

**HEARTS ON FIRE WITH LOVE FOR CHRIST:
BRINGING THE ZEAL OF NEW TESTAMENT MISSIONARIES TO TODAY'S CHURCH**
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Even a cursory reading of the New Testament, beginning with the Gospels, reveals the great significance that missions had in the early Church. Jesus himself sent the Apostles out to "proclaim the Gospel of God and heal the sick." (Lk 9:2, cf. Mt 10:5-15; Mk 6:7-13) Before Jesus ascends into heaven, leaving the Apostles gazing at the sky, He entrusts to them the famous 'missionary mandate' of the Church: "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit" (Mt 28:19). The entire book of the Acts of the Apostles deals with the spreading of the Good News, first within Jerusalem itself, then to Jews outside Jerusalem, and shortly thereafter to Gentiles. The letters of St. Paul stand out among the others (although the others address the idea of mission as well) as underscoring the need for mission and relating the fruitfulness of the proclamation of the Good News.



The whole New Testament emphasizes the necessity of the Christian to proclaim the Good News. St. Paul writes to the Corinthians, "the love of Christ impels us" (2 Cor. 5:14) explaining the untiring eagerness he has to share the love, the truth, and the life that he has encountered in Jesus. The love of Christ is what ought to propel the heart of every Christian forward, to go out into the world and proclaim the Good News, to be "his witnesses...to the ends of the earth" (cf. Acts 1:8). This reality has not changed since the days of St. Paul. The Second Vatican Council and every Supreme Pontiff since the Council has renewed the sense of urgency to proclaim the saving love of Christ. The "Church is missionary by her very nature"¹ is a call that echoes from the Second Vatican Council through the documents of the Holy Fathers into the Church of today. It reasserts a truth about the Church that "we have to 'step outside', to search for the lost sheep together with Him, the one furthest away...to 'step outside' towards others, to draw close to them so we can bring the light and joy of our faith."²

Perhaps the first fundamental question to be addressed in the context of looking at the New Testament foundations for a renewed perspective on missionary work in the Church is to understand what is meant by "mission" and who are missionaries. It is important to understand that there are differences in how the early Church perceived these roles and how we understand them today, yet they are grounded in the same truth. "Mission in the New Testament usually centers around a person's (or group's) commissioning (e.g., Matthew 28:18-20; Luke 24:46-48; John 20:21-23) to a particular task, in the present case focusing on the proclamation of the gospel, the message of God's gracious salvation and forgiveness of sins in Christ Jesus which is to be appropriated by faith...[as well as a proclamation by] a broader notion of Christian service."³ Today we often have the conception the mission is to go and dedicate one's life to evangelization in some far distant country. While this is still no doubt necessary, there is also a new reality that calls for the need of a new kind of mission: a re-evangelization of traditionally Christian cultures which have lost touch with the living power of the Faith. Bl. John Paul II himself termed this the New Evangelization.⁴ The message of Jesus Christ remains the same, but the context and means by which it is proclaimed has changed to meet the needs and deepest questions of modern man. Yet, because the message remains the same, it is essential that we go back to the sources--to the original proclamation of the Good News to draw insight into missionary activity, which can begin in our own homes and families.

As we begin to examine the Evangelical and other New Testament foundations for the missionary work of the Church, it is important to recognize some differences between how contemporary culture understands and undertakes a mission, and how it was understood in the nascent Church. Perhaps one of the first differences is that "missionary work of the early Church was carried on by almost every conceivable kind of person: not only by "ordained" ministers of various kinds, but also by wandering missionaries, by articulate philosophers and theologians, and by enthusiastic men and women who would chat informally with friends and acquaintances, "gossiping the gospel" (1970:166-78). To this list should be added Christian merchants and travelers (Frend 1970:7-8)."⁵ Today, we tend to think that only the qualified can evangelize, and many times this is an excuse to stay quiet.

If people from all walks of life could be included in the missionary work of the early Church, perhaps we need to return to this kind of simplicity in the evangelization of today. It is not, and has never been, about human wisdom "for the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom" (1 Cor 1:25). Jesus himself promised that the Apostles should not worry about what to say when being interrogated, that "You will be given at that moment what you are to say" (Mt 10:19). At the same time, St. Peter exhorts Christians to, "Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope" (1Pet 3:15). What is this "explanation for our hope" if not an opportunity to evangelize...a mission in itself. This is the only qualification necessary: faith in God who is our hope.

We have often heard that what a person does is rooted in who that person is, in his or her identity. This is very much the case when we look at the twelve men Jesus chose to be his witnesses. "In so naming His appointed workers [Apostles, Jesus] really defined their commission. They were not sent as theologians, or ecclesiastics, or philosophers, but as missionaries—'sent ones,' messengers, witnesses of His, to tell what they had seen and heard and experienced, to declare the redemption He had wrought for them and for the whole world. This is still the true function and primary duty of every missionary, however unpopular the conception may be to some today."⁶ This identity as 'one who is sent' gives a fundamental framework to the rest of their lives and their missions. Yet, as baptized Christians, we too have the identity of being 'sent'. We receive the prophetic character at baptism, a character that endows us with the necessary grace to proclaim the Truth who is Christ at every moment, in season and out. We see the cost of this task in the prophets of the Old Testament, but in a particular way in the martyrs. This form of witness to Christ was and remains a powerful missionary tool. Their testimony and confession of their faith in Christ given with serene fortitude and confidence in the Lord demonstrated the authenticity of their faith rather than an attitude of rebellious defiance.

Yet martyrdom was not the only way that the early missionaries brought hearts to faith in Christ. They had to be quite creative in responding to changing needs and situations. Christians went from being more or less ignored, or peacefully coexisting with Jews and other religious cultures to violently opposed. They went from being included in Jewish prayers and liturgies in the Temple and Synagogue to gradually being excluded. Through these changing situations, the early Christian missionaries developed innovative ways of delivering the message of salvation--methods that are essential to the task of the New Evangelization today. Although the New Evangelization is to be "new in ardor, expressions, and methods,"⁷ the message stays the same. Just as the Christian missionaries of the New Testament were increasingly prevented from entering Jewish synagogues and so began preaching in the streets⁸, in the new 'methods' of today this can take the form of preaching on the radio or the means of mass communication. The same with written communications -- the written word is always powerful and can spread quickly. A letter⁹ that was able to reach numerous communities in the early Church can now be accessible to millions through the internet. Early Christians recognized that "direct proclamation is but one, albeit the most significant, means of evangelization in the early church," and so practiced it, there were "other, complementary modes of mission include exemplary suffering or "good citizenship."¹⁰

Similarly, we are able to attribute the success of the early missionaries to several distinctive marks. Missionaries of today must also take note so that these same characteristics may be emulated within the context of the New Evangelization. Kelly writes, "the missionaries succeeded for a variety of reasons: faith, bravery, the power of their message, and so much more. But they also succeeded by respecting and being open to the culture of their converts. This enabled them to use the culture properly and effectively to get across the Christian message."¹¹

As we begin to see the various dimensions of mission in the early Church as portrayed through the New Testament, the centrality of mission starts to come into sharper focus. Some argue that the New Testament not only encourages and places a foundation for missionary activity, but must be seen in itself "as a 'missionary document.'"¹² Taking into account the context in which both the Gospels and other New Testament books were written, this seems to be a feasible conclusion. It is clear that they were not written to be a history book, with a collection of dates and names, but rather a tool to serve the spreading of God's Word. They were written by those disciples (and thus missionaries) who saw the need to leave a written account of Jesus' own words and actions for the future generations. St. Paul, as he wrote from the cities he was evangelizing, would address practical issues in order to teach people to authentically live the Gospel. He wrote in the context of mission himself. The Evangelists who were not one of the Twelve Apostles had been on mission with St. Peter or St. Paul and had come to see the need for a written account of Jesus' life and

mission. The act of writing flowed from seeing the pastoral necessities during a time of mission. St. Matthew and St. John were Apostles who had experienced mission under the direction of Jesus himself.

As can be seen, there is a great missionary impulse to even what lies in the background of the New Testament. From having been written while on mission or after having seen the realities of those receiving the proclamation of the Kingdom in the midst of mission, one can begin to gather the importance of mission for Early Christians. Evangelization was a natural consequence of having come to faith in Jesus, and so it must be again today. Christians of today must ask ourselves if we are truly living the all that Christ called us to...are we living as the Apostles themselves lived, proclaiming with our lives that "It is impossible for us not to speak about what we have seen and heard," (Acts 4:20) preferring to obey God (who had commanded them to spread the Good News) than man. Can we truly say what the Apostles Peter and John said to the lame beggar at the gate of the Temple, "I have neither silver nor gold, but what I do have I give you...the name of Jesus Christ the Nazorean" (Acts 3:6). The name of Jesus and our faith in His redeeming power is our greatest treasure. Are we sharing the wealth we have received?

¹ Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church, *Ad Gentes*, II Vatican Council, December 7, 1965.

² H.H. Francis, General Audience, March 27, 2013

³ Köstenberger, Andreas J. "The Place Of Mission In New Testament Theology : An Attempt To Determine The Significance Of Mission Within The Scope Of The New Testament's Message As A Whole." *Missiology* 27.3 (1999): 347-362. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials. Web. 25 July 2013.

⁴ Cf. John Paul II, Address to CELAM's 19th ordinary assembly, 9 March 1983.

⁵ Crum, Winston F. "The Mission Of The Church In The New Testament And Patristic Writings." *Missiology* 12.1 (1984): 81-85. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials. Web. 25 July 2013.

⁶ Glover, Robert Hall. "The Bible And Missions, 2. The Missionary Heart Of The New Testament." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 93.370 (1936): 193-200. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials. Web. 25 July 2013.

⁷ Cf. John Paul II, Address to CELAM's 19th ordinary assembly, 9 March 1983.

⁸ Cf. Crum, Winston F. "The Mission Of The Church In The New Testament And Patristic Writings." *Missiology*

⁹ 2.1 (1984): 81-85. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials. Web. 25 July 2013.

¹⁰ Cf. *Ibid*

¹¹ Köstenberger, Andreas J. "The Place Of Mission In New Testament Theology : An Attempt To Determine The Significance Of Mission Within The Scope Of The New Testament's Message As A Whole." *Missiology* 27.3 (1999): 347-362. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials. Web. 25 July 2013.

¹² Kelly, Joseph F. "Mission In Early Christianity." *Liturgical Ministry* 18.4 (2009): 153-160. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials. Web. 25 July 2013.

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