

Matthew 10 – A Missional Community.

Matthew 10 is the first time that the twelve are listed in Matthew (we only have Peter and Andrew, and James and John in chapter 4).

Twelve, of course, had a deeply symbolic importance as it reflected in the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles of Jesus. (These seem to come together in the 24 elders around the throne in Revelation 4.)

Peter, James and John appear to be the inner circle of the twelve as is seen in such events as when he takes them alone up the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt 17:1—a parallel to Moses, Aaron and Hur? See Exodus 17:10 etc.).

In Mark 6:7 the disciples are sent out two by two which may have been simply pragmatic (they could pray together and encourage each other) but we should not forget that it was crucial in Israel that “a matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses” (Deut 19:15) – a principle that seems to have been taken very seriously in the church (e.g. Matthew 18:16).

As we know, they were a very diverse bunch that included fishermen, a tax collector, a political radical and a traitor. Not a team any of us would choose! In addition, they were all men, all Jews, all free, and all Galileans (except Judas—“Iscaiot” means “man from Kerioth”, located in southern Judea).

However this happy homogeneity would not last long. After Pentecost the church would include Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; [those] from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs” (Acts 2:9-11). And to these we need to add slaves and free, sons and daughters, old men and young, and, of course, women.

However I am straying from what I set out to say. Going back to Matthew 10, the crucial thing to note is that this is the first time in the gospels that we have the embryonic church and its commission described and it is clearly a mobile missional community.

As you might know, Matthew is structured around five blocks of teaching (perhaps mirroring the five books of Moses): chapters 5-7 being the Sermon on the Mount, chapter 10 being the commissioning of the embryonic church as described above, chapter 13 the parables of the kingdom, chapter 18 the “ground rules” for church life, and chapter 24 our Lord’s teaching on the end of the age.

There are two things we should note: first, chapter 10 is one of the five “pillars” of Matthew’s gospel, but we seem to be somewhat excluded as this mission is limited to reaching the Jews. “These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: ‘Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel.’” (v.6). In addition there are other details that only apply to this specific commission (e.g. “it will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town.”) (v.15, which as far as I know, is not said of any of the towns in the book of Acts.)

[Note: I should add that there is plenty that does apply to us today, but this commission is specifically to reach the people of Israel.]

The second point to note is what the disciples are specifically told not to take: “Do not get any gold or silver or copper to take with you in your belts— no bag for the journey or extra shirt or sandals or a staff, for the worker is worth his keep” (Matthew 10: 9-10),

By way of contrast, Israel, when it leaves Egypt, are specifically told to take these things with them! They were told to take “your flocks and herds...[were] instructed by Moses to ask the Egyptians for articles of silver and gold and for clothing” (Exodus 12:31-39). The chapter makes it clear that Israel, God’s missional people, went out loaded with goods!

So what are we to make of all this? It can’t simply be brushed aside as the contrast is too vivid: Israel goes out and takes an abundance of goods. The disciples are sent out as God’s embryonic missional community and are commanded to take virtually nothing!

In 1974 the missiologist, Ralph Winter, wrote a paper on The Two Structures of God’s Redemptive Mission for the prestigious Lausanne symposium (I still have my dog-eared copy in my library today). In it he pointed out that throughout biblical history and church history God has always worked through two structures: using sociological terms he called one a modality and the other a sodality (don’t be put off by the technical terms, they are very basic).

His thesis was that both are needed. The modality being modeled by Paul’s mobile apostolic team and the sodality by the more static communities (“churches”) that he planted – not that either category is watertight.

The modality is fluid, “apostolic”, pioneering and mobile. It breaks new ground. Such structures abound in church history all the way from the apostles, through the monastic period, and into the modern missionary movement.

By way of contrast, the sodality is rooted in a community, embraces all believers, seeks to see transformation in the area where they are “planted”, and supports the modality financially—and hopefully sends its best workers to join them.

It would then seem like Matthew 10 is clearly a modalic structure, targeted at a specific people group (the Jews). Their lack of carrying, or asking for, any provisions making a powerful statement that they were not in the game for the money (as the itinerant “philosophers” all over the ancient world were). They planted local churches (sodalic structures) which then in turn sent out more mobile, missional (or “modalic”) structures.

Therefore it would seem that the Exodus from Egypt was clearly to form a sodalic structure and therefore it needed the goods and provisions to do so (hence the flocks, herds, fabrics, and articles of silver and gold). Then, by way of contrast, the disciples were a modalic community and to have any baggage would slow them down and compromise their witness.

Then Ralph Winter traces the development of both these structures through history and concludes that what is in desperate decline today is the modalic/missional dimension of the church – so much so that the word “church” today conjures up in our minds a solid stable building rather than a mobile group of plucky pioneers.

We have become a bird that is trying to fly with one wing and it just does not work. I should emphasize that both structures are needed (hence the contrast in what is to be taken between Exodus and Matthew 10), but one has gone into decline and our passion to reach the ends of the earth has gone with it.

C.T.Studds famous words sum it up Ralph Winters analysis so well: “Some wish to live within the sound of church or chapel bell, I want to run a rescue shop within a yard of hell.” Amen.