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The Best Kept Secret of Christian Mission

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CHAPTER 1

The One and the Many

Why Get Involved in Mission?

He is to be feared above all gods.

Psalm 96:4

A FEW YEARS AGO, I was having coffee with a friend in a café at my local beach. I was explaining to him what our church was doing to promote Christ among the residents of the area. At one point, I noticed a woman a few tables away looking inquisitively at me. I assumed she was a fellow Christian interested in listening into our conversation. I just kept on talking.

A few minutes later, the woman got up from her table, paid her bill, walked straight across to me and, at what seemed like the top of her voice, said: “So, you want to convert the world. How dare you!” And off she stormed. It was at that point I realised she probably wasn’t a Christian.

I thought of the perfect comeback—about an hour later! At the time I was dumbfounded. For a moment, I even wondered: “Maybe our mission is presumptuous. Perhaps promoting the news about Christ is the stuff of fanaticism rather than a reasoned, modern faith.”

I am sure many of us at times have wondered similar things. The rhetoric of our world, which insists you keep your faith to yourself, is powerful and sometimes leaves us cringing at the thought of getting overly active in God's mission to "convert the world".

So, I want to step back and ask: Why do we reach out to others with the news of Christ? What ultimately is the driving idea behind God's mission to the world?

There are plenty of good, biblical answers to this. You could say we promote Christ because he means so much to us personally, and that's true. You could say we promote Christ because in the Great Commission he commands us to do so (Matthew 28:18–20), and that's true as well. But I want to suggest that a more comprehensive reality drives our desire to make Christ known to the world. Not surprisingly, this driving force of mission also happens to be the fundamental idea of the Scriptures, Old and New Testaments.

The Bible's Most Basic Doctrine

Please pause and reflect about what you would regard as the most basic doctrine of the Bible. Go back through your mental list of theological big ideas and try to arrive at the starting point (this is not a test of true faith, by the way).

There may be different ways of expressing it but I think I would have to answer this question with the simple statement: *there is one God.*

From Genesis to Revelation the Bible makes the resounding, unapologetic declaration that there is just one Creator and Lord of the world. It begins in the Bible's opening line: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1). To ancient readers, this was not simply a sensible way to start a holy book. It was a huge swipe at the entire religious outlook of the time. The opening lines of the Babylonian creation story, *Enuma Elish*, to give just one example from the period, list no

fewer than nine separate gods, each with its own part to play in the events leading up to creation. Saying that “*God* created the heavens and the earth” was tantamount to saying that no other deity was involved in the universe.

And that’s exactly what the rest of the Bible affirms. The central creed of the Old Testament was the *Shema* (still recited twice daily by Orthodox Jews). It proclaims an uncompromising monotheism, or belief in one God:

Hear [Hebrew: *shema*], O Israel: the LORD is our God, the LORD, the One and Only.³ (Deuteronomy 6:4)

In the New Testament, the apostle Paul reworked the *Shema* (which he himself would have recited daily since his youth) in light of the lordship of Jesus:

We know that “An idol is nothing at all in the world” and that “There is no God but one” [the original language here is very close to the *Shema*]. For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”), yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live. (1 Corinthians 8:4–6)

Monotheism, crystallised in the universal lordship of Jesus Christ, is the Bible’s most basic doctrine.

What has monotheism got to do with mission? How is it that the most basic doctrine in the Bible is also the fundamental idea behind promoting the gospel? The answer may be obvious but let me spell it out. If there is just one God in the universe, everyone everywhere has a duty to worship that Lord.

Psalm 96 and the Universal Duty

This brings us to the main Old Testament text I want to reflect on. Psalm 96 is one of those Bible passages made famous by countless hymns and songs of praise (I hear a tune every time I

look at the text). The words are well-known but they must not be taken for granted. The truths contained in this portion of God’s Word are crucial for a biblical understanding of why we promote the Lord to the world. For in this psalm we have not only a strident affirmation of the lordship of one God, but also a plea to God’s people to publish this reality throughout the world (for the two ideas are related):

Sing to the LORD a new song;
 sing to the LORD, all the earth.
 Sing to the LORD, praise his name;
 proclaim his salvation day after day.
 Declare his glory among the nations,
 his marvellous deeds among all peoples.
 For great is the LORD and most worthy of praise;
 he is to be feared above all gods.
 For all the gods of the nations are idols,
 but the LORD made the heavens. (Psalm 96:1–5)

The opening lines of the psalm are directed to the ancient people of God, the Jews, urging them to “sing to the LORD” and “praise his name” within earshot of the pagans or non-Jews around them. In the words of verse 3, they were to “declare his glory *among the nations*, his marvellous deeds *among all peoples*”.

This might be hard to imagine at first: how could non-Jews (or Gentiles) overhear Jewish praises of God? The answer is simple: ancient Jerusalem was a bustling international city in the ancient world, and the temple drew not only Jewish visitors but Gentiles as well (see 1 Kings 8:41–43). Later, when Jewish synagogues began to spring up all around the Mediterranean (300 BC–AD 100), a psalm like Psalm 96 took on special significance, since now Jews were singing their praises on pagan turf. In Jesus’ day, the Jerusalem temple had a large Court of the Gentiles designed specifically for Gentiles to experience the praise of the true God. For ancient Jews this was a kind of evangelism.

It may sound odd to speak of “evangelism” in the Old Testament, but these opening verses of our psalm make clear that

The word translated “proclaim” in verse 2 (“proclaim his salvation day after day”) makes the same point. It is the Hebrew term *basar*, meaning “announce grand news”. It is the same word that appears in the famous “evangelism” passage of Isaiah 52:7: “How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news” (Hebrew: *basar*). This term always refers to an announcement that is news to the hearers. It is the very term that (via the Greek translation of the Old Testament) gave us the words “gospel” and “evangelism”.

this proclamation of salvation and of God’s glory is intended for those for whom it is “news”, the pagan nations around Israel. Israel’s praise of God—in the temple and the synagogue—was meant to be overheard by the pagans around about. This is “evangelism” through our public praise, something I will be discussing at length in chapter 10. If we were in any doubt about all this, verse 7 of the psalm takes up this call to proclaim God’s glory to pagans and begins to address the Gentiles directly:

Ascribe to the LORD, all you families of nations [that’s the
Gentiles],
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.
Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name;
bring an offering and come into his courts.
Worship the LORD in the splendour of his holiness;
tremble before him, all the earth. (Psalm 96:7–9)

These verses provide the lyrics of the “new song” Israel was instructed in verse 1 to sing among the nations. The song turns out to be an invitation to the nations to come and worship the God of Israel, to “bring an offering and come into his courts” (verse 8). The same thought appears in Psalms 57, 66, 108 and the lovely Psalm 117:

Praise the LORD, all you nations;
 extol him, all you peoples.
 For great is his love toward us,
 and the faithfulness of the LORD endures forever.
 Praise the LORD. (Psalm 117)

This is nothing other than the fulfilment of King Solomon's inaugural prayer for the Jerusalem temple. After pleading with the Lord for blessings on Israel, Solomon asks for the same blessings (through the temple) to be poured out on non-Israelites:

As for the foreigners who do not belong to your people Israel . . . when they come and pray toward this temple, then hear from heaven, your dwelling place. Do whatever the foreigners ask of you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your own people Israel. (1 Kings 8:41–43)

What King Solomon prayed for, Psalm 96 (and others) invites: all people everywhere to come to the place of God's presence (the temple in the old covenant; the Lord Jesus in the new) and "worship" him.

Psalm 96 and the Great Mission Equation

There are so many interesting things we could explore in this important psalm. For instance, it is often said that the Old Testament has no interest in seeing Gentiles join God's people. That idea, say some, developed only in the New Testament. But Psalm 96 (among others) shows that this is not true. Several Old Testament texts, and many Jews of the pre-Christian era, were keen to invite the nations to know and worship the one true Lord. If this were a different sort of book, I would enjoy detailing the way in which large numbers of ancient pagans found themselves drawn to Jewish "worship services" to learn about the true God.⁴

But let me return to the main question of this chapter. *Why* were God's people to declare his praises within earshot of the Gentiles? What is the logic behind the call of Psalm 96 to pro-

mote God's glory and salvation to an unbelieving world? Verses 4–5, beginning with the Hebrew conjunction *ki* or “because”, provide the all-important answer:

For [or “because”] great is the LORD and most worthy of
praise;
he is to be feared above all gods.
For all the gods of the nations are idols,
but the LORD made the heavens. (Psalm 96:4–5)

The splendour and majesty of the Lord must be promoted throughout the nations for the simple reason that there is no other Lord of the nations, no other Creator of the universe. All of the so-called gods are “idols”. The Hebrew word for “idols” (*elilim*) basically means “nothingness/worthlessness”. The Bible does not so much denigrate pagan gods as insist they are non-existent. Here we arrive at the fundamental equation of mission, the driving force behind all our efforts to bring the news of the one true Lord to our friends and neighbours:

If there is one Lord to whom all people belong and owe their allegiance, the people of that Lord must promote this reality everywhere.

Monotheism and mission are intimately related. The existence of just one God makes our mission to the many essential.

This is not to say there are not other reasons for promoting the gospel as well. There are. For instance, the fact that our friends and neighbours need salvation from the coming judgment provides a real motivation to promote the news of a Saviour. Indeed, the final paragraphs of Psalm 96 itself remind us of this theme:

The world is firmly established, it cannot be moved;
he will judge the peoples with equity.
Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad;
let the sea resound, and all that is in it.
Let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them;
let all the trees of the forest sing for joy.