



CO-MISSIONED!

**A Bible Study on
Becoming a Missional People**



**the Center
for Parish
Development**

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." (I Peter 2:9). This Bible study, *Co-Missioned!* has been created to help congregations discover through Scripture the Holy Spirit's power to form their whole community of faith for its witness in the world.

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1448 E. 53rd Street
Chicago, IL 60615
773-752-1596 (voice) 773-752-5093 (fax)
www.missionalchurch.org

Suggestions for using this Bible study

1. When you gather together, ask one of your group to act as your facilitator and timekeeper, to help the group stay on track and on time.
2. Create an informal and relaxed atmosphere. Make sure all persons in the group know one another. If possible, have coffee or other light refreshments available.
3. As a reminder of the purpose, read the Introduction at the beginning of each session.
4. Read aloud the Bible passages set for each study. Your group can decide whether or not to read aloud the other material offered for reflection.
5. Use the questions as a guide for your discussion. Do not get derailed by seeking the “right” answer.
6. Be creative in supplementing the study: acting out texts, drawing symbols, using hymns, art objects, or poetry.
7. This resource can be used in a variety of ways: adult and youth education classes, with small groups, for church councils, in a congregational retreat, or as a special congregational series.
8. A key component of Bible study is the experience of Christian community. Encourage persons to be open to one another, to listen to each other respectfully, and to speak the truth in love.
9. Engaging in Bible study is an opportunity to hear God’s voice speaking afresh to us. Spend time in prayer at the start of every session, asking God’s Spirit to guide and enlighten the group.

The staff of the
Center for Parish Development

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Session 1: _____

Co-missioned!

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*

Introduction

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.

The approach of this study will be to 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 at least three other missional perspectives: from the gospel 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.

Mark: A Community Proclaiming the Gospel

Luke: The church as a Sign of the Reign of God

John: A Sent Community

Matthew: A Community of Discipleship

Paul: A Community of Reconciliation

The New Testament Witness and Ours

The Gospel writings were not meant only to paint a picture of Jesus' life for those who might be interested. Instead, they are intended to "train us to situate our lives in relation to that life."¹

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Most scholars believe that the Mark's was the first "gospel" ever written. The others followed. Thus a new literary form was created. It was the communication of the good news of Jesus Christ in

story form. The authors were not just handing on the words and stories of Jesus as they had received them. They were interpreting what they had received in order to proclaim the Gospel anew within the concrete situation of the communities of which they were a part. The purpose of the gospel story was not to entertain or simply to inform, but to provoke and invite a community – then and now – to participate in God's mission

for the sake of the world.

Our congregation also must learn how to interpret and witness to God's creative and mighty presence in our changing context. We too must learn how to see God active both within the history of Jesus, and within the present life and ministry of our congregation. At its heart, this study is about Jesus' mission and ours. Through the process of discussion and reflection together we will be developing the practice of "interpreting" Jesus mission anew for our congregation's life. 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. Why do we have one Gospel of Jesus Christ but different ways of expressing and interpreting that Gospel, even within scripture?
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.
(16:15)

Mark wrote his gospel for households of faith who still understood themselves as a group or sect within Judaism. As such, they were caught, with the rest of the Jewish population, in the middle of a severe social and political crisis. Out of concern for them, Mark takes the stories of Jesus and reinterprets them. He proclaims the Christian message for a frightened and bewildered Christian community. Desperately in need of a fresh perspective, this gospel is written to give them courage and hope. It is aimed to help these small communities of believers come to terms with the de-

mands and dangers of their times as they sought to be faithful to Jesus and his teachings.

Read Mark 1:15. With this announcement the stage is set.

According to Mark, the proclamation of the Gospel is proclamation in action.

Through the power of the Spirit in Jesus of Nazareth the promised and long expected redemptive rule of

God has drawn near. To proclaim this Good News takes much more than verbal statements. Actually, in Mark deeds have precedence over words. It is only by presenting the full range of Jesus' activity – preaching, teaching, healing, exorcising, calling and forming disciples, feeding, comforting, confronting – that God's rule can be adequately described.

The proclamation of the Gospel is proclamation in action.

Thus Jesus' ministry responded to human need wherever he found it. He dealt with physical illness (read 6:56). He also responded to needs which were more spiritual: forgiveness, liberation, dignity, social acceptance, and affirmation. The mission of Jesus was good news – the rule of God has come near to confront and challenge any power whatsoever that oppresses or diminishes human life.

But Jesus' ministry also challenged existing assumptions about

God and what God was doing: The people of Israel were expecting the rule of God to come by

means of a strong and mighty national leader who would restore the former glory of David's kingdom. These as-

sumptions about the nature and quality of the Messiah's mission are redefined by this gospel-writer. Jesus' identity is more closely aligned with that of the Suffering Servant of Isaiah than with a military and conquering Messiah. When Jesus predicts his own suffering, death, and resurrection (8:31), he takes to himself not power, but service, suffering, and sacrifice. Then, as they travel to Jerusalem, Jesus challenges the disciples to join him in his destiny, in his life-giving death. "Take up [your] cross and follow me" (8:34).

Discipleship involves not power, prestige, and position,

but following the crucified Jesus. Within the gospel of Mark, the cross is the model for genuine discipleship.

The Christian community is called to proclaim the Gospel by taking up a life of service, suffering, and sacrifice together.

The ministry of Jesus and his challenging call together are seen as "good news" within the Gospel of Mark.

Jesus announces a new reality in which the poor, the diseased, the oppressed, the marginalized – even children – have central places. The communities of faith at the center of the evangelist’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.

Bible Study on Mark: Proclaiming the Gospel

1. Read Mark 10:32-45. Try to put yourself in the place of the disciples. How would you respond to Jesus’ account of what will happen to him?
 - a. How does Jesus’ rejection, suffering and death relate to his proclamation of the kingdom of God?
 - b. What kind of Messiah do contemporary Christians believe in and pray for?
 - c. What do you think it means to follow a Jesus who was crucified?
2. Read Mark 16:14-20. Jesus’ last commission. Based upon your reading and study so far, what is the “good news” the disciples are to proclaim to the whole creation?
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 – a community proclaiming the Gospel – what would be different?

Session 3:

LUKE: The Church as Sign of the Reign of God

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

Luke-Acts, written as two volumes by the same author, was addressed primarily to Gentile Christians. More than a half century had passed since those momentous events that swirled around Jesus of Nazareth. Much had happened during the intervening years. The Zealot movement within Judaism had precipitated the Jewish War which, in turn, had led to the destruction of Jerusalem by Rome and almost totally changed the face of Judaism. The Christian church, which began as a renewal movement within Judaism had, during the preceding four decades undergone an almost complete transformation. It was no longer winning any significant numbers of Jews to faith in Jesus Christ. It had, for all intents

and purposes, largely because of the missionary work of Paul, become a Gentile church.

A degree of stagnation had set in. The church was now a church of second generation Christians and had all the characteristics of a movement that no longer shared the fervor and dedication of recent converts. The return of Christ for which the church had prayed and which had been fervently expected by the first generation of believers did not take place. Within the church there was a decline of enthusiasm and a major religious disappointment. Outside there was growing hostility and opposition from both Jews and others in the Roman world. Gentile Christians were asking fundamental questions about mission:

"Who are we really? And how are we to relate to the earthly Jesus, who is gradually and irrevocably receding into the past?"

Luke attempted to help the Gentile churches. He emphasized that through the Holy Spirit the risen Christ

was present in the community. By the power of the Holy Spirit, these communities of faith are called to

be signs of the reign of God. Luke challenged these mainly Gentile faith communities not to be like the world around them, a world which, as now, favored the rich, the powerful, the influential. "The church is to be a sign of God's reign and not a sign of the Roman Empire. The church is not to model itself after anything or any reality except the in-breaking reign of God."² Luke's description of the reign of God called for resistance and even opposition to the domi-

nant culture's standards and norms.

Criteria for evaluating the community's faithfulness to this calling are the same criteria that Jesus proposed in response to the question asked by the disciples of John the Baptist: "Are you he who is to

come, or are we to wait for another?"

...Tell John, "The blind receive their sight, the

lame walk, the

lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me" (7:22-23).

The faith community is to be judged and evaluated by God's standards, not by Roman standards. According to Luke, the church's mission is to become a very specific *sign of the reign of God*.

Luke challenged the mainly Gentile faith communities not to be like the world around them.

Bible Study on Luke: Sign of the Reign of God

1. 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.
 - a. What do we learn about who Jesus is and what he will be about in his ministry from his choice of this text?
 - b. Consider those to whom the good news is addressed in this text. How are those persons and situations present today?
 - c. Who are the excluded ones in today's society? What is the message your church is giving to them? What, if any, "good news" is being proclaimed to them?
2. Read Luke 24:44-49. Jesus' last commission.
 - a. How is "repentance and forgiveness" a sign of the in-breaking of the Reign of God?
 - b. How would you like to see your church "practice" forgiveness?
3. If Luke's model of mission – sign of the reign of God – was adopted by your church, what would be different in its life and in its actions?

Session 4:

JOHN: A Sent Community

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

In the Gospel of John, LIFE is the purpose of Jesus' coming (read 10:10). Jesus proclaims and brings life. The stated purpose of the Gospel of John is "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name" (20:31). The work of Jesus—his mission—is to reveal the truth from God that makes people truly free, "to save the world and not to judge it," to "give life," by "coming" into the world, by words, signs, and works, by his life and by his death. (Read 3:15-17). Participation in this new life is not only a future hope, but a present possibility 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 narra-

tive 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 life and destiny of humanity. It is this truth which motivates and guides the mission of the church.

While in the other Gospels the disciples are given specific tasks, "to make disciples," "teaching and preaching," "to proclaim the good news," "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 disciple community 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 drawn into communion with God.

As commissioned and authorized by the Risen Lord, when the disciple community forgives or an-

nounces 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. “Thus the sent community by its proclamation or by its neglect of proclamation; by its love or lack of love; by its accepting or rejecting attitude; by its judgmental or by its pas-

toral approach, is conveying forgiveness or unforgiveness!”³ In John’s model of mission, 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. The church can participate in the mission of Jesus only because it is empowered by the Holy Spirit. Both in its life and in its service the

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.

church is dependent upon the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the church as a sent community is the work of the Spirit from start to finish – “it is not essentially a task laid upon the church; it is a gift given to the church. It is an overflow of Pentecost.”⁴

Bible Study on John: A Sent Community

Read John 20:19-23. Jesus’ last commission. 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?
2. Most people would rather not depend upon other people for God’s love and forgiveness. What if God’s love and forgiveness were only known and experienced through the words and actions of the Christian community?
3. What difference will the Holy Spirit make in the life of the church? What will the Spirit bring to the church?
4. If your church adopted John’s model of mission – *a sent community* – what would be different in its life and in its actions?

Session 5: _____

MATTHEW: A Community of Discipleship

Make disciples of all nations. (28:19)

Matthew was writing around 80-90 A.D. as a member of a small Christian community that had left Judea before the Jewish war (the uprising against Rome) and settled in a predominantly Jewish community in Syria. His concern was not so much to write up the life of Jesus but rather "to provide guidance to a community in crisis on how it should understand its calling and mission."⁵ The small "household of faith" to whom Matthew was writing existed in and around Antioch, located in Syria, an area that was experiencing extensive transition as it was becoming increasingly

urbanized. The people in the area, and in the little Christian community, were living through a transition from rural to urban culture, from the Aramaic language to the Greek language, from an ethnically homogeneous people of lower income to an ethnically heterogeneous people that included many of higher economic status. Greek culture was invading the area.

While the process of urbanization was economically benefiting many, still much poverty yet surrounded Matthew's community of faith.

Discipleship in Matthew is focused on right relationships both within the community of faith and in the way this community of faith relates to the world.

The theological heart of Matthew's gospel is that Christian communities of

faith cannot be based on race, blood, status, or wealth, as was the surrounding society. The new communities which are formed in allegiance to Jesus can be based only on whether a person lives a life of obedience -- discipleship -- a life that reflects the will of God. Discipleship in Matthew is focused on right relationships both within the community of faith and in the way this community of faith relates to the world. The relational focus of discipleship in all cases according to Matthew is also translated correctly as *justice*. The work of justice includes right relationship, doing the will of God, and being obedient to the teachings of Jesus.

The new communities of discipleship, seeking to live in obedience to the will of the One who sent Jesus, strove to be inclusive communities. These communities of faith struggled not to organize their life around status and power, but around inclusive love and genuine hospitality toward all. The mission of the church according to Matthew was to become a faithful *community of discipleship*.

Bible Study on Matthew: Community of Discipleship

1. “Marks” of discipleship – those who participate in the ministry of Jesus Christ – are described in Matthew. Read the following texts:

Matthew 10:17; 16:24-25 (a readiness to suffer)

Mt.19:23-26; 6:19-21 (to be poor)

Mt.18:1-5 (to be humble)

Mt. 25:31-40 (to love)

Mt.23:6-7 (1-12) (to reject worldly honor)

Mt.20:20-28 (to serve)

- a. What are the essential ingredients of discipleship according to Matthew?
 - b. Applying Matthew to our own 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?
2. Read Matthew 22:34-40 and 28:16-20. These texts invite us to link Matthew's Great Commandment with the last commission, to connect "right relationships" with making disciples and becoming a faithful community of discipleship.
- a. Where and how is loving – loving God and loving your neighbor – being taught and practiced in your congregation?
 - b. If discipleship was at the heart of the ministries (such as teaching, preaching, social ministry, pastoral care, worship) of your church, what would change?
3. If your church was to adopt Matthew's model of mission, what would be different?

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, an area dominated by the Roman army but deeply influenced by Greek culture. In this context, Paul maintained that in Jesus Christ, God has initiated a new state of affairs. The Jewish Law as

a way of salvation has been superseded by the crucified and risen Messiah. The final, coming age of God's forgiveness and love – God's future – *has begun*. Therefore salvation in Christ is now to be offered to the Gentile world. All persons are to be invited to participate in the new community, the church.

God has initiated a new state of affairs... The final, coming age of God's forgiveness and love – God's future – has begun.

Paul instructed the churches to whom he wrote that they were a community of a special kind. It is like this: The whole human community and all creation that is existing in an alienated and estranged

state is becoming transformed. This transformation is becoming concretely realized in the life and relationships of a specific human community – the community of faith in Jesus Christ. This community – a community of reconciliation -- is a new creation.

But, in the faith communities to whom Paul was writing, living in transformed and reconciled relationships was difficult. Precisely for this reason

the establishment of supportive communities was crucial. The realization of God's reconciliation with the world would be impossible without new communities where love, forgiveness, and mutual accountability could be concretely experienced.

Paul's vision of the church's mission is a *community of reconciliation*. The small Pauline churches were so many "pockets" of an alternative lifestyle that penetrated the norms of society around them.⁶ In the midst of a "crooked and perverse generation" Christians are to be "without blemish" and shining "as lights in the world" (Philippians 2:15). According to Paul, this people, among whom God's reconciliation can become a personal, social, and communal reality, is precisely what the body of Christ has to offer the world.

Bible Study on Paul: Community of Reconciliation

1. Read Philippians 2:1-18. A particular way of life – a way of being in relationship with one another for the sake of the world – is envisioned throughout Paul's letters to the New Testament churches. This way of life is pictured in Philippians 2.
 - a. What "mind" is to exist among those who are "in Christ" or "in the Spirit?"
 - b. Does the mind of Christ mean there are to be no differences within the Christian community? If not, what does it mean?
 - c. How would the mind of Christ be manifested within a setting (inside or outside the church) of differences, opposites, and even enemies?

- d. How would you like to see the mind of Christ have greater sway in your church?
2. Read 2 Corinthians 5:16-21. God has reconciled the world to God's self and has given the Christian community the message and the ministry of reconciliation.
 - a. Taking our cues from the Good News that we are reconciled to God, what would a ministry of reconciliation look like for the church?
 - b. What does a community of reconciliation have to offer the world?
 3. What would be different in the life and actions of your church if it adopted a *community of reconciliation* as its model of mission?

Summarizing our Learnings _____

Questions for reflection and discussion

Five understandings of the mission of the church were explored in this Bible study. As you consider how your church is to embody God's vision for its future, what insights did you gain from this study:

Mark – A Community Proclaiming the Gospel

Luke – The Church as Sign of the Reign of God

John – A Sent Community

Matthew – A Community of Discipleship

Paul – A Community of Reconciliation

¹ Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), p. 74.

² Keith A. Russell, *In Search of the Church: New Testament Images for Tomorrow's Congregations* (Alban Institute, 1994) p. 45.

³ Mortimer Arias and Alan Jones, *The Great Commission: Biblical Models for Evangelism* (Abingdon Press, 1992) p. 86.

⁴ Lesslie Newbigin, *Mission in Christ's Way: A Gift, A Command, An Assurance* (Friendship Press, 1988) p.17).

⁵ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, p. 58.

⁶ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 150.

For more information about Bible studies and other resources to support transformation in your church, please contact:



1448 E. 53rd Street
Chicago, IL 60615
773-752-1596 (voice) 773-752-5093 (fax)
www.missionalchurch.org