 6:66). However, Jesus is willing to share this truth with anyone who will hear it. Perhaps most surprising to his disciples, this included a lengthy conversation with a Samaritan woman he met when sitting at a well. Using a simple metaphor she could readily understand, she invited her to drink "water well up to eternal life" (John 4:14). This precipitated the woman becoming an evangelist for Jesus and bringing the entire population of her town to listen to Jesus. Only the Gospel of John recounts this story for us.

More than just teach about the abundant life God offers to those who believe, Jesus displays the power that he embodies as the source of that abundant life. This is shown in perhaps the most remarkable miracle Jesus performed: raising Lazarus from the dead. Reported only in the Gospel of John, prior to raising Lazarus, Jesus declares, "I am the

resurrection and the life” (John 11:25). His point was not that our mortal bodies will sustain forever if we believe in him, but that life is defined by Jesus rather than by anything else. Even if our mortal bodies fall away and decay, our life is secure in Jesus because Jesus—not our bodies—is the source of that life. So, it was an easy thing for Jesus to return the life of Lazarus to his already decaying body and to heal that body. He does it with just a prayer and few words.

So it is that Jesus’ full mission was “to save the world and not to judge it,” to “give life,” by “coming” into the world, and sharing the truth through words, signs, and works, including both his life and his death (John 3:15-17). Participation in this new life is not only a future hope, but a present possibility for all people because the light and life of all the world is found in Jesus Christ.

John’s model of mission is seen most clearly in Jesus’ last commission to his disciples (Read 20:19-23). This narrative indicates the launching of the church, a movement sent into the world in the same way Jesus was sent into the world. “As the father has sent me, so I send you.” Jesus himself, “the sent one,” provides the model for the church’s mission. Through his own being and coming, living and teaching, dying and rising, Jesus Christ revealed the truth about God, about himself, about the abundant life God desires all to share. It is this truth which motivates and guides the mission of the church.

While in the other Gospels the disciples are given specific tasks, such as “to make disciples,” “to proclaim the good news,” or “to announce repentance and forgiveness,” in John there are few indications of why they are sent or what they are to do. Only one clue is given: “As the Father has sent me.” The community of disciples is neither to withdraw from the world into a religious sanctuary, nor is it to engage with the world on the world’s terms. Following Jesus, the mission of the sent community is to proclaim and embody God’s love in such a way that persons are convinced of the truth and drawn into the abundant life of God.

Jesus does mention one power that he gives the disciples: the capacity to forgive sin (John 20:23). As commissioned and authorized by the Risen Lord, when the disciple community forgives or announces forgiveness, something real happens. God’s love and forgiveness is mediated through the words and actions of those who are called and sent into the world as Jesus was sent. In John’s model of mission, then, the church does not *have* a mission, it *is* a mission—God’s mission. The church is a “sent” community, sent to manifest God’s redemption of the world in Jesus Christ.

The church’s call to be sent as Jesus was sent is reinforced by the promise of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. In the Gospel of John, the Spirit is called the *Paraclete*, which means Helper, Comforter, Advocate, Intercessor, or Mediator. The church enjoys the full benefits of Jesus’ life-giving work because of the gift of the Holy Spirit (John 14:26, 15:26, 16:7-15, 20:22). The church can participate in the mission of Jesus only because it is empowered by the Holy Spirit. Instructed and sustained by the Spirit, God’s truth, love, and

life are mediated through the church's life, teaching, and forgiveness, just as they were through the person of Jesus.

*Bible Study on John: A Sent Community*

Read John 20:19-23. The disciples had withdrawn behind locked doors. In this situation Jesus comes to them. He breathes on them, confers the Holy Spirit upon them, and sends them in the same way as he was sent.

- 1) How and in what ways has today's church withdrawn from the world? What doors are "locked" in today's churches that keep those who are in it from being able to go out and share the life of Christ? What doors are "locked" that keep those who are outside the church from coming in and exploring what it believes?
- 2) The idea of offering forgiveness can be very difficult today because it starts with the assumption that someone has done something that needs to be forgiven. This can be very offensive in cultures where everyone is expected to mind their own business and not judge others' beliefs and ways of living. Is it possible to practice forgiveness today in a way that conveys love?
- 3) The idea of love itself is contested today. Some point to how it describes human relationships, especially in relationship to sex. Others argue that it is just a matter of neurobiological impulses in the brain. Still others see it as a sentimental notion with little power. How does your congregation use the term love? How does it relate to the cosmic truth and life that the Gospel of John describes?
- 4) The notion of truth is much debated today. In a world full of terms like "post-truth" and "fake news," does the idea of proclaiming the truth even make sense? If so, how could it be conveyed in words and/or deeds that would be compelling for people? What difference would looking to the Holy Spirit as a guide to truth make in the life of the church?
- 5) The idea of abundant life is different than the idea of eternal life. It suggests that life is available both in this world and eternally. How does this help you think about salvation? Does it mean that there are ways to measure whether we are receiving and sharing that abundant life through our congregation's ministries now?
- 6) If your church adopted John's model of mission how:
  - a. Would it allow you to meet needs in your context are not being met now?
  - b. Would it change the way that you relate to the people in your context?
  - c. Would it build credibility for the message your church teaches?
  - d. Would it change the way your congregation does its ministry?

## SESSION 5 MATTHEW: A Community of Discipleship

*Make disciples of all nations. (28:19)*

The Gospel of Matthew was written in the years after 70 AD, when the Roman army had attacked Jerusalem and burnt the temple. The intended audience was made up of Jewish followers of Jesus who now were scattered outside of Israel and cut off from their central place of worship. Given the traumatic upheaval experienced by this audience, the Gospel of Matthew seeks "to provide guidance to a community in crisis on how it should understand its calling and mission" (David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 58)).

The audience was facing more than one transition. Not only had it become unmoored from its ancestral home and worship practices, in its flight these Jewish followers of Jesus also were forced into a more cosmopolitan world. Rather than living in a relatively secluded part of the Roman Empire that had been granted a certain level of autonomy for Jews to practice their religion, they now were living in Gentile towns and cities throughout the Empire. This means that they faced a transition from a more rural to a more urban order of life, from primarily using the Aramaic language to using the more common Greek language, and from living in as a more ethnically homogeneous people of lower income to living amongst an ethnically heterogeneous people that included many of higher economic status. They were being forced to acclimate to Roman culture.

The result would have been doubly jarring for this community. As Jews who followed Jesus as their Messiah, it would have felt like both their Jewish roots and their capacity to honor Jesus were being stripped away. This was because they would have found it difficult to practice their Jewish rituals outside of Israel and because they would have been surrounded by a completely different value system than what they would have known in Jerusalem.

Matthew responded to these concerns by emphasizing two points. The first was that Jesus, not Moses, was the definitive prophet for them to follow. The second was that discipleship rather than ethnicity, geography, or any other marker was the basis for Christian communities.

In Deuteronomy 18:14-22, God promised to raise up a prophet like Moses to guide the Israelites when they came into a new land where the inhabitants would tempt them to turn away from God. While Moses delivered God's law and led the people to the Promised Land initially, this new prophet would secure the people as faithful to God regardless of their setting. Perhaps most impressive, this new prophet would speak truthfully 100% of the time (Dt 18:21-22), something that not even Moses had done.

Matthew makes it clear that Jesus is this promised prophet who comes to lead people into complete faithfulness to the law. This is visible both in the actual construction of the book and in its chief theme.

In terms of its construction, the Gospel of Matthew includes five major discourses. Most scholars believe these five discourses are meant to parallel the five books of the Torah, demonstrating that Jesus is the “new Moses.” These discourses do not denigrate Moses and the law he taught, but offer a fuller understanding of how God desires us to live. As Jesus himself explained,

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished (Matthew 5:17-18, NIV).

The five discourses are:

- the Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus reiterates the law given by Moses but explains it in a way that moves beyond physical obedience and calls for a change of heart (Matthew 5-7). For example, it is not enough just to avoid murder and adultery, one must avoid hate and lust.
- the Mission Discourse given to the disciples before Jesus sends them out to proclaim the Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 10).
- the Parabolic Discourse in which Jesus shares numerous parables that describe the nature of the Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 13).
- the Discourse on the Church in which Jesus describes how those who are part of the people of God should relate to one another (Matthew 18).
- the Olivet Discourse in which Jesus describes the final judgment (Matthew 23-25).

The consistent theme of these discourses is the “Kingdom of Heaven.” (One of the reasons scholars believe this book was written for a Jewish community is because Matthew uses the term “Kingdom of Heaven” rather than “Kingdom of God” to avoid offending Jews who would not be comfortable with using the name of God.) While the Gospel of Mark also points to the Kingdom of God, Matthew expands on this by including the five discourses in which Jesus explains the Kingdom in much greater detail.

Here again, Jesus is shown to move beyond Moses. Where Moses prepared people to enter the Promised Land, Jesus prepared people to enter God’s own presence through participating in the Kingdom here on earth and into eternity.

This leads us to our second point. How does someone live as part of the Kingdom? By becoming a disciple of Jesus. A “disciple” is someone who learns. It is little wonder, then, that when Jesus gives the commission to “make disciples,” he includes the command to

“teach them to obey every command I have given you” (Matthew 28:20). In doing this, Jesus points everyone who would be his disciple back to his teachings about the law and how to order one’s life in a way that honors God.

Being a disciple is not just a matter of individual obedience, however. The five discourses do not primarily discuss how a single person can live a morally upright life, but how they can be fit for the Kingdom of Heaven through the way they relate to other people. It is not surprising, then, that we find the “Great Commandments” in the Gospel of Matthew:

Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Matthew 22:37-40).

In saying this, Jesus settled a rabbinic debate as to which of these two commandments was more important. He explained that they could not be separated. If someone wanted to be loving toward God, they must also be loving toward their neighbor. It was impossible to do one without the other.

In the example of murder/hate and adultery/lust above, the issue is not just about an individual disciple honoring God’s commandments by avoiding vice, it is about the disciple living in a loving way toward others. If we love our neighbor, we will not reduce them to a mere object of our hate or lust. Rather, we will see them as fellow humans made in the image of God who are worth the same dignity that we have. This kind of love is demonstrated first within the community of disciples, and then is extended outward as those who are already disciples invite others to be part of the community (hence fulfilling the Great Commission to “go and make disciples”).

Discipleship in the Gospel of Matthew, then, is focused on right relationships both within the community of disciples and in the way this community relates to the world. This realization was meant to break the disorientation of the Jewish community that received the Gospel originally. Their identity was not based on race, blood, status, geography, or rituals. Rather, they were a new community which was formed through allegiance to Jesus and a life of obedience — discipleship — that reflects the will of God. This community was entered by faith, explaining why Jesus includes the command to baptize those who become disciples (Matthew 28:19). Baptism is the visible symbol of the new life of discipleship a person desires to live as part of the disciple community.

Not only was this small Jewish community secure in its identity so long as it grounded itself in discipleship to Jesus, it was commissioned to be an agent of transformation. It had a way of living that invited others to know the hope of living in right relationships with one another in such a way that not only blessed them in this world, but invited them to share in heaven for eternity.

*Bible Study on Matthew: Community of Discipleship*

Read about the following passages that describe some of the characteristics of a disciple of Jesus Christ and then answer the questions that follow.

- Mt. 6:19-21; 19:23-26
  - Mt. 10:17; 16:24-25
  - Mt. 18:1-5
  - Mt. 20:20-28
  - Mt. 23:6-7
  - Mt. 25:31-40
- a. What are some of the essential ingredients of discipleship according to Matthew?
  - b. Applying Matthew to our lives today, where do you see tension between these qualities of discipleship and our contemporary society?
  - c. Where and how is learning about discipleship occurring within your congregation?

Read Matthew 22:34-40 (the Greatest Commandments) and 28:16-20 (the Great Commission).

- a. The Great Commission is often linked to the idea of “evangelism.” How do you understand the ministry of evangelism? What does it entail? Does this match with what the Great Commission says is part of “making disciples?”
- b. What happens when you link the Greatest Commandments with the Great Commission—when love for God and neighbor became the basis for making disciples and inviting them into the discipleship community? Does that further change how you think about evangelism?
- c. Where and how is loving—loving God and loving your neighbor—being taught and practiced in your congregation?
- d. How are people prepared for baptism in your congregation now? How does the congregation engage with those who are baptized to help them grow as disciples? Is this done in an ongoing way that prepare the baptized disciple to become someone who invites others into the community of discipleship?

Pick one parable from Matthew 13 and read it. How does it shape your understanding of Heaven?

Pick one teaching in Matthew 18. How does it shape your understanding of what God expects from those of us who are in the church?

If your church adopted Matthew’s model of mission how:

- a. Would it allow you to meet needs in your context are not being met now?
- b. Would it change the way that you relate to the people in your context?
- c. Would it build credibility for the message your church teaches?
- d. Would it change the way your congregation does its ministry?

## SESSION 6 PAUL: A Community of Reconciliation

*All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18)*

Paul's letters were written to young churches throughout the Mediterranean area, many of which Paul had personally planted during his three missionary journeys throughout the Roman Empire. This makes Paul's letters the earliest writings in the New Testament, since Paul's conversion (Acts 9:1-19) and subsequent missionary happened only a few years after the Ascension of Jesus Christ. Most scholars think that the first letter he wrote was 1 Thessalonians, dated to about 50 AD.

Although Paul had been a devout Pharisee, meaning he followed the Mosaic law and customs carefully and taught others to do the same, after becoming a follower of Jesus Christ he claimed God had called him to be an "apostle to the Gentiles" (Romans 1:5, Galatians 2:8). In this role, he intentionally preached the gospel to all people, both Jew and Gentile. While Paul continued to desire deeply that all Jews would be saved by God (Romans 9:2-3), he was convinced that God had forestalled that salvation to allow Gentiles the opportunity to be saved first (Romans 11:25).

In claiming this, Paul inverted the expectation that the Jews had long held based on the messages they had received from the prophets. These pointed to God restoring the Kingdom of Israel, which then would allow Gentiles from the nations to come into it. (See, for example, Isaiah 2:2). However, Paul contended that the Jews had misunderstood the order of God's activity. First the Gentiles would be included in God's salvation, then God would save Israel and establish the Kingdom.

Paul's reason for doing this was based on what God had done through Jesus Christ. While Paul believed that Jesus was the prophesied Messiah of the Jewish people (Acts 28:23), he also believed that the way God worked through Jesus addressed a problem that was common to all humans regardless of their ancestry or cultural background: sin.

Paul argues that all people are infected by Adam's original sin in the Garden. This sin came with a curse: death (Genesis 2:17, Romans 5:12, 1 Corinthians 15:22). Ever since the first man and woman sinned, then, all people have faced the dismal reality that they have inherited a human nature that is corrupted by sin and doomed to die as a result of that.

The Law of Moses is useful because it teaches people what sin is (Romans 7:7). However, knowing what sin is does not mean that we therefore stop sinning. Rather, because we are infected with the sin of Adam, we perversely desire to do the very things that the law forbids us from doing (Romans 7:21-23). This leads us into a spiral toward death that we have no capacity to stop. Only God's intervention on behalf of humanity can free us from this corruption that leads to sin and death.

Paul joyfully proclaims that God did intervene in the person of Jesus, providing us with the means to be saved through his crucifixion and resurrection (Romans 5:6-8). As the “new Adam” (1 Corinthians 15:45), Jesus inaugurated a new humanity that participated in God’s righteousness and life rather than in Adam’s sin and death (Romans 5:19). In doing this, God reconciled all of humanity to God once again (Romans 5:9-11)!

Why did God offer Jesus to us when we deserved death instead because of our participation in sin? Paul has a simple explanation for this: God loves us. It is because God loves us that God extends grace to us, meaning that God works for our good when we could not do it for ourselves. As Paul states, “God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope” (2 Thessalonians 2:16). This love was so intense that God the Father was even willing to sacrifice the Son for our salvation (Romans 8:32). It is little wonder, then, that Paul declares triumphantly:

in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:37-39).

While God has graciously done this incredible work through Jesus Christ on behalf of all humanity, that does not mean that we as humans simply can enjoy what God has done without responding. While we cannot earn the righteousness and life that Jesus makes available to us, we must be intentional about claiming it. According to Paul, we do this through faith. As he writes: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9).

This faith is partly demonstrated by believing that Jesus is the Son of God who came to save us through his death and resurrection: “If you declare with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Romans 10:8-9). This belief is the same for Jews and Gentiles alike (Romans 10:12-13), since both are afflicted by the common problem of sin and death, and both are loved by God enough to be offered the grace of Jesus’ new humanity.

The other way to show this faith is through how we order our lives. Paul does not jettison the law, rather he contends that once we have exercised faith by believing in God’s gracious work through Jesus on our behalf, God then moves in us to lead holy lives. Above all, this holiness is demonstrated in how we obey the Great Commandment of the law to love one another (Romans 13:8, Galatians 5:13-14). This love is shown both by actively serving one another as well as by refusing to indulge in selfish desires through which we denigrate ourselves and others. This affects our moral formation, affecting every aspect of how we relate to others in our day-to-day lives.

God makes it possible for us to act on our faith by sending the Holy Spirit to empower our moral decision making and activity. The Spirit gives us gifts we can use to better serve others (1 Corinthians 12:1-11), virtues that reflect the character of God (the “fruits of the Spirit” in Galatians 5:22-23), and strength so that we do not fall prey to immoral desires (Romans 8:1-17, Galatians 5:24-25). In all these things, the Spirit keeps us connected to God and one another so that we are not just individuals trying to forge through a sinful world alone (Romans 8:26-27).

While leading holy lives through loving others, having our character formed in the virtues, and maintain good moral behavior is something that all people can do, Paul also recognized that it requires contextual sensitivity. This is because the moral decisions that people make will differ from one context to another.

Most of Paul’s letters address issues that would never have occurred to the Jewish followers of Jesus. For example, is it allowable to eat meat sacrificed to idols (1 Corinthians 8)? Jewish followers of Christ would have kept kosher, so they would never have needed to ask this question because they never would have considered eating something prepared at a pagan temple. For the Gentile followers of Jesus, however, this was a very real question. A great deal of the meat they bought in the marketplace was sold after the animal had first been sacrificed to a pagan god. Did that defile the meat for the Christian? What if the Christian was invited by friends to a banquet being held at a pagan temple? Should they go and eat there?

Paul’s answer to all such questions is consistent. Is acting one way or another going to demonstrate love toward others? If there is even the smallest hint that what I do could be harmful to another person, then I should avoid it entirely even if the activity is not morally wrong by itself. As he explains in relation to the question of eating meat sacrificed to idols: “food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do...[But] if what I eat causes my brother [or sister] to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause them to fall” (1 Corinthians 8:8, 13). Paul’s concern is not whether the Christian eating will be harmed by the meat, but whether the person will harm the conscience of those who watch the Christian eating the meat.

Caring for the impact we had on others was critical for Paul because he was convinced that Jesus would return to judge all people once and for all (1 Corinthians 7:29). This meant that there was very little time left to respond in faith to the grace of God shown through Jesus Christ and to love others by the power of the Holy Spirit. What people should do with that time was devote themselves to offering a witness to the surpassing goodness of Jesus for others to see and believe (Romans 10:14-15, 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12).

So it was that Paul called people to recognize that they had been utterly transformed by God’s grace, made into new people in the image of the righteous, life-giving Jesus Christ instead of the corrupted Adam who was doomed to die. As these new people, we are representatives of God toward the rest of the world, inviting everyone to be reconciled to

God through faith in Jesus Christ so they might join us as those who share in the hope of salvation. As Paul himself put it:

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:17-21).

*Bible Study on Paul: Community of Reconciliation*

Read Philippians 2:1-18. This passage includes what is often referred to as the "Christ Hymn," (2:5-11), which describes the how Jesus chose to relate to God and humanity. Paul does not restrict this way of living to Jesus alone, however, but enjoins his readers to live in a similar way.

- 1) How would you describe the "mind" (verse 5) Paul wants his readers to have? Does it include having certain:
  - a. beliefs?
  - b. character traits?
  - c. ways of acting?
- 2) Does having the mind of Christ mean there are to be no differences within the Christian community? If not, how are differences to be addressed?
- 3) How would the mind of Christ be manifested within a setting (inside or outside the church) of differences, opposites, and even enemies?
- 4) How would you like to see the mind of Christ have greater sway in your church?

Re-read 2 Corinthians 5:16-21.

- 1) The word "reconciliation" has been adopted by a variety of social causes. See if you can name any of these uses. How does Paul's use of the word agree or differ from these? What happens if we base our sense of mission on one of the uses that is not the same as Paul's?
- 2) Central to Paul's notion of God's grace is that Jesus Christ died for our sins. This was God's ultimate act of love and the basis for which we are to love others. However, both the idea of sin and the idea of Jesus being sacrificed for that sin can be problematic for people today. How do you address these concerns?

If your church adopted Paul's model of mission how:

- a. Would it allow you to meet needs in your context are not being met now?
- b. Would it change the way that you relate to the people in your context?
- c. Would it build credibility for the message your church teaches?
- d. Would it change the way your congregation does its ministry?