



**Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence. 1 PET 3:15–16**

# Missionary Discipleship

**T**he mission of the church is to make known the person and message of Jesus Christ. As disciples of the Lord, all of us have been invited to play an active part in this mission. By word and witness, we are called to contribute to spreading the gospel, the good news of Jesus, to the world. If we are to be true to our identity as disciples, then we must be evangelizers, witnesses of the gospel to others.

There is an intimate connection between the word of God and the call to missionary discipleship. As we learn to listen to Scripture, we learn how to witness to the word of God. The more we receive that divine word into our hearts, the more our lives will reflect that word to the world. Discipleship is a call to go inward, to experience an ever-deepening encounter with Jesus Christ, and a call to go outward, to witness the good news to others.

The church is missionary by its very nature. Carrying on the mission of Jesus to the world, the church bears witness to the kingdom of God. Like Jesus, his community of disciples is called to continually make all things new, embodying the presence of Jesus through his Spirit in the world. A church that always looks inwardly, to its own internal issues and struggles, is a church that has forsaken its missionary vocation. A renewed and vibrant church must be outward-looking, evangelizing with zeal, living the gospel with joy and hope for the sake of the world.

In our day, the Holy Spirit through the church is calling followers of Jesus Christ to be soaked in the word of God so that we can be heralds of the gospel to the world. The more we become biblical disciples, the more we will become missionary disciples. Our vocation to evangelize cannot be delegated to others. Through baptism we become bearers of Christ, and in the Eucharist we become the body of Christ, so we witness him wherever we go.

The gospel offers us a whole new way of seeing the world, a fuller vision of our own lives and the lives of one another. While we can never impose the good news of God's love in Jesus Christ, we are called to bring it to others and let them know the beauty of life in Christ. We must resist the tendency to treat our convictions as a private matter. Our faith is not a costume that we put on for particular occasions. Only when faith permeates every aspect of our lives can we truly open the hearts of others to the transforming power of the gospel.

### **Reflection and discussion**

- What are the implications of being a missionary disciple of Jesus Christ?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- Why does an inwardly focused church fail to fulfill its calling?

### **Obstacles to Hearing and Witnessing God's Word Today**

The task of missionary discipleship is particularly difficult today because of the obstructions presented by our cultural setting. Although the message of the gospel remains the same—"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Heb 13:8)—the challenges of evangelization differ in every age. Here are a few of the obstacles to God's word being implanted in the minds and hearts of individuals and society today.

The first is secularism: living as if there were no God or any need for God. This secularism fosters a mentality in which God is simply left out of human consciousness and culture. Today we have crossed from a neutrality toward religion to hostility toward religion and denial of the transcendent truths upon which traditional society has been based. Divinely revealed truth is something that believers today are encouraged to experience within their own private lives but to leave out of the public domain. Anything that is above or beyond the present, practical world is not a matter for consideration in public life. Ultimate human purpose and destiny are beyond the purview of the secular culture. This increasing secularization has resulted in a declining capacity for people to listen and understand the words of the gospel as a true and life-giving message.

A second obstacle to missionary discipleship is rationalism, which holds that human reason is the sole arbiter and the final test of all truth. Of course, Christian theology has always defended the importance of reason, in alliance with faith, in seeking truth. But human reason, divorced from faith, cannot know the highest forms of truth, which are knowable only through divine revelation. The supernatural gift of faith permits us to experience God in ways that reason alone cannot.

A third obstruction to hearing and witnessing God's word is relativism, which holds that there is no absolute truth or value. All ideas have only relative, subjective value according to personal differences in perception and judgment. In today's culture, the truths of faith tend to be viewed as merely personal opinions. But Christian faith rests in the certainty of God's revealing word. It is a faith that does not follow the waves of trends and the latest novelties. It gives us the knowledge to judge truth from deceit. We cannot truly hear God's word unless we trust that it expresses divine truth, and we cannot witness to God's word unless we know that it is not subject to changeable opinion and personal whim.

A fourth obstacle today is individualism. Human life no longer has a purpose that is commonly agreed upon or a conception of the good toward which human life ought to aim. So individuals are free to choose their own personal values and live life in a way that leads to their own satisfaction. Such individualism obstructs the revelation of a higher source of authority than one's self about the meaning and goal of human life. Judeo-Christian faith is

entirely incompatible with today's individualism. The two dominant biblical images of the church—the people of God and the body of Christ—present Christianity as a community filled with the presence of the risen Lord and animated by the Holy Spirit. Christians cannot be isolated individuals, but are a community of disciples doing the work of justice and love as a tangible expression that the reign of God is upon us.

And a fifth cultural obstacle to God's word being implanted in the minds and hearts of individuals and society today is consumerism. Global capitalism has replaced the Roman Empire as the context in which the word of God must be proclaimed. The focal point of cities is no longer the cathedral spire topped with the cross, but the skyscraper topped with the corporate logo of its owner. Rampant consumerism has perverted human desires by redirecting them from their natural end in God to an artificial objective in material objects and temporary pleasures. In this environment, the ancient call to evangelize becomes distorted. Churches who want to increase their share of the market must ask themselves what will attract customers and meet their needs. What is called evangelization often looks more like church marketing. Offering multiple social choices and options for self-improvement becomes the first goal while less marketable aspects of Christian faith are removed.

Yet people eventually become discontent with our civilization of gadgets, entertainment, trends, and novelties, and they seek lasting meaning and purpose. In spite of all the obstacles of today's culture, we still profess with conviction that the gospel of Jesus Christ answers the truest needs and the deepest longings of the human heart. Today's challenge for the church is how to offer the authentic good news of God's reign to a world staggering under the weight of so many unanswered questions and unfulfilled longings.

### **Reflection and discussion**

- What are some of the signs of these cultural obstacles in my own life today?

- What are some ways that communities of faith can help to overcome these five obstructions?

### **The Bible Communicates the Mission of God**

All of Scripture witnesses to God's mission for the sake of the world. This mission springs from the reality that humanity has rebelled against God's original desire for creation and experiences the darkness of ignorance and despair. God's mission is to redeem the world, to restore the broken relationship, to bring light to the nations, and to bring about a new creation. It is a mission that embraces the whole of creation, time, and humanity within its scope. By inserting our own lives into the grand narrative of the Old and New Testaments, we unite our lives with God's mission, establishing within us a confident hope.

In order to fulfill the divine mission for the sake of the world, God calls forth Abraham and promises blessings to all the families of the earth through his descendants. The people of Israel become the bearers of God's mission for the world, as God makes them his own people and the instruments of his saving will on the earth. God desires to bless one people so that through them he can in turn bless all peoples. This is the message that Paul describes as the good news preached in advance, "the gospel beforehand" (Gal 3:8), the proclamation of God's overarching will, expressed throughout Scripture, to bring blessings to all the nations.

Through the Torah, prophets, and psalms, we come to know God and the kind of blessings he has in mind for the world. The whole of the Old Testament is oriented toward the future and impelled by hope. Through increasing revelation, manifested by the words and deeds of God among his people, we come to realize that, from the beginning to the end of God's mission, God desires to heal the world by calling it to ever-greater justice, beauty, goodness, and truth.

With the people of ancient Israel, we must look backward, forward, and outward. God's people must look backward to God's original intention for human life and forward to the end of time, to God's goal of a renewed humanity in a restored creation. And we must face outward to the nations, confronting idolatry, seeking justice, and embodying God's will so that all people might come to know and worship the true and living God. Facing outward as God's people, we join in his mission so that all people might experience his saving grace.

The word "evangelize," to declare good news, first occurs in the Old Testament in the context of Israel's imminent release from their exile and captivity in Babylon. Isaiah evokes the imagination and hope of his hearers with the image of a single messenger, an evangelizer running with the good news. Speeding across the mountains, he carries the news, announcing that God's promises are being fulfilled: "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.' The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God" (Isa 52:7, 10).

The good news that God returns, redeems, and reigns will ultimately benefit "all the nations." This good news spreads from a single messenger to "all the ends of the earth." The word of God opens outwardly from a word directed to Israel to a word with universal scope. God's word becomes good news for all people, a promise of salvation to the world.

But as the Old Testament period ends, Israel has failed in its mission to the nations. Languishing in the darkness, under the successive occupation of the Babylonian, Persian, Greek, and Roman empires, Israel longed for its Messiah, but was torn apart by factions—Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots, and Essenes—each with a different vision of the coming kingdom and how God will bring it about. Each vision manifested a profound misunderstanding of God's purpose in choosing Israel. They developed attitudes of separatism from other peoples and affirmed their own privilege over other nations. Their history of being exploited manifested itself in bitter hatred for the Gentiles and a desire for vengeance toward the peoples of other nations.

The prophetic image of the coming kingdom of God looked nothing like the historical situation in which Israel found itself. By the time of Jesus, Israel

was looking forward to a Messiah who would crush and destroy its Gentile enemies. The divided people hoped that God would punish the peoples of other nations—an expectation far different from God’s desire to bring salvation to the ends of the earth.

In the New Testament, we see Israel’s flame of hope blaze up from the earth’s darkness and prepare the way for the dawn of God’s kingdom. Israel’s long-awaited Messiah will inaugurate an evangelizing mission that will bring the good news of God’s salvation to the ends of the earth.

### **Reflection and discussion**

- In what ways do the Scriptures call us to unite our lives with the mission of God?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- What are some reasons Israel was failing in its mission to be a light to the nations?

### **Reading the Bible as Missionary Disciples**

The longer we live and the wiser we become, the more we realize that all of those things in which we are tempted to place our hopes—like material possessions, physical pleasures, and worldly power—are only temporary and fleeting. For Christian believers, what gives meaning to the world and purpose to life is the word of God. God has spoken his word in the history of salvation and definitively in the life, death, and resurrection of his Son. As



Peter addresses us in his first letter, “The word of the Lord endures forever. That word is the good news that was announced to you” (1 Peter 1:25).

Through the power and inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the Word of God became flesh, and the word of God became Scripture. This word of God has been entrusted to the church, which then hands it on through the apostles and its apostolic tradition. The mission of the church is to proclaim the word of God to the world. Because Scripture is God’s self-revelation and divinely inspired, we hear, read, experience, and share it with others as the word of God. And as the word of God, Scripture forms us into missionary disciples.

The more each of us engages in a prayerful and faith-filled reading of the Bible and thereby deepens our relationship with Jesus Christ, the more we are able to participate in the church’s mission of evangelization—proclaiming the word of God to the world. We cannot keep to ourselves the hope that is within us. Peter continues in his first letter, “Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence” (1 Peter 3:15–16).

We become missionary disciples by first being evangelized ourselves by the word of God. Through prayerful, faith-filled, reflective reading of Scripture, we become people who communicate the gospel to others by the witness of our lives. By becoming missionary disciples, we become ready to offer to others the reason for the hope that lies within us, the gospel that animates our lives. But, as Peter suggests, we must never use pressure or overwhelm others in our efforts to evangelize. Our motivation must always be love for others and a desire to help them remove whatever obstacles block the word of God from their lives. The work of missionary discipleship must always be done with gentleness, respect, reverence, and love.

The truest incentive for missionary discipleship comes from contemplating God’s word with love, lingering over its pages, and reading it with the heart. Approached in this way, the beauty of Scripture will amaze and continually excite us. But if this is to come about, we need to listen to the word with a contemplative spirit, recognizing that we have been entrusted with a precious treasure that leads us to a new life. There is nothing more valuable that we can give to another.



**Reflection and discussion**

- Why is it important that we let ourselves be evangelized before we can bring the good news of Jesus Christ to others?

- What are some ways in which we can prepare ourselves to be missionary disciples?

**Prayer**

*God of light, who has revealed yourself to the world and called your people to missionary discipleship, look upon me as I begin this study of your inspired word. Let your word so transform my mind and heart that I may respond more fully to your call to spread the good news of your Son, Jesus Christ. Send your Holy Spirit upon me to guide, encourage, and enlighten me as I contemplate the sacred texts of Scripture.*