

Biblical Ventures
"The Bible Says"
Scriptural Questions about Common Missiological
Assumptions

by J. Paul Pennington

Over three hundred years of Protestant mission theology, mobilization, and practice, Christians have developed deeply entrenched narratives about what the Scriptures say about their global mission. These narratives provide the motivational and practical foundation for what people do as they develop and pursue their mission strategies and methodologies.

I have spent most of my sixty plus years living in and with these narratives. I have been a missionary kid, a missionary, and served for seventeen years as a Professor of Intercultural Studies. Until recently, I served as Vice President for Academic Affairs with William Carey International University.

In spite of my long connection with the mission world, I have had, for some time, a nagging sense that our missiological narratives around key scriptural terms do not actually represent what Scripture tells us about them. If our understanding of terms like "kingdom," "gospel," and "disciple" reflect inadequate scriptural understanding, it is likely that both our missiology and the praxis derived from it could prove faulty. The prevailing missiological narratives about biblical terms could actually keep us from reading and listening to Scripture carefully and following what it actually teaches.

If we want to be faithful to Jesus and his Word in our missiology, it is essential that we re-read Scripture for what it actually says, rather than what our mission narratives tell us. And if we are serious about pursuing the commission of Jesus in ways that are faithful to him and his Word, in ways that don't unnecessarily alienate people on the frontiers from Jesus, we must help believers wrestle with how Jesus wants to be represented and served on the edges, fringes, and frontiers. This research agenda is not a matter of academic pedantry or irrelevant etymology. The way that we use, or possibly misuse, scriptural terms at the core of our mission pursuits has had eternal consequences for millions of people.

Editor's Note: This article was originally presented at the International Society for Frontier Missiology 2019 (a track of EMS 2019), Dallas International University, Dallas, TX.

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In 2016, Mike Rynkiewich published an article in *IBMR* entitled "Do Not Remember the Former Things."¹ Based on Isaiah 43:18, Rynkiewich suggested, "Repeatedly in salvation history God moves faster than his people can keep up."² The author then contended that "*missiology continues to be hindered by outdated theories of culture and theologies of mission*" (emphasis mine) and called for deep reexamination of core assumptions in the face of globalization, urbanization, migration, and post-modernism.

Tite Tiéno, in his *IBMR* response to Rynkiewich's article, noted that he had also "*questioned the ideologies that were present in mission thinking, promotional literature, and strategy*" (emphasis mine).³ Tiéno then called for a more disruptive review of mission tradition:

It is indeed time to reconsider the assumptions operating in missiology and the categories used by mission practitioners and strategists. Such a task is long, difficult, and perilous because too many people and powerful organizations have a vested interest in perpetuating marketable rallying cries, slogans, and plans.⁴

After noting the difficulty of such re-examination, Tiéno concluded, "We should . . . not be surprised that strategic categories continue to prevail in mission. *Perhaps what is needed is a new articulation of the very nature of Christian mission.*"⁵ (emphasis mine)

In the past year, I have also been engaged in multiple conversations around Mike Stroope's recent book *Transcending Mission*.⁶ Stroope, by his own admission, in a private conversation, has sought to provoke deeper reconsideration of the historical and terminological foundations of the "mission" paradigm. Stroope's analysis joins the voices of Rynkiewich and Tiéno in calling for deeper reflection on how Jesus wants his followers to serve and represent him globally.

Rynkiewich observed in the conclusion of his article:

Our understanding of the world, our set of categories—our worldview, if you will—leads us to see what we expect to see, but they deceive us so that we miss what we do not expect to see. The name for this practice is *hubris*; it is a lack of epistemological humility. (italics original)⁷

If Christianity, church, or mission are founded upon this hubris, this lack of epistemological humility, we might actually find ourselves pursuing missions, purposes, and agendas that are out of line with or even counter to the mission and purpose of Jesus and his Father. The only cure for hubris, is the humility to set aside our epistemological certainty and to listen deeply to corrective voices—voices that can help us hear what Jesus wants and what he is doing in the

world—but voices that, if we listen carefully, will challenge our missiological and mission hubris.

Of all the voices we need to consider, I am deeply concerned that we aren't always paying careful enough attention to the voice of Scripture, what it tells us about Jesus' priorities, and how he wants us to go about the task he has set us. So let me first make some general observations about how we should listen to Scripture. I will then illustrate the challenge of using scriptural terms in unscriptural ways by exploring three representative examples: "kingdom," "gospel," and "disciple."

Listening to Scripture

In our own incarnational journey, my wife and I have noticed rather often that when Christians assert, "The Bible says . . ." they are often unaware of how they are actually citing their own tradition's narrative about what the Bible says, or are demonstrating that common tendency of "misreading scripture through Western eyes"⁸ or through some other cultural lens.

Some Christians would even argue that there is little or no room for innovation in mission. If Jesus is "the same yesterday, today, and forever," they argue, then we just need to keep preaching the same, simple "gospel" in the same way we have done.

I would counter, however, that such a naïve and simplistic view of Jesus and his good news is challenged by the New Testament itself. One thing that never changes about Jesus is his constant desire to incarnate his way—his life—within the families, cultures, communities, and societies of this world. And that incarnational spirit leads to variety and adaptability in the New Testament, not systematization and conformity.

A few years ago, I was involved in an email discussion where one participant asked for assistance in identifying "biblical culture." Our divisions would be solved, the writer indicated, if all believers would simply follow the "biblical culture" presented in the New Testament. I myself come from a Christian tradition where our religious forebearers claimed to have found the "New Testament pattern" that all believers should follow in order to be faithful to Jesus and Scripture.

However, as I have reflected on that idea of "biblical culture" or "New Testament pattern" I have become increasingly impressed by a unique feature of the new covenant Scriptures—I have come to term it the "cultural non-specificity" of the New Testament. As we review the commands and instructions from Matthew to Revelation, it is amazing how many of them do not provide enough cultural detail—enough form or structure—for us to replicate the

command in the same way in every instance, much less across cultures and times.

The Mosaic Law, in contrast, provided specific rules for what to eat or not eat, material for clothing, rituals and festivals, even hair cutting. While the Jews did not always follow these commands, they did follow enough of them to become a separate nation, somewhat distinct from those around them.

In stark contrast, the New Testament Scriptures provide little cultural form for any required practices or rituals. Baptism and the Lord's Supper, while obviously practiced, are not given enough specificity to know precisely how they were conducted, who was permitted to administer them, or when they were performed. We have no "order of service" from the New Testament era to serve as a blueprint for later liturgies. Every modern worship service depends on a form and order invented after or beyond what is recorded in the Scriptures.

This pervasive cultural non-specificity has to be intentional, not accidental. Why would Jesus lead his people to not record the specific forms they used for essential practices and commands? I am convinced that this non-specificity is, in fact, due to the incarnational spirit of Jesus and his new covenant. Given a choice, Jesus wants to incarnate his life, his good news, his ekklesia, his teaching into the cultural forms and expressions of families, communities, and peoples. He does not want his followers to standardize one cultural form as normative for all believers in all contexts.

So for me, at the outset, we must first listen to this incarnational voice of Scripture, its cultural non-specificity. This is the foundation for the disruptive innovation we need to consider, particularly in frontier missiology. It is important that we understand a corollary principle to the cultural non-specificity; if the New Testament does not specify cultural forms for its commands, then it is necessary for believers to invent a form in order to obey the command or to perform the essential function. Once created, however, those forms are only normative for the believers who created them in a specific context. Believers should never assume that the forms they created are "biblical" and thus normative or necessary for any believers in any other culture or community. The function is normative, but the invented form is almost always constructed, contingent, and contextual—that particular form is not essential for the function.

I have come to the conviction that terms like "Christianity," "church," "mission" themselves are all cultural constructs, laden with cultural baggage and accretions. Some were legitimate "incarnations," cultural inventions within a particular context. Some have been human departures from or even unwarranted additions to the way of Jesus. Jesus is not bound by or to any

Christian, church, or mission forms, no matter how sacrosanct or hallowed in the eyes of their partisans. While perfectly appropriate in the settings where they were created, those forms are not necessary or normative for believers in other contexts, especially in the most challenging frontiers, edges, fringes, and margins that have proved most impenetrable to traditional Christian mission forms.

In new contexts, Jesus, if he is given his choice (not our conformity), wants new wineskins, not cosmetically enhanced old ones. He wants new forms and new expressions that are as natural to that context as our adaptations were to our ancestors when they invented them.

I became increasingly impressed with the cultural non-specificity of the gospel.

Frontier missiology needs to encourage this incarnational spirit into the next generation. It requires a radical reexamination of our propensity to standardize and essentialize the forms and expressions of one culture for another community of believers. At this higher level, we need to teach our students to listen to the incarnational, innovative voice of Scripture instead of teaching forms, structures, and traditions that are the accumulated accretions of cultural inventions from other communities.

Additionally, in order to better root our frontier missiology in Scripture, I propose that we also need to listen more carefully to what Scripture says about the foundational concepts that have been deeply woven into our missiology and practice.

The incarnational spirit of the New Testament is marked by variety and flexibility in expression and form in contrast to the one-size-fits-all conformity and standardization often followed by mission theorists, strategists, and practitioners. Frontier missiology particularly must encourage practitioners to reflect on incarnational adaptation of the New Testament—to listen more deeply to Scripture, not just to the parts we culturally prioritize and emphasize.

So let me explore this challenge of listening more deeply to Scripture, of using scriptural terms in scriptural ways through three representative examples. They will illustrate how claims to "biblical missiology" can actually ignore fundamental

principles that Scripture articulates about how we should understand and use "kingdom," "gospel," and "disciple."

Excessive Emphasis on Kingdom

Let's first consider the pervasive use of "kingdom" language in mission and missiology today. Significant ink and breath have been expended on the need to "bring the kingdom," "advance the kingdom," "expand the kingdom," "spread the kingdom," or "build the kingdom." Countless mission conferences and consultations have utilized the phrase in the Lord's Prayer, "Thy kingdom come," as a paradigm for their mission emphases, but will often ignore or at least minimize the two other petitions that open that model prayer, "Your name be honored" and "Your will be done."⁹

He knew that Jesus had spoken often of the kingdom. He was there when those conversations and sermons had occurred. So what would lead the man arguably closest to Jesus to mostly leave out that overt kingdom language in his telling of the story? We are not told why. But, John's reduction of the "kingdom" theme cannot be accidental. However, given John's obviously intentional decrease in "kingdom" language, our missiology should at least ask why one of Jesus' dearest witnesses would tell the whole story of Jesus without feeling the need to front "kingdom" language to do so? Was John being unfaithful to Jesus? Absolutely not.

The incarnational Jesus, for whatever reason, led John, inspired him in fact, to tell the whole story without hardly a mention of

The incarnational Jesus, for whatever reason, inspired John to tell the whole story without hardly a mention of the kingdom of God.

Obviously, Jesus spoke a great deal about the kingdom (kingdom of God, kingdom of heaven)—some eighty times in fact. Given this prevalent theme, some Western Christians particularly have developed whole systems of "kingdom" teaching and paradigms that have woven deeply into their missiology. They have then exported their kingdom emphasis globally as part of their packaging of the good news of Jesus, teaching kingdom seminars, developing kingdom ministries, and pursuing all sorts of kingdom agendas and schemes. Those who create these emphases claim the Bible as their justification.

But I contend that, in creating these paradigms and packages, we have not paid close enough attention to how the Scripture uses the kingdom motif. The excessive use of kingdom as an essential paradigm that all believers in all places must adopt and utilize is actually challenged by Scripture. Frontier missiology especially needs to wrestle with this overemphasis on kingdom from both scriptural and practical perspectives.

Consider, first of all, the evidence of the Gospels themselves. Yes, the kingdom theme occurs eighty times in the Gospels. But seventy-five of those are in the synoptics. When we turn to John's gospel, something remarkable happens. The idea of God's kingdom is referenced only five times there, twice in Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus (John 3), and then not again until three times in Jesus' conversation with Pilate (John 18). That's it!

John was the "disciple whom Jesus loved," the one who had a unique relationship with Jesus, and who knew his heart well.

the "kingdom of God." The incarnational Jesus was modeling the level of variation and adaptation that his believers should follow when presenting his life and authority. Our missiology is limited and truncated if we simply and uncritically gravitate to kingdom emphases and language without considering this important direction that John took for the audience to whom he was writing.

Can you proclaim Jesus without emphasizing "kingdom" everywhere you go? John apparently believed so. And our missiology should examine both why that might be necessary and how it might be faithful to Jesus to reduce kingdom language in certain contexts. I'll return to that in my practical considerations in a moment.

We must consider a second scriptural phenomenon in the use of kingdom. In summarizing the forty days of Jesus' appearances after his resurrection, Luke says that during that time Jesus was "speaking of the kingdom of God" (Acts 1:3). Reading that phrase one would expect to find prevalent and constant references to this theme in the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus. So, read through Matthew 28, Mark 16, Luke 24, and John 20–21? How many times does "kingdom" occur in those chapters? Not once!

This is even more telling than John's omission. The evidence of Scripture seems to indicate that Jesus himself was adept at speaking about his understanding of the "kingdom of God" without feeling the need to use that precise phrase or

language to do so. Those who recorded his last conversations certainly felt no compulsion to insert it into each account.

The third consideration is Jesus' last conversation with his disciples before he ascended to heaven. He had gathered them together on the Mount of Olives. They asked him a question, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" What was Jesus' answer? "That is none of your business! God is in charge of that."

So Jesus basically says, "The kingdom is none of your business. That's God's. Your business? You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

In other words, the last thing Jesus said to his disciples was, "Don't get hung up on kingdom! Focus on being my witnesses." And the rest of the New Testament indicates that they took him seriously. From the prevalence of "kingdom" language in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the book of Acts reduced references to kingdom to sixteen times in twenty-eight chapters.¹⁰ Likewise Paul emphasized other aspects of the authority and lordship of Christ and God and referenced "kingdom" much more sparingly (only once per epistle, except 1 Corinthians). It's there, but not nearly as frequent.

I suspect that there are two cultural dynamics that play into the reduction in kingdom language. It was an important concept for 1st century Jews who had developed a number of paradigms around God's messianic kingdom. That language resonated with their aspirations, even as Jesus tried to correct the expectations to a more internal, spiritual reign of God within. At the same time, the imperial authorities found talk of an alternate kingdom potentially seditious. Given these Jewish and Greco-Roman dynamics, Jesus led his followers to speak of his transformational life and his authority using metaphors and expressions that did not emphasize "kingdom" to the same extent he did when alive in a Jewish context.

This reduction in kingdom language, then, is actually initiated and inspired by the incarnational Jesus himself as he leads his people to live out his way and life in the Gentile world.

Innovative frontier missiology, I suggest, must wrestle with why the New Testament reduces kingdom language. And it must grapple with the implications of this reduction in the contexts where using "kingdom" could actually be problematic.

So let me briefly shift from scriptural to practical concerns about kingdom.

From one perspective, when Christians tout their kingdom agendas and programs in nations that were once subject to Western imperial and colonial rule, their message often

sounds like a desire to reinstate that foreign imperial and colonial control. Wrapping Jesus too tightly in "kingdom" garb can actually create an impression that his incarnational spirit wants to avoid.

At the same time, we should also ask, why some Western Christians love "kingdom" language and paradigms so much? Sadly, that language may resonate with their own cultural history of power, control, domination, and subjugation. Subtly, yet with significant hubris and arrogance, some Christians pursue their "kingdom" agendas with too much of that spirit in mind. Recently, in reading of a "union mission" that once existed in Benares (Varanasi), India, I was struck that one of the partners was actually named World Dominion Mission. Whatever the founders and members thought of that name, most Indians then and now would understand such words to refer to foreign dominion and subjugation, not the humble, compassionate reign of Prabhu Yesu (Lord Jesus).

So both from a scriptural and practical perspective, future missiology needs to challenge existing "kingdom" paradigms and encourage students and practitioners to listen more carefully to what Scripture actually says about how the early followers of Jesus understood and represented Christ's authority and rule in the world. And it needs to challenge believers to nuance situations, contexts, and communities where kingdom language ought to be reduced or de-emphasized just as the New Testament actually demonstrates.

Hiding Good News behind "Gospel"

The gospel obviously presents a foundational concept for our missiology. It is the person and work of Jesus, the good news of what he has done for sinful humanity. All too often, though, Christians have created standardized packages and truncated presentations of what their version of the gospel entails. Some Christians, in fact, assert that cultural considerations are irrelevant; that we just need to "preach the simple gospel." Or as we've heard from Indian Christian friends in our early explorations, "Christians have been taught, 'You don't need to worry about relationships or culture, just give them the gospel.'"¹¹

The New Testament, in contrast, demonstrates considerable variety and flexibility in how the good news, the wonderful story of Jesus, is told. The four gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) all tell the story of the one Jesus, who is "the same yesterday, today, and forever." Yet they present that same story in different ways for different audiences and communities.

John's gospel presents Jesus with significant variation from the Synoptics. In addition, it is important to note that John never uses *euangelion* ("gospel," good news) in either his gospel or his letters. It does occur a single time in Revelation 14:6. As

we saw with "kingdom," John was led by Jesus to tell his story without feeling the need to slavishly use "gospel" to do so. Is it possible to recount the life and significance of Jesus without ever using "gospel" (euangelion, good news) to do so? John apparently thought so.

In so doing, he challenges us to consider a level of variation and adaptation in our own telling where "gospel" might, for some reason, represent inappropriate or confusing language to our hearers. John wanted to present the good news of Jesus to his readers, and for some reason declined to ever use "gospel" to do so. Our missiology ought to be nuanced and deep enough that we wrestle with why and where our own presentation of the good news might also demonstrate such variation and flexibility, instead of slavishly using "gospel" because Christian tradition says we must.

In addition to the variation in the four gospels, Paul's epistles include enough of his presentation to provide what amounts to a fifth "gospel." Paul tells the story at times in words and with explanations not found in any of the four gospels. Yet Paul specifically asserts, "The good news that was announced by me is not of human origin, for I neither received it nor was I taught it, but I received it through revelation from Jesus Christ" (Galatians 1:11–12; author's translation from Greek). Paul specifically claims that his varied presentation of the good news came directly by revelation from Jesus, not from a human source. So the different expressions and explanations he uses he attributes to the revelation of Jesus, not his own invention.

Additional early historical evidence also testifies to the varied presentation of the good news in the New Testament era. Eusebius cites a report from Papias regarding Mark:

Mark, who had been Peter's interpreter, wrote down carefully, but not in order, all that he remembered of the Lord's sayings and doing.... *Peter used to adapt his teachings to the occasion, without making a systematic arrangement of the Lord's sayings....*¹² (emphasis mine)

In fact, the Book of Acts reflects this variation in presentation. Of the eight sermons in Acts, no two are the same. The occasion, the audience, the cultural and religious backstory all lead the speakers to tell the story of the same Jesus in different ways. The incarnational Jesus leads them to communicate his good news with adaptation and variation, not a standardized, one-size-fits-all package.

Given this significant variation in gospel presentation, frontier missiology must fundamentally challenge Christian

tendencies to standardize the gospel into truncated, one-size-fits-all presentations that claim to be "biblical" while ignoring the Bible's rich, varied, and diverse telling of the multifaceted, multidimensional good news of Jesus. The earliest witnesses of Jesus were led by his Spirit to adapt and vary their presentations to their audiences. If we listen carefully to Scripture, our missiology should inculcate this incarnational ability to understand and present the good news of Jesus in varied ways as we encounter radically different contexts from those in which we created our "gospel" packages.

Why is this so critical? Enoch Wan has offered a cogent critique of the "simple," guilt-based gospel presented by so many. He articulates why we need to listen more carefully to how early believers adapted instead of standardized the good news, and how we should still do so today in non-Western contexts, if not in the West itself.

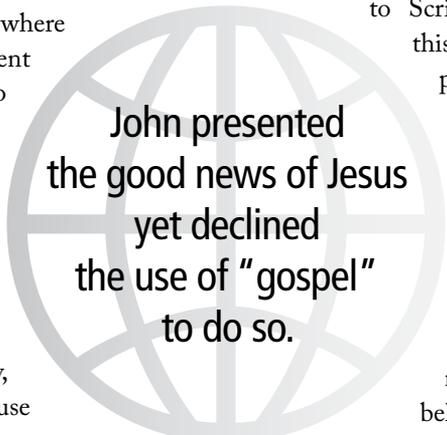
Of course, the "whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27) should be taught eventually in a discipleship program. But nobody should be alienated from the Kingdom of God [note the intersection with our last term] because they are culturally unable to grasp the overemphasized "forensic" aspect of the gospel and therefore unprepared to accept the "penal substitution of Christ" as presented by Anglophone Caucasian Christians [and, I would add, their foreign proselytes] in evangelism.¹³

Our understanding of and presentation of the good news of Jesus, especially on the frontiers, desperately needs to challenge the prevalent standardization, systematization, and industrialization of gospel and evangelism. Frontier missiology must listen more carefully to the incarnational voice of Scripture, and challenge common narratives and methodologies that claim biblical justification, while ignoring the deeply incarnational and adaptive spirit of the good news of Jesus.

Ignoring the Disappearance of "Disciple"

A final example further illustrates how we must listen more carefully to all that Scripture says rather than creating theologies, missiologies, and then strategies based on an incomplete reading of Scripture.

Without question the Gospels place great emphasis on a discipling model for maturing and multiplying followers and leaders. The field of missiology has consumed immeasurable ink and paper just on discussing the meaning and application of Jesus' instruction in Matthew's version of the Great Commission—that his followers should "make disciples of



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all nations.” Some would argue that since Jesus told us to do it, then of course we should not only obey his command but should use the term he chose as we do so.

So based on this partial, simplistic analysis of Scripture, Christians and missions have created a plethora of discipleship theologies, discipleship programs, discipleship ministries, and discipleship strategies—all claiming to represent Jesus biblically. Yet, when I read the New Testament, the pervasive addiction to a “discipleship” narrative and paradigm is again challenged when we listen more carefully to the Scriptures.

In Acts, two terms for the followers of Jesus predominate, “disciples” (27 times) and “brethren” (32 times). Once an identity was established to that extent, Christians would tend to standardize practice and continue using that term. We should expect to find a similar pattern in the rest of the New Testament regarding disciple, an even distribution between it and brethren (*adelphoi* could mean brothers and sisters, siblings of any gender).

Instead, a shift in terminology occurs that is unexplained, but undeniably significant. After the end of Paul’s third journey (Acts 21:16), and through the rest of the New Testament, the name “disciple” is completely dropped. Mike Breen has called this *The Great Disappearance*.¹⁴ In contrast, brother or brethren occur 183 times in the rest of the New Testament after Acts.¹⁵

Paul never calls believers disciples, never speaks of disciple-making (although Luke speaks of such work in Paul’s first journey—Acts 14:21). He never utilizes disciple language in his extensive writing. I regularly hear Christians and missionaries talk about Paul “discipling” while they ignore this significant shift in Paul’s own terminology and methodology.

Was Paul being unfaithful to Jesus by not using the D-word to describe his ministry? Was he being disobedient to the Matthean version of the Great Commission? Not at all! He was familiar with the “disciple” paradigm; he was, after all, a disciple himself of the Rabbi Gamaliel. He associated with the disciples after his conversion in Damascus (Acts 9). And he was in Antioch serving the fledgling congregation with Barnabas when the “disciples” were first labeled “Christians” (Acts 11:26). So his prevalent use of brother/brethren (in continuity with Acts) while completely dropping “disciple” terminology is a significant feature of his ministry that demands greater missiological attention.

In this important shift, Paul models an incarnational (or innovative) impetus in serving Jesus. He is committed to fulfilling the command and purpose of Jesus. Yet, led by the Spirit of Jesus, he feels no compulsion to perpetuate the Jewish Rabbi/disciple model to do so. Yes, the Greco-

Roman world also had disciples. students of philosophers and teachers. But for some unexplained reason, Paul seems to have determined that “disciple” terminology was not appropriate for the contexts in which he worked.

Make no mistake, Paul is committed to the function of maturing and multiplying believers, the purpose of the Great Commission. He is constantly accompanied by a team of partners (e.g., Silas, Timothy) and continually is training and deploying them in service just as Jesus did with his disciples. But instead of using the “disciple” term for doing so, Paul emphasizes at least three alternative models for his obedience to Christ’s command.

- Parent/child
- Coach/athlete
- Equipper (trainer)/worker (or Master/apprentice)

Paul maintains his commitment to serving the key mandate of Jesus, but he adopts different metaphors and models in his context for how he does so. And he exhibits the utmost confidence and assurance that he is maturing and multiplying believers in obedience to Jesus.

What is Jesus saying to peoples who are following Jesus without adherence to traditional Christian forms and assumptions?

So again, we need to listen more carefully to what Scripture says. Paul’s shift away from “discipleship” models and language has significant implications for the future of missiological education. We should challenge students and practitioners to stop creating artificial, often Western-laden “discipleship” models that claim to be scriptural while they actually export foreign emphases, packages, and explanations.

Conclusion

So where does this reflection on what Scripture says lead us? Frontier missiology, to be truly faithful to Jesus and the Great Commission, should encourage practitioners to follow the Spirit-led adaptations reflected in the New Testament. We must teach a new generation to not slavishly develop standardized, simplified methodologies that claim to be biblical while they actually ignore the incarnational variation and adaptation that Jesus and the Apostles modeled.

The questions I have raised regarding “kingdom,” “gospel,” and “disciple” are only representative samples of the foundational reflection and innovation we must pursue as we

more carefully consider frontier missiology. Jesus is actively shaping new wineskins today. The next generation will not be able to follow his incarnational lead unless they learn to listen to Scripture with much greater discernment and sensitivity, while also listening far more deeply and responsively to the contexts and communities they are called to serve.

If we want to be used effectively by Jesus to help shape the new wineskins in the remaining frontiers, frontier missiology must challenge us all to listen afresh to Jesus, Scripture, and the Spirit. One way for this to happen is to listen deeply not just to "Christian" perspectives of what Scripture says, but also

to the incarnational communities of Jesus followers among Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and other peoples. What is Jesus saying to these peoples who are following Jesus without adherence to traditional Christian forms and assumptions?¹⁶ How might we actually hear the Lord's voice more clearly from them than from 1900 years of Christian tradition?

Combine those two voices (from both Scripture and incarnational communities), and the incarnational Jesus will call his servants to imagine, envision, and shape disruptive innovations in mission, those radical new wineskins that are called for on the remaining and challenging fringes, edges, margins, and frontiers. **IJFM**

Endnotes

- ¹ Michael A. Rynkiewich, "Do Not Remember the Former Things," *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 40, no. 4 (2016): 308–17.
- ² Rynkiewich, "Do Not Remember the Former Things," 308.
- ³ Tite Tiénou, "Reflections on Michael A. Rynkiewich's 'Do Not Remember the Former Things,'" *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 40, no. 4 (2016): 319.
- ⁴ Tiénou, "Reflections on Michael A. Rynkiewich's 'Do Not Remember the Former Things,'" 319.
- ⁵ Tiénou, "Reflections on Michael A. Rynkiewich's 'Do Not Remember the Former Things,'" 321.
- ⁶ Michael W. Stroope, *Transcending Mission: The Eclipse of a Modern Tradition* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017).
- ⁷ Rynkiewich, "Do Not Remember the Former Things," 315.
- ⁸ E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O'Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes* (IVP Books, 2012).
- ⁹ The English rendering and recitation of the Model Prayer (Matthew 6) obscures the fact that Jesus taught a threefold petition, not two-fold as traditionally recited:
 Our Father who is in heaven,
 May your name be "hallowed" (honored, revered) [*hagiasthētō to onoma sou*]
 May your reign come [*elthetō hē basileia sou*]
 May your will be done [*genēthētō ton thelēma sou*]
 As in heaven so on earth.
- Both the reign (kingdom) and will are means to the end of his name being honored. When we overemphasize "kingdom" as if it is the primary issue, we can fail to keep all three in balance, and miss the fact that his name is first in the list, and likely of primacy over the other two in Jesus' own priorities and values.
- This is an example of how church tradition, insisted on in Scripture translations, hides what Jesus actually said and taught, and leads to misplaced emphases as a result.
- ¹⁰ Luke's usage shift is particularly significant. "Kingdom of God" occurs thirty-seven times in Luke, half of the seventy-five total occurrences in the synoptic gospels. But after the ascension, Luke only refers to the kingdom sixteen times (less than 50% of his usage in Luke). If Luke were intent on pushing a "kingdom gospel" as some contend, then we should expect him to continue that agenda in the 2nd volume of his series. After all, he is talking about what Jesus continued to do in his people after the resurrection and ascension. So the substantial decrease in kingdom language by Luke is especially striking and demands greater missiological reflection. As the followers of Jesus move away from Jewish contexts, kingdom language declines noticeably. In Acts it is still primarily used in contexts where Jewish believers are present. This demands further research, exploration, and whatever kingdom theology we follow should reflect this scriptural balance.
- ¹¹ See J. Paul Pennington, *Christian Barriers to Jesus: Conversations and Questions from the Indian Context* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2017), chapter 4, starting on p. 85, for examples and discussion of this spirit of "giving the gospel" with disregard for culture or relationship.
- ¹² Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, translated by G. A. Williamson, revised (London, UK: Penguin Books, 1989), 103–104.
- ¹³ Enoch Wan, "Ethnic Receptivity and Intercultural Ministries," *Global Missiology* 1, no. 2 (2004), 3.
- ¹⁴ Mike Breen, *The Great Disappearance* (Exponential Resources, 2013).
- ¹⁵ W. F. Moulton, A. S. Geden, and H. K. Moulton, eds., *A Concordance of the Greek Testament*, Fifth ed. (Edinburgh, Scotland: T. & T. Clark, 1978), 19–21.
- ¹⁶ Two influential voices in my own journey have been Dayanand Bharati (Hindu follower of Jesus) in *Living Water and Indian Bowl* and his blog, *Dialog of Life*, as well as Richard Twiss (First Nations follower of Jesus) in *Rescuing the Gospel from the Cowboys*. Both books can be a painful read for Christians, but their articulation of the deep cultural, relational, and even psychological harm their people have experienced demands that we listen sincerely and repentantly to Jesus' challenge through them to those who serve and represent him. We must not ignore, dismiss, or disregard their challenging critiques if we genuinely want to follow the incarnational way of Jesus.

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