

Covenant and Mission

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One of the most important moments in my understanding of mission was the reading of Johannes Blauw's book *The Missionary Nature of the Church*. That was in the 1970's and his perspective has never left me and continues to guide my understanding of the mission of God's people. On the basis of Gen. 12:3 Blauw writes:

Here it becomes clear that the whole history of Israel is nothing but the continuation of God's dealings with the nations and that therefore the history of Israel is only to be understood from the unsolved problem of the relation of God to the nations.¹

Subsequently, this perspective was further developed and enhanced by Arthur Glasser of Fuller Theological Seminary. He taught a course on Biblical Foundations for Mission. The fruit of a long life of study has now been published in a new book.² I am much indebted to Arthur Glasser for his work in this area and I gladly acknowledge the contribution he has made to my understanding of the subject. I recommend his book warmly.

The Unifying Theme of Scripture

Since earliest times, Christians have used Scripture to provide a basis and motivation for mission. Too often, though, the proof-text approach was used. Passages such as Matthew 28:18-20 and Luke 4:18-21 readily come to mind. Until recently, the study of mission did not rank highly in the theological curriculum. Real theological work was done in Systematic theology, which was considered vital for the maintenance of sound doctrine. Mission tended to be an adjunct to Theology at best or a diversion at worst.

¹ J. Blauw, *The Missionary Nature of the Church*, WCC Division of World Mission and Evangelism, 1962, p.19

² Arthur F. Glasser, *Announcing the Kingdom*, Baker, Grand Rapids, 2003.

While the importance of Systematic Theology is acknowledged, the danger is that there is so much emphasis on analyzing, systematizing and harmonizing of the biblical text that the overall message is lost sight of. The Bible then becomes like 'a lucky dip' from which all sorts of treasures may be extracted but these treasures have no coherent relationship one with another. I recall reading an article in *Missiology* many years ago in which the author suggested that reading the Bible without being aware of its main message is like closely studying the Mona Lisa, and not recognizing that it is the portrait of a woman³.

Behind all the diversity and complexity of Scripture there is a clearly discernable message that unifies the whole. No one has expressed that more clearly and poetically than Calvin Seerveld:

*... there is only one true story: the faithful covenanting Yahweh is gradually unfolding his Reign historically upon the earth, our rich, sin-plagued creation, by his providing, reconciling Word fully revealed and focused in the birth, death and resurrection of his son Jesus Christ, whose adopted body of believers, and creatures at large, are being used to bring about the magnalia Dei until He returns to be completely glorified.*⁴

The essential message that unifies both Old and New Testament is that God refuses to accept as final the alienation that has occurred due to sin. Rather, He sets in motion a redemptive purpose and plan to reclaim fallen creation and restore it to its intended order. While the relationship between Old and New Testament is often described in terms such as: anticipation-fulfillment, shadow - reality, centripetal – centrifugal, the essential message of Scripture is clear. It is the missionary message of God restoring a lost world to himself. If that message is overlooked, the Bible tends to become a collection of good, moral lessons and will consequently impoverish the preaching of the Word.

The remainder of this article is in essence the substance of a talk given at a mission conference for local churches. I do not pretend that this is a scholarly article in the sense of interacting with a range of scholars on the subject. My intent is to emphasize the missionary dimension of the Old Testament and to convey the sense of God's concern for the world so that

³ I think the author was Charles Taber.

⁴ Seerveld, Calvin, *Rainbows for the Fallen World*, Toronto Tuppence Press, Toronto, 1980, 90

churches may align themselves with God's intent. I will therefore trace in broad brushstrokes the way in which God worked out this redemptive program in the Old Testament.

Covenant Election

When we trace God's redemptive plan in the Old Testament, we cannot avoid the matter of election. I am aware that any reference to election causes concern. Some would hold that election is a mystery and is only there as a stimulus to praise God. I agree that to think about election should lead to humility and doxology. See Romans 11:33

Other Christians avoid talking about election, except perhaps when discussing the matter with those of Arminian persuasion in order to win an argument. Sometimes the doctrine of election is spoken of in the way you would speak of a computer program. God programs everything that is to happen and human beings are like pawns on a chess board.

If we use biblical truth this way and turn it into dry dogma, the story of Scripture will tend to become sterile. In the process, the dynamic qualities of the missionary story are lost. The election of Abraham and his descendants is part of the great mission of God to reclaim His world! But let me backtrack a little first.

Universal History

God's sovereign election of Abraham began way back in eternity, but in human history it began to be played out about 4000 years ago. In the beginning God created a spiritual being capable of knowing Him and living in relationship with Himself. That was God's special creature called Adam and Eve, the first man and woman. He gave them creative instincts and a noble task. In the unfolding human drama the question arises as to whether this created person would remain obedient to God or would himself decide the norms for human life. Would he defy God and opt for independence?

Genesis 3 tells us that human beings opted for independence as they enthroned themselves. We also know the tragic consequences of this revolt, namely, disintegration, chaos and death.⁵ Whether humankind would ever

⁵ Romans 5:12

again enjoy communion with God would depend on the initiative of God. Fortunately, the biblical story is one of grace. It tells us how God would restore fallen humanity to himself (Romans 5:6-8).

Over time, the wickedness of man became so great that God was sorry he had created humankind.⁶ It grieved him to the heart and God responded in wrath and consequent judgment through the flood. Yet, already at this early stage we see that God reached out in sovereign grace in his mysterious selection of Noah for salvation and service. He was found righteous before God, but also a man of flawed character (Genesis 9:20,21). God made a covenant with Noah. God pledged to deliver him and his family and promised their participation in a new life beyond the Flood. This covenant included the promise of regularity in the cycle of nature, no more destruction by a flood and the reiteration of the sacredness and protection of human life. Noah willingly accepted by faith (Heb.11:7).

The essence of the biblical concept of covenant we find in Jeremiah 7:23, where God reminded His wayward people of the covenant established at Sinai:

Obey me and I will be your God and you will be my people. Walk in all the ways I command you, that it may go well with you.

God's participation in a covenant is based on his faithfulness. In spite of judgment and the Flood, God remained faithful to his creation and to his elect.

It seems that humanity learns little from history. Over time, the sinfulness of humanity increased again. The descendants of Noah turned away from God and in their insecurity and arrogance they turned to collectivization and urbanization for fulfillment. Building a tower with its top reaching to the heavens was the ultimate pride.⁷ God, in judgment, frustrated the builders by confusing their language and scattering the people. What is going to become of humanity? Who will save it from self-destruction? Genesis 12 provides the answer.

⁶ Genesis 6:6,7

⁷ Only sin will ever reach as high as heaven. Rev. 18:5

grace and blessing to all nations. The church is holy in the sense of having a special relationship with God and consecrated for special service.

This leads us to the next issue of the relationship between election and life-style.

Election and Life-style

At Sinai, Israel was confronted with the provisions of the covenant, the law and the sacrificial system. In that way God made people aware of their distance from his holy presence and encouraged the life of worship, fellowship and a regard for doing justice. The sacrificial system took care of the covering of sin and prepared them for the One who would be the perfect sacrifice. He would mediate a total forgiveness for sinners and guarantee that the redeemed continue in the presence of God (Heb. 9:14,26).

The law dealt with the lifestyle that is in accord with election and results in just actions. To illustrate this concern for justice, we only need to refer to a few obvious examples where God expected particular attitudes and actions from his covenant people. Slaves were to be treated justly and not exploited (Exodus 21:2ff, Deut. 15:15). Minority peoples were to be protected and not abused (Deut. 14:29, Exodus 22:29). The land was to be regarded as trust from God and not to be 'owned' in perpetuity or accumulated by a small wealthy aristocracy. Hence, every fiftieth year, the land had to be redistributed (Leviticus 25).

Why this concern for a covenantal life-style? All these explicit instructions about morality and life-style seem to suggest that God is narrowing the focus just to the people of Israel. It would be a mistake to think that. Even here there is a universal intent, "The active presence of God in Israel is a sign and guarantee of His presence in the world: and the presence of Israel is thus a continuing appeal to the nations of the world."¹³

God's people were placed in the midst of the nations to demonstrate the attractiveness of life lived under the theocratic rule of God. That kind of life should be an attraction to the nations so that they in turn might want to worship the Lord.

¹³ Blauw, 28

Kingdom, Division and Exile

It did not quite work out that way. Despite the great assistance given to the Israelites by the Lord, they were disobedient and sabotaged the purposes of God (Judges 1:1-2:6). Even though with the establishment of the kingdom the Golden Age under King David began, the reality of nations being blessed through Israel was not yet apparent. Spiritually, Israel committed adultery by adding the worship of Baal to the worship of Yahweh. This led to the showdown between Elijah and the prophets of Baal. Elijah challenged syncretism and the evils associated with it. The worshipper of God must do justice and love mercy and not go along with the prevailing trends. The Old Testament serves as a warning against paganism and syncretism. It serves to deliver us from preoccupation with the subjective and mystical in order to concentrate on the mighty acts of God in history.

In time, Israel was scattered among the nations as a judgment for her unfaithfulness. When it was clear later on that Judah must also go into captivity for sin, Isaiah introduced the concept of the remnant of God's people; that is, a spiritual Israel within political Israel; a new and redeemed Israel over which the Messiah would reign in the Last Day. It was through this remnant, preserved by grace, that God's promises would be realized.

To remind themselves of these promises and of God's faithfulness, the confession of God's people was dominated by three major emphases. They constantly reminded themselves of the fact that God had chosen Abraham and his descendants as his special people, that He had delivered them from Egypt through Moses the liberator and given them the Promised Land. We see an instance of this confession in Deuteronomy 26: 5-11.

It is worth noting that these elements find their parallel in the New Testament gospel proclamation, though obviously in an expanded, spiritualised form. God's chosen people are no longer limited to one particular 'ethnic' group. The church, which is fulfilment and continuation of the Old Testament people of God, is now expanded to become an international people belonging to God (I Peter 2:9ff.). This people is not delivered from bondage in Egypt but delivered from guilt and the consequences of sin. The promised land they anticipate is the gift of eternal life through Christ. That is the hope that energizes the people of God. However, for the Old Testament people of God, that hope was not as clear as it is for the New Testament Church.

The Hope of Israel

How would God's promise of 'salvation' (*shalom*) be fulfilled? Repeatedly the Old Testament warns against putting 'your trust in princes',¹⁴ or depending on human help. They were to look to the rule of God for the achievement of *shalom*. This became all the more urgent after the Kingdom was divided and Israel languished through national decay and spiritual apostasy. God had promised that David's house and kingdom *shall endure forever before me, your throne shall be established forever* (2 Sam. 7:16). The prospect of the realization of such a universal, eschatological kingdom required someone greater than an earthly David.

The prophets particularly focused this longing for *shalom* on the figure of the Messiah (Isaiah 9:1-7, 11:1-5, Micah 5: 2-4). The Messiah is the person who would realize and express the Lordship of God over all nations. The Psalms that express this universal lordship of God may truly be termed 'messianic'.

Blauw expresses the convergence of this universal lordship with the messianic rule of *shalom* as follows:

*We are justified in concluding that the universal lordship of God, eschatological expectation of salvation and the expectation of the Messiah belong together; they are, as it were, concentric circles: the Messiah is the center of the Israelite as well as of the universal expectation of salvation.*¹⁵

This hope of Israel is described by reference to three messianic figures:

- **Son of David.** This description of the messiah emphasizes his humanity as the Davidic king. Even though the Davidic line came to an end with the exile and destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC there was the ongoing expectation of a messianic Davidic king ruling over a restored Israel and removing all sin and evil that peace and righteousness may prevail. That was the hope that kept the faithful going during the dark days of exile.¹⁶ This hope rested on the promise that David's house would remain forever (II Sam. 7:16).

¹⁴ Psalm 118: 8,9 and Psalm 146:3,4

¹⁵ Blauw, 47

¹⁶ Glasser, 147

- **Son of Man.** After the exile the prophetic emphasis shifted from the hope of an earthly kingdom to a kingdom that would come from beyond history.

*The earthly Davidic Messiah was overshadowed by a heavenly transcendental Son of Man who is to come with the clouds to initiate the new order.*¹⁷

This messianic Son of Man is spoken of in the prophecy of Daniel. He comes from beyond history and received dominion over the nations as a gift.

He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations, and men of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed (Dan. 7:13,14).

Dominion is taken away from the four beasts, representing all that opposes the rule of God, and given (not usurped!) to the Son of Man who would reign in righteousness, unlike the rule of the Beasts. Here we clearly sense the concept of divine intervention not only in the history of Israel but in the history of the world.

It does not call for a lot of imagination to relate this passage to the Great Commission in Matthew 28, where Christ claims to be the fulfilment of this prophecy when he said: *All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.* In the light of this it is not surprising that Christ made very comprehensive claims. All power was given to him, therefore all nations should acknowledge him and walk in all his ways and the church in proclaiming this message would be assured of his presence all the days!

- **Suffering Servant.** There is another messianic figure who features prominently in the prophecy of Isaiah. I refer to the Servant passages of Isaiah 42-53. The Suffering Servant fulfils his mission by death (53:10). What is the identity of this Servant? In these passages there is a certain fluidity of understanding, ranging from a corporate group to a representative figure. However, when we come to Isaiah 53 there is little doubt. The New Testament commentary on this passage is crystal clear and has been accepted by the Church through the centuries (Acts 8:32-34). Christ was that

¹⁷ Ladd, George. E, *Jesus and the Kingdom*, Harper and Row, New York, 1964, 50
Vox Reformata, 2004

Suffering Servant who through his suffering and death redeemed His people (Matthew 1:21).

When, in the fullness of time, prophecy was fulfilled and Christ came as the son of David, Son of Man and Suffering servant, the Jews participated in the final tragedy of rejecting Him (John 1:11). Israel which was elected for divine possession and for service, in order to be a blessing for the nations, failed in its mission.

Blessing for the nations

The blessing of election conferred the responsibility of being a channel of blessing to the nations. In the Old Testament there is no explicit command to go to the nations. Rather, the emphasis is on the nations coming to Jerusalem as they discern the blessings given by God to His people (Isaiah 2:2-4).

While mission in the Old Testament is largely a matter of nations coming to Jerusalem, in the New Testament, the church is to go into the world in order to make disciples. Yet, in either case, God's redemptive purpose is for all nations. The failure of God's people will not prevent God from reaching the goal he envisages for the world for God was and is and always will be in control of history. God's purposes move forward in spite of the failure of his people.

The final salvation will be all inclusive- reconciliation with God, forgiveness of sin, renewal of nature, removal of the curse of death, wiping away all tears (Isaiah 11: 6-9, 25:6-8). Such a salvation embraces the totality of human existence and is of cosmic proportions.

Conclusion

What does all this mean for the Church today? When we have done all our theologising and analysing of the biblical text, we are left with implementing the ministry of reconciliation: *Be reconciled to God* (2 Cor. 5:20). That involves effort, commitment, pain and suffering. As Webster put it so well:

Mission sooner or later leads into passion. In biblical categories, and these remain contemporary, the servant must suffer, the world

being what it is. The very shape of mission is cruciform. We can understand mission only in terms of a cross. One of the factors about being a missionary today, in any country, including the West, is the new form of suffering to which he is exposed.

Many of us can identify with the emphasis on cross-bearing. The New Testament clearly indicates that as Christ had to suffer and then enter into His glory (Luke 24:26), so His followers would likewise enter the Kingdom through many hardships (Acts 14:22). Nevertheless, Webster adds another dimension that should give impetus to the mission of the Church:

... though the means of all mission is a cross...the end is a resurrection. We know something of the meaning of the cross...but all too little of the joy of the resurrection.

The joy of resurrection, as multitudes are raised with Christ to new life,¹⁸ becomes deeper and richer in the fuller revelation of the New Testament era.

¹⁸ Romans 6:4