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**A READER'S GUIDE TO  
*TRANSFORMING MISSION***

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## Chapter 1

# *The New Testament as a Missionary Document*

(Bosch, TM, pp. 15–55)

The original audience for the New Testament writings was not a catechism class or a seminary. It was an entire religious movement living a missionary life, spreading a missionary message, and along the way running into one crisis after another. The early church, “because of its missionary encounter with the world, was *forced* to theologize” (16.4). It had to find some answers to the burning questions raised by announcing the gospel in non-Christian, even non-Jewish, settings. To look into the New Testament for guidance about mission today is therefore completely in keeping with the nature of the writings themselves.

The Old Testament writings were not as pervaded with this missionary nature, but they did provide some essential starting points for New Testament mission. First, the God of the Old Testament is a God who steps into the flow of human history in ways of his choosing, unlike the gods of other nations who were tied to the annual seasonal cycle and to certain religious centers and rites (17.4). Second, revelation from this God is frequently a revelation of what he is promising to do for people at a later stage of history, not simply what religious acts he expects people to do for him today (17.9). Third, God focuses his involvement in history and his promises on one nation, Israel, which he brought into being and appointed for a special type of service as his representative among the nations (18.3).

New Testament mission combines all three of these ideas. The sending of Jesus is presented as another example of God stepping into history and changing its course. It was also the fulfillment of the many promises of the coming Messiah, and it was the ultimate example of something happening in Israel that had global implications.

How do we bridge from mission then to mission now? Many scholars have dismissed the historical value of the New Testament writings and gone on to invent all kinds of Jesus figures as props for their predetermined views of mission (22.1). Others have got hung up on an “objective reality” that supposedly is not affected by the interpretation of the observer (24.4). Many mission promoters

have tried to apply the words of the New Testament writings straight to mission today without taking the original context into account.

A sounder approach is that of “critical hermeneutics” (23.8), which asks how the writers understood themselves and their situations and how this affected their interpretations of Jesus. “They handled the traditions about [Jesus] with creative but responsible freedom, retaining those traditions while at the same time adapting them” (21.6). “A crucial task for the church today is to test continually whether its understanding of Christ corresponds with that of the first witnesses” (22.7). This is the other half of critical hermeneutics, how we understand ourselves.

In the next three chapters we will consider the self-understanding of Matthew, Luke, and Paul and its impact on their writings. Before going into those details we need to look at the self-understanding of Jesus, insofar as we can fathom it from his circumstances and the writings about him.

### **JESUS’ OWN PERSON AND MINISTRY**

Jesus clearly did not see himself as a religious teacher with a generic message of religious truth for all humanity (20.5). “He stands in the tradition of the [Old Testament] prophets. Like them and John the Baptist his concern is the repentance and salvation of Israel” (26.4).

In one important sense, however, his strategy for prophetic ministry went against the grain of all other Jewish movements of his day. For all the others, the prophetic task was to define the faithful remnant and build walls around it to keep it from being polluted and lost. The Pharisees and especially the Essenes set about this with great dedication. Even the baptism of John was a way of defining a boundary between ordinary Jews and the true Jews who would be saved by the Messiah (25.7).

Jesus, by contrast, acted as if he thought his mission was to *all* Israel rather than to some subset of Israel defined by one or more religious boundary markers (26.7). By fraternizing with tax collectors like Zaccheus, he indicated that outcasts were welcome in his movement. By preaching the good news so often and so directly to the poor, he lowered the social standards for entry into his movement. By teaching love for enemies, he included them in the groups to which his followers had a mission. By making a Samaritan a hero in a parable, he showed how far outside conventional bounds his thinking went, even outside Israel itself. “What amazes one again and again is the *inclusiveness* of Jesus’ mission” (28.2).

This inclusiveness makes perfect sense if we understand the center of Jesus’ ministry and the implications it had for Jews in general and Jesus’ followers in particular. Here is the sequence:

#### ***1. Jesus announces and demonstrates the arrival of the reign of God***

“The reign of God (*basileia tou Theou*) is undoubtedly central to Jesus’ entire ministry. It is, likewise, central to his understanding of his own mission” (31.9).

Unlike his contemporaries, Jesus saw and declared the reign as arriving, not only as a future hope (32.2). This news electrified his hearers, and he did more than talk about it. He launched “an all-out attack on evil in all its manifestations” (32.9). Victims of disease, demon possession, calamities and ostracism were delivered (literally “saved”) as he arrived among them (33.6).

***2. The arriving reign of God pushes the Torah into second-place importance***

If the arrival of God’s reign is at the center of things, the Torah cannot be at the center any more. This shift at the center creates giant ripple effects throughout Jewish identity and the entire Jewish way of life. “The central place of the Torah in late Jewish apocalyptic is . . . taken by the person and the cross of Christ. The place of life in the law is taken by fellowship with Christ in the following of the crucified one. The place of the self-preservation of the righteous from the world is taken by the mission of the believer in the world” (35.5, quoting Moltmann).

The defining mark of the reign of God arriving in Jesus is not pointing toward God’s requirements as the Torah did. Rather it is love that startlingly reaches out beyond Israel and treats people as more important than the Torah’s regulations (35.9). This love turns the Master into a servant who washes the feet of his followers (36.4).

***3. Jesus reigns over his followers; he does not merely teach them as a rabbi***

The first thing Jesus did after announcing the arrival of God’s reign was to call his first four disciples (36.5). They are the ones who were given front-row seats to watch the arrival of the kingdom, get swept up into it, see how it worked, and pass it on. Following Jesus was drastically different from following other rabbis before or since (see Table 2 on p. 16).

***4. Easter and Pentecost hit the world as the second and third waves of God’s arriving reign***

“It was the Easter experience that determined the early Christian community’s self-definition and identity. Nothing else suffices to account for its coming into being” (40.2). “Intimately related to the resurrection, almost part of the Easter event itself, is the gift of the Spirit, which is equally integrally linked to mission” (40.7).

Jesus announced that God’s reign was arriving, and he backed up the claim with his miracles, his teaching, and his formation of a group of followers. As if to say, “Oh, no, it is not coming,” the powers of this world put him on the cross. As if to say, “Oh, yes, it is,” God raised Jesus from the grave and, as the final blow, sent the Holy Spirit on his followers. As we will see later, the world

**Table 2**  
**Contrast of Rabbis and Jesus**

Following a typical rabbi	Following Jesus
The follower chooses the rabbi	Jesus chooses his followers (37.1)
Authority is based on study of Torah	Jesus authorizes himself (37.5)
A student hopes to become a rabbi	A follower never moves up to a higher status (37.7)
Followers are students	Followers are students and servants (38.1)
A rabbi is a window into his teaching	Jesus' teaching is a window into himself (38.4)
A self-contained group of followers	The vanguard of the messianic people (39.2)

insisted, "Oh, no, it's not," by trying to stifle the disciples, but it was too late. The cross had breached the dam of the world's power. Through Easter and Pentecost the reign of God was pouring uncontrollably into the world, just as Jesus had predicted (40.9). The mission of Jesus' followers is to keep on witnessing to Easter, Pentecost, and (in faith) to his return.

Adding up the previous four points, we arrive at an inclusive gospel of the reign of God, good news for anyone and everyone who welcomes Jesus' message and centers his or her life on it. Note the importance of each person's response to this news. Jesus does not announce that people of all ethnic, social, and religious groups are already included in the reign of God, but that they are all eligible. The reign of God is "at hand" (Matt. 4:17) and people from any group may enter it by following him. Jesus did not teach social or ritual boundaries to mark the citizens of God's new reign/kingdom because he himself *was* the only boundary that mattered. The reign of God was like a bubble around him; getting into it and staying close to him amounted to the same thing.

#### **THE CHURCH'S MISSION AFTER JESUS ASCENDED**

Jesus concentrated his ministry on the people of Israel, and for a while after his resurrection and ascension, so did his followers. They saw themselves as one more theological camp within Judaism, along with the well-known camps of the

Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and Zealots. Cutting across these theological categories was another very different criterion for categorizing Jews — the cultural and linguistic difference between the “Hebrews” (Aramaic-speaking Jews) and the “Hellenists” (Greek-speaking Jews, 42.7).

Within the group of Jews that followed Jesus, this cultural difference eventually proved decisive for its self-understanding and its mission, leading in about fifty years to the emergence of “Christianity” as a religion separate from Judaism. We need to take a closer look at the way this happened, for it was shaped by mission and has shaped mission ever since.

Not long after Jesus’ ascension, the first decisive incident in this saga occurred in Jerusalem. Stephen, a high-profile Hellenist spokesman in the group of Jews that followed Jesus, was mobbed and stoned to death by the Jewish establishment, mostly Hebrews of the Sadducee group. They were defending Judaism against Stephen’s criticisms, which they felt a “real” Jew (a Hebrew, not a second-class Hellenist Jew) would never have made. This sparked widespread attacks on the whole group of Jesus’ followers, making Jerusalem unsafe for them.

Where to flee? Many headed for Antioch, which was the capital of the Roman provinces of Syria and Cilicia, and the third largest city in the Roman Empire at the time. “The largely anonymous, extraordinarily assured, open, active, pneumatic, city-oriented, Greek-speaking heirs of Stephen . . . ’ exiled from Jerusalem, arrived there and founded a church made up of both Jews and Gentiles” (43.6, quoting Meyer). This Jew-Gentile combination, unlikely ever to happen among Jesus’ followers in the Hebrew-dominated, homeland climate of Jerusalem, actually did happen in the highly cosmopolitan and progressive city of Antioch.

Once it became apparent that Gentiles could join the Antioch movement without becoming Jews by being circumcised, two things happened in short order. (1) The Jesus community acquired a new label, “Christians,” by which the wider community was able to distinguish it from both “Jews” and “Gentiles.” (2) The Hebrew leadership of the Jesus community in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to investigate.

At least from a human point of view, the whole future of the Jesus movement hung on Barnabas at this moment. What would he make of what the Hellenists were doing in Antioch? Would Jerusalem, home of the all-Hebrew apostles, tell Antioch it was out of bounds? Would Antioch accept the apostles’ authority if they did so? Would the Hebrew followers of Jesus split from the Hellenistic ones?

The danger was real, but it was avoided. “Instead of censuring the Antiochians for what he saw, Barnabas was himself caught up in the events there and ‘encouraged’ the believers (Acts 11:23)” (43.8). Then he traveled to Tarsus to recruit Saul (Paul) to come to Antioch and help the Hellenists think through what they were doing. Paul was ideal for this role because he was something of a “Hebrew-Hellenist” himself, born and raised in Tarsus (a Greek-speaking setting, now in Turkey) but with long rabbinic schooling in Jerusalem. His encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus had broken the authority of his schooling as a strict

Pharisee and forced him to do for his own sake the kind of rethinking of the Jewish heritage that the Hellenists at Antioch needed as they pioneered a Jew-Gentile community. We will return to this in the chapter on Paul's model of mission.

It should come as no surprise that Antioch was the place of the momentous decision by a group of Jesus' followers to become pro-active about sending missionaries to other countries, and that Paul and Barnabas were the first two sent (Acts 13:1–2). "This far-reaching decision and action was, however, not peripheral to the early Christian community, a kind of expendable extra. Rather, in retrospect it becomes clear 'that Christianity had never been more itself, more consistent with Jesus and more evidently en route to its own future, than in the launching of the world mission'" (44.4, quoting Meyer).

The success of the missionary work of Paul and Barnabas among Gentiles triggered further fears among the Hebrew group in Jerusalem, leading to the decisive "Apostolic Council" recorded in Acts 15, "by all odds the cardinal policy decision of the first-century church" (46.4, quoting Meyer). The door was opened for the Gentiles. Was it thereby closed for the Jews? That was certainly not the intent of the Hebrews who held the power in the Jesus movement in Jerusalem, but a completely different earthquake was about to hit Judaism and drastically alter their relationship to it.

The Jewish revolt against the Romans led to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 and the banishment of all Jews from Jerusalem. This had quite different effects on the five subgroups of Judaism mentioned earlier. The Sadducees, whose power base was the Temple and all the Jerusalem power structures around it, quickly collapsed. The Zealots were killed or went underground. The Essenes, who had largely withdrawn to desert communities, gradually petered out. The Pharisees emerged as the defining center of "Judaism," no longer challenged by the other three groups. They were able to survive so well because their power base was in the local synagogues rather than the Temple and in the application of the Law of Moses to daily life, not only to Temple worship (46.5).

The strength of the Jesus movement, which by this time included large numbers of uncircumcised Gentiles, was not so directly affected by the destruction of Jerusalem. However, its identity was. It could no longer see itself as one of five (or more) sects within Judaism. It was one of only two left standing, and the other one hated it.

The Pharisees were convinced that God had allowed the destruction of Jerusalem because the Jews as a whole had not been faithful to the Law of Moses. The future restoration of Jerusalem would depend on keeping the Law more rigorously than ever. Since the Jesus movement appeared to be playing fast and loose with the Law of Moses, the Pharisees slammed the door on it. In AD 85 they made it official, prohibiting all "Nazarenes" (followers of Jesus of Nazareth) from attending synagogues (46.8).

Retracing the sequence, we see that Jesus' followers first saw themselves as a movement within Judaism, then recognized they had a mission to the Gentiles, then accepted that the Gentiles did not have to become subject to the Law of

Moses, then were excluded from Judaism by the Pharisees because they mixed with Gentiles. Thus Christianity became a new “religion” without intending to do so. Its emergence as a religion separate from Judaism was a byproduct of the theological implications of its mission to the Gentiles.

For much of its history, the church has “responded with anti-Jewishness to Judaism’s anti-Christian stance” (52.2). The inability of the church “in the long run, to make Jews feel at home” is a sad theme running through the story of Christian mission after the first century (51.8).

### **THE MISSIONARY PRACTICE OF JESUS AND THE EARLY CHURCH**

Before looking more closely at the mission perspectives of Matthew, Luke, and Paul, let us summarize five of the main ingredients of the missionary ministry of Jesus and the early church.

#### ***1. A paradoxical and enigmatic announcement (47.1)***

Jesus’ mission did not appear as logical as the missions of many of his contemporaries. His ambiguous announcement of the “arriving” reign of God set him apart from those who pinned all their hopes on either the future or the present. He seemed to straddle the present and the future and to call others into the same strange position. Thus he had a lot of explaining to do about what he meant by the “reign of God.”

#### ***2. A revolution with political implications (47.7)***

On the surface the mission of Jesus and the early church did not appear to be political, but underneath, “It rejected all [Greek and Roman] gods and in doing this demolished the metaphysical foundations of prevailing political theories. . . . Christians confessed Jesus as Lord of all lords — the most revolutionary political demonstration imaginable in the Roman Empire of the first centuries of the Christian era” (48.1).

#### ***3. A sociological innovation (48.3)***

The combination of Jews and Gentiles, slave and free, rich and poor, cultured and uncultured into one new community was a “sociological impossibility” (48.3, quoting Hoekendijk). Humanly speaking, one could never get all those groups to identify with each other in one new social group. When the church achieved this, the Roman world took notice, even referring to the Christians as a “third race” (distinct from the “Greeks” and the “Jews”; 48.7).

**4. A gentle sign of things to come (49.2)**

Jesus and the early church understood that it was not their mission to impose the revolution of God's reign but only to signal it. They did not overthrow Rome; they only acted as if they knew of something and someone more powerful and important than Rome. They did not pressure Rome to legislate equality between Roman citizens and noncitizens; they showed the world what such equality looked like. They were gentle signs of things to come.

**5. An acceptance of hostile reactions (49.7)**

In this world the gentle sometimes become the trampled. Jesus and the early church accepted that as part of their mission. Jesus showed his followers how to deal with hostile reaction — just take it. Accept even death from your enemies, and if anyone tries to defend you violently, restrain him. Jesus and his followers were a sign of the times, but also, as Simeon said of the baby Jesus, “a sign that is spoken against” (49.7, quoting Luke 2:34). When the powers of Rome read the sign of Jesus and his followers, they thought it said, “Your days are numbered. A new regime is on the way.” Such a placard is too threatening for politicians to tolerate, even if it is gently waved.

In sum, this is the description of a church on a mission: “A community of people who, in the face of the tribulations they encounter, keep their eyes steadfastly on the reign of God by praying for its coming, by being its disciples, by proclaiming its presence, by working for peace and justice in the midst of hatred and oppression, and by looking and working toward God's liberating future” (54.7).

**YOUR VIEWS AND YOUR CONTEXT**

4. New Testament mission is entirely based on three ideas that are central in the Old Testament but not in other religions or philosophies: (1) God steps into human history, (2) God makes promises about what he will do in history, and (3) God works through Israel to the nations. Are any of these missing from the worldview of the people you seek to evangelize? How does this absence make it difficult for these people to understand and accept the gospel of the arriving kingdom of Jesus, the Messiah?
5. Compare and contrast the following three common versions of the good news of Christianity with the good news as Jesus announced it in Matthew 4:17.
  - (a) “Good news! I know how you can go to heaven when you die.”
  - (b) “Good news! I will teach you the moral principles for a life that pleases God.”
  - (c) “Good news! God is taking over now!”

6. Why did the Hebrew-speaking followers of Jesus in Jerusalem feel it was necessary to send Barnabas to investigate what the Greek-speaking (Hellenist) followers of Jesus were doing at Antioch? How did Barnabas's evaluation of the church at Antioch affect the whole church's view of its mission from then onward?
7. How closely does your church resemble the following description of the New Testament vision for the Christian community: "A community of people who, in the face of the tribulations they encounter, keep their eyes steadfastly on the reign of God by praying for its coming, by being its disciples, by proclaiming its presence, by working for peace and justice in the midst of hatred and oppression, and by looking and working toward God's liberating future" (54.7)?
8. How does the quotation above compare to a typical definition of the church one might find in an ecclesiology course or a systematic theology textbook? What do you conclude about theology and the church from the differences?